

Fostering Grief-Ready Workplaces:

A Starter Kit for Mental Health and School Mental Health Leadership



Pacific Southwest (HHS Region 9)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

**WORKPLACE
RESILIENCE**
An initiative of TDP

The
DINNER PARTY

What is this guide?

Fostering Grief-Ready Workplaces: A Starter Kit for Mental and School Mental Health Leadership aims to provide essential ingredients to guide you and your organization through the basics of supporting a grieving workforce. This starter kit recaps the content covered in the Spring 2021 School Mental Health Grief Readiness Lab pilot and the Fall 2021 Grief Readiness Series, which was open to general and school mental health practitioners.

The pilot and Series were created and hosted by Workplace Resilience, a program of The Dinner Party, and the Pacific Southwest Mental Health Technology Transfer Center and advised by the National Center for School Crisis & Bereavement.

Workplace Resilience has developed a 6-week program to guide school and mental health practitioners across the United States as they continue to explore how best to manage grief in schools and their workplaces through developing their own Grief Readiness Plans. The pilot version of the Lab ran from April to June 2021, and included 25 participants from the Pacific Southwest region who met weekly.

Informed by our findings from the pilot, we then offered a Grief Readiness Series for school and mental health leaders nationwide in the fall of 2021, timed intentionally to occur before the holiday season. This series was attended by a diverse group of 79 behavioral health providers within the school and general mental health fields.

Why this guide?

At the time of writing, approximately 900,000 people in the United States have died from COVID. According to the bereavement multiplier published by the National Academy of Sciences, “every death from COVID-19 will leave approximately nine bereaved.”¹ That’s over 8.1 million bereaved, from COVID deaths. That doesn’t include those who were grieving before the pandemic hit, or those who lost a significant person to another cause.

As writer Alison Gilbert puts it, “a grief crisis is coming,” and whether our colleagues are vocal about their losses or not, the personal cannot be completely separated from the professional. Teams in our workforce across the United States are grieving.

As the Workplace Resilience team, **we’re motivated to shift the experience of workplace grief away from an isolating, murky, and stressful experience and toward something that feels not only manageable, but deeply human, too. This benefits not just those grieving but those**

managing or working alongside grievers. Through simple interventions, skills, and policies, we can transform grief in the workplace into a loyalty- and community-building experience, where a grieving person's work setting becomes a place to rebuild confidence, or even an emotional anchor. It might sound far-fetched, but we're already seeing it happen through simple shifts like ongoing check-ins, occasional team meetings dedicated to how, not just what, folks are doing, and bereavement leave policies that go beyond the typical three days off. Bit by bit, we're resisting outdated workplace norms that grief and emotion should be checked at the door, and we're building our ability to have hard conversations and move forward together.

The Pacific Southwest MHTTC team is dedicated and funded to provide the mental health and school mental health workforce with evidence-based practices and approaches to support these fields. This mission includes supporting the practitioners who provide support, which in itself is evidence-based.

Grief is felt acutely in all of our lives: in our staff meetings, cubicles, community-based mental health organizations, therapy Zoom rooms, classrooms, and broader school communities. Whether that grief is spurred by deaths within our own organizations (e.g., the death of a colleague, or the death of a colleague's relative, friend, impactful person), the school community (e.g. the passing of a teacher, coach, administrator, or student), or a death just outside of it (e.g. in the family or friend networks of clients/students and staff), **Grief Readiness is inherent in any conversation about creating emotionally and socially safe school environments, mental health organizations and agencies, and workplaces overall.**

The time is now for workforces to embrace Grief Readiness in tandem with trauma-informed care, in tandem with workplace wellness initiatives.

We learned through the Spring 2021 Lab that one of the most potent impacts of this work was giving school mental health leaders the **vocabulary to start these conversations within their teams.** According to Allie Mink, the Director of Youth Mental Health Programs and Outreach for NAMI San Bernardino Area, the Lab *"gave me the language to bring up this topic in the workspace. It also enabled me to take a deeper dive into what is available for grief in my district and where we can improve."* For many participants, it provided a time to pause, take stock of current cultural norms around grief, and figure out how to incrementally improve. **That is grief literacy. That is Grief Readiness leadership.**

We're hopeful that the wave of losses caused by and surfaced through the COVID pandemic may also bring movement to a place of more proactive support and elevated grief literacy. We hope that, in the same way workplaces are getting better at supporting new caregivers, there will be a growing acknowledgement that so too must we support employees who are becoming bereaved, with the time off, respectful re-entry, and ongoing support they deserve. Conversations about grief and loss in the workplace are conversations about equity, psychological safety, deep collaboration, and respect. Until we reach the day where mental health systems, agencies, school districts and beyond have their own "Chief Grief Readiness Officer," HR policies

that are grief equitable, and explicit practices and policies that always assume grief is present (because it is), it's up to all of us to ensure our workplaces are ready.

Our hope is that this guide provides you with the inspiration, reflection, and tips to start the process for your workplace.

How Might You Use this Guide & Who is it For?

This starter kit recaps the contents covered in the Grief Readiness Lab (April-May 2021) and Series (November-December 2021). We offer **an overview of what was explored in the Lab and Series**, and a taste of some of the conversations shared among participants. While nothing beats being there “in person” (a.k.a. on Zoom), our hope is that the following pages help you to expand and deepen your thinking around how to create supportive workplaces for people experiencing a loss.

Just as we shared in our Spring 2021 Lab throughout the six 90-minute sessions, time and this guide won't be everything you'll need to figure out every detail for your workforce's grief response approach. **We offer this guide not to provide a copy-and-paste solution, but instead to provide a framework that each individual school counselor or mental health professional can use to begin developing a unique Grief Readiness Plan for their schools and/or workplaces, recognizing that each participant holds a distinct role and sphere of influence in their school or district.**

While big systemic shifts need to occur in order for bereavement leave policies to change on a national, state-, or even county-wide scale, there are lots of small steps and soft skills we can work on that make a meaningful difference in the ability of our schools to support grieving staff.

We encourage you to think beyond Grief Readiness as supporting your students or clients. **We invite you to include the support of educators, colleagues, staff, employees, administrators, and other adults in the school/mental health agency ecosystem.**

This kind of work often begins with the self, and while this guide is not specifically meant to be a place for the processing of personal grief, it does offer tools for caring for ourselves and managing our own feelings of grief while caring for others. **We hope that this guide aids in instructing not just how to perform support, but how to really show up when compounding grief is activated in the workforce.**

Moreover, we acknowledge that it's not just individual grief that needs recognizing, but the collective, historic, intergenerational, and insidious grief often sharply experienced and held throughout BIPOC communities.

We developed this brief with two hopes:

- To provide participants of both the Lab and Series with a summary of the content covered, which will aid in the ongoing development of their individual and school-system Grief Readiness Plans.
- To serve as a resource to general and school mental health practitioners who weren't present with us in the Lab or Series, offering takeaways to support their own grief-readiness work.

A gentle reminder: One consistent refrain from the conversations with participants following the Lab and Series is that this work doesn't happen overnight. Shifting culture takes time.

Our main hope is that this guide gives you some inspiration and fodder for your process of cultivating workplaces that are clearer, more compassionate, and more respectful towards grieving employees.

What's inside the guide?

- Compilation of content we engaged with during the Spring 2021 Lab and Fall 2021 Series.
- Quotes from participants & learnings from our discussions; participants represented mental health and school mental health practitioners, represented decades of cumulative experience.
- Practical activities and strategies to employ in the workplace or in schools.
- Reflection questions to guide you toward creating your own Grief Readiness Plan or program. These are questions that you can return to again and again, and each time has the potential to spark something new.

Who is this guide for?

- Supervisors, managers, directors, administrators, and leadership of school and mental health organizations, agencies, and agencies
- Human resources professionals
- Mental health and school mental health providers (e.g., therapists, social workers, peer support professionals)
- Technical assistance providers, coaches, consultants
- Trauma-informed professionals
- *And anyone else interested in being grief sensitive at work.*

Onwards,

Carla Fernández, Director, Workplace Resilience & Co-founder, The Dinner Party

Leora Ya'Acova Wolf-Prusan, School Mental Health Field Director, Pacific Southwest MHTTC

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Grief Readiness: The Basics

Have you ever felt ill-equipped to support a colleague or friend who experienced a loss?

If yes, you're not alone. Even people who've experienced significant loss can find it hard to find the right words or actions. Grief Readiness allows us to put structure in place so that when someone on our team is experiencing a loss, their manager or colleagues are not improvising support, but offering it with consistency, humanity, and equity.

If you have experienced a loss, did you ever struggle to feel fully engaged at work or supported by your organization?

If yes, welcome to the club! As you begin preparing your Grief Readiness Plan, we recommend drawing from your personal experience to inform what work needs doing, while also asking about the personal experiences of people on your team to ensure an approach informed beyond your own biases.

What Do We Mean By “Grief Readiness”?

Becoming grief-ready means different things in different contexts, but the basic definition we used at the beginning of the Lab is:

proactively preparing for the impacts of grief experiences on employee well-being and workflow.

Why Does Grief Readiness Matter?

- When asked, participants in the Lab gave a myriad of ways they wanted to strengthen their grief readiness, including:
 - “How to help make a self-sustaining approach to grief in our school districts for our professionals and our youth.”
 - “Be more collaborative with other organizations and people to further empathize and promote healthy grief and loss behaviors and practices.”
 - “An understanding of what language to use surrounding grief.”

Working during times of loss can be helpful, or it can be hard. For some, work becomes an anchoring community, a restorer of confidence, and a place for forward motion. More often, however, going back to work is deeply challenging and full of mismanaged expectations, compounding the feeling of isolation and overwhelm that can come with grief. There are simple solves – skills to build, conversations to practice – but teams require guidance to get there.

Culture around loss is a make or break for employee engagement:

I think that it’s important that there be a plan. If something happens, not only think “this incident has occurred now what?”. We need to be able to turn to a plan that’s implementable, and accessible to people who need it.

TIM LEA

Suicide Prevention Educator, Buckelew Programs, Novato, CA

A healthcare CEO put it well:

“

“Loss is a time when your organizational culture is truly exposed for what it is.”

Professionals lack the skills and confidence to manage loss in the workplace. We’ve also heard that those with roles in HR, Talent, Culture, Management, and beyond don’t feel like they have the tools to support grieving employees. Most organizations have a paragraph in the employee handbook and an Employee Assistance Program, but not much else.



How is Grief Impacting Our Workforce?

Each person's grief experience is unique, and yet there are consistent ways that processing a loss can show up in our bodies, hearts, and minds.

Here's a refresher on the multi-dimensionality of how grief impacts us, and our workforce. While the loss might be personal, it's impossible to stop the impact grief has on staff to be present during the workday. By being aware of the ways in which our grieving workforce, and their work output, might be impacted by grief experiences, we can create more empathetic and productive paths forward in supporting them and their workflow.



REFLECTION QUESTION: How have I been most impacted by grief in my personal loss experiences? Are there other impacts I would add to this list?



Grief at Work by the Numbers



The Grief Recovery Institute estimates that
1 in 4 employees
are grieving at any given time.

And that was before COVID-19.



They also estimate that annually,
\$75 billion dollars
are lost to mismanaged grief in the workplace.

Due to absenteeism (people being out of work because of a loss experience)
and presenteesim (employees back at work but disengaged).



And that was before COVID, which, remember, has introduced a
“grief crisis” sweeping the nation, with over

8.1 M bereaved

from COVID deaths alone. And the number of school personnel lost to COVID is growing.



Grief Readiness Paradoxes

The art and science of being grief-ready has a lot to do with our ability to hold opposites. Here are some to keep top of mind.

1. It's not if, but when. And, it's probably right now. And it may be invisible.

Grief is impacting your organization, full stop. For some teams, it might be out in the open. For others, it might be hidden, depending on the level of comfort and privilege employees each feel in asking for help. Either way, schools and other professional systems need to develop better plans and policies to support teams not if, but when they need it.

I was a marathon runner for many years and my coach used to say, "By the time you're thirsty, it's too late". Essentially, the organization should know that it's not a question of if a person's going to need help navigating a grief issue, it's a question of when. Someone might be able to work three or four months pretty steadily, but then they're going to need a break. Again it's not if, but when. If you're thirsty for a break, your body has already hit the bottom of the well.

TIM LEA
Suicide Prevention Educator, Buckelew Programs, Novato, CA

3. Standardize support without losing humanity.

Supporting a grieving employee is a time to show that you care about their humanity. If they're allergic to pears, don't send the generic fruit basket. Instead, find ways to ensure that everyone receives an equitable level of support, while still showing them that their loss isn't just another box to check.

4. Knowing less can be more.

Grief Readiness isn't about managers becoming their employee's grief counselor, although it's helpful for workplaces to have a counselor on staff, or one available through an Employee Assistance Program. It's about knowing that if someone is having a grief experience, there are resources available to help them step back if need be, to regain control and, when they're ready, re-engage with work, without employers needing to know any of the personal details.

In the case where a manager is unclear whether a performance issue is grief related, or just general bad behavior, managers can clarify with this sort of question: "Is there something going on related to grief in your personal life? I don't need to know the details, but I do need to know that something is up."

5. Be proactive. Enable agency.

Don't place the burden of asking on your grieving employee. Be proactive about ways to support the employee, while giving them the ability to decide what's best for them.

What are the Benefits of Grief Readiness?

Here are some of the key benefits Grief Readiness Lab participants found as they developed their readiness plans.

IMPROVES OVERALL WORKPLACE CLIMATE:

Grief Readiness is awesome because you can have those procedures in place to help your staff and then administration can improve the **overall school climate**, which is great.

CARLA QUINTERO
Regional Mental Health
Coordinator, Orange County,
CA

ENABLES ENERGY AND INNOVATION:

[Other benefits] are the continuity of work, because things are always going to happen. Productivity increases, because you have a workforce that wants to come to work because they feel supported. **Energy and innovativeness goes through the roof because they feel safe.**

AMY CASTELLANOS
Project Aware Coordinator,
Phoenix, AZ

SHIFTS FROM BEING REACTIVE TO PROACTIVE

The Grief Readiness Lab really allowed me to think of how to be ready if someone is having a grief experience or if you yourself are having a grief experience. **I'm really thinking of how to be proactive now.**

CARLA QUINTERO
Regional Mental Health
Coordinator, Orange County,
CA

Reflection question: What might be a benefit of being grief-ready in your own school or workplace?

What else do we grieve?

“We think you’re only allowed to grieve when you’ve lost someone you love, but the truth is you grieve over any kind of loss: loss of structure, loss of your role, loss of work, loss of relationships, loss of illusions — even the loss of bad things can be discombobulating. So let’s cast the right net here. Grief is huge, it’s tricky stuff, and we’re all in some kind of it right now, whether or not we know it.”

BJ MILLER

Physician & Author *Beginner’s Guide to the End*

While the majority of the Lab focused on grief from an acute death-loss, we also spent time acknowledging the other loss-types that are leaving our teams feeling out of whack. While your Grief Readiness Plan might not accommodate all of these loss types (e.g. the loss of peace and quiet), it’s important we remain sensitive to how no two grief experiences are alike, and that sometimes changes that might seem less significant on the outside can catalyze major grief on the inside.

Loss comes in many forms:

- Community
- Face-to-face interaction
- Lives
- Plans
- Financial security
- Child care
- Sense of normalcy
- Social connection
- Routine
- Places we can rest & worship
- Health
- Teammates

Reflection Question: What are the losses your team is grieving?



Temperature Check: How Grief Sensitive are You/Your Org?

We can't fix, solve, or save people from grief. What we can (and must) do is ensure our workplaces lessen the feelings of isolation and disconnection that come with grief and loss.

So, no judgement! Start by assessing where you're at in your Grief Readiness "journey." In the Lab, less than 10% of participants reported their organization as being ready. Remember, your organization might mean a school site, school district, an agency, a department, a faith-community, a remote team, or more.

How grief-ready are you?

- My organization is ready. We have a strong bereavement policy, a culture of peer support, managers are well trained in grief-related conversations, and loss experiences often bring us closer together rather than strain the trust of our teams.
- My organization is getting ready. We have some policies and training in place and we are able to support employees who are grieving, but there's definitely still room for improvement.
- My organization is not ready. Help! This report has shined a light on the lack of conversation, policies, programs, and overall safety around grief and loss in my work culture.
- This is directly related to my job, and I can start putting wheels in motion.
- This isn't directly related to my job, but I want to learn anyway and see what I can do to make my organization more grief sensitive.

I don't think that a school community or school system is really fully prepared to address it. That's my opinion, based on some objective observations. I think that they talk about it, but in practice I don't think that they're ready.

PAT SANBORN
State Health and Wellness Coordinator, Carson City, Nevada



TIPS FROM LAB PARTICIPANTS:

What To Keep In Mind While Crafting Your Plan

DON'T GO IT ALONE. RECRUIT COLLABORATORS.

Definitely find at least one partner because it can be difficult to do this on your own. I would just advise finding like-minded people who think this topic is important enough, and team up with them.
PAT SANBORN | State Health and Wellness Coordinator, Carson City, Nevada

ADD GRIEF READINESS INTO EXISTING PLANS INSTEAD OF A NEW INITIATIVE

Right now, add it into an existing school recovery plan or back to school plan, and get that buy-in to get to something new and shiny but that also fits into existing work. People don't really like to approach new procedures because they have to go through so much paperwork, and so many board approvals.

CARLA QUINTERO | Regional Mental Health Coordinator, Orange County, CA

ASK FOR WHAT YOUR TEAM NEEDS:

If I was given the authority to do this - I would ask anonymously for people's experiences, And what they felt like. I would get a sense of what people actually experience. It's all well and good to do this and that...but what do people actually want? We need to find out what's actually happening, what's missing, what's a wish list. As people in the mental health field, there's a lot of good will and assumption of what's necessary, but sometimes a lack of personal data to inform decision-making.

TIM LEA | Suicide Prevention Educator, Buckelew Programs, Novato, CA

START NOW AND COME TO THE TABLE WITH SOLUTIONS:

Begin today. Ask a lot of questions. Identify the invested cohorts of parents, students, teachers, administrators, and ask questions. Ask them questions from all their points of view. Have very specific questions designed to implement a program. Don't just ask vaguely what would be useful, what would be good. You know where you want the answers to be going.

TIM LEA | Suicide Prevention Educator, Buckelew Programs, Novato, CA

Some examples to consider:

- A budget to fund memorialization or commemoration efforts for late staff members, or a gift budget for grieving employees
- A lengthening of the number of paid days off for bereavement leave, or an expansion of the qualifying event (i.e not just immediate family member)
- Proactively developing back-up plans for everyone on staff in case someone needs to take time off

APPROACH GRIEF READINESS WITH CULTURAL HUMILITY

We asked Lab participants what culturally humble grief support means to them. Here are some of their answers:

Being open to how other cultures think about grief, how they perceive grief, what it might mean to them spiritually, and what kind of practices or rituals are typical in that culture. Not trying to push your own beliefs onto a different culture that might have different perceptions as to what grief is supposed to look like. . . . One thing my state could do is try to hire school teachers or administrators that “look like” the student population. If we have a high Native American population you might think about having some staff or personnel who are also of Native American culture, or any different culture that is largely part of the population of the school. I think that one of the biggest issues that schools have is that they might hire white teachers to do a job in a school that is primarily not white. Don’t enforce that “white knows best” mentality.

PAT SANBORN | State Health and Wellness Coordinator, Carson City, Nevada

We assume that we know everything a person might but in the midst of a grief experience we often forget that grief is a unique individual experience. We must ask people what they need. For example, some people may perform their job in English, but for grief support, may need it delivered by a native speaker.

TIM LEA | Suicide Prevention Educator, Buckelew Programs, Novato, CA

REFLECTION QUESTION: What would culturally humble grief support look like/feel like/sound like in your local context?



What's in Your Sphere of Influence?

We don't all have the authority or capacity to enact major changes in how our organizations handle grief in the workplace. However, by identifying what's in our sphere of influence, we are able to get clear on the changes we can create.

WHAT ARE THE. . . **decisions you can make**

WHO ARE THE. . . **people you can inspire**

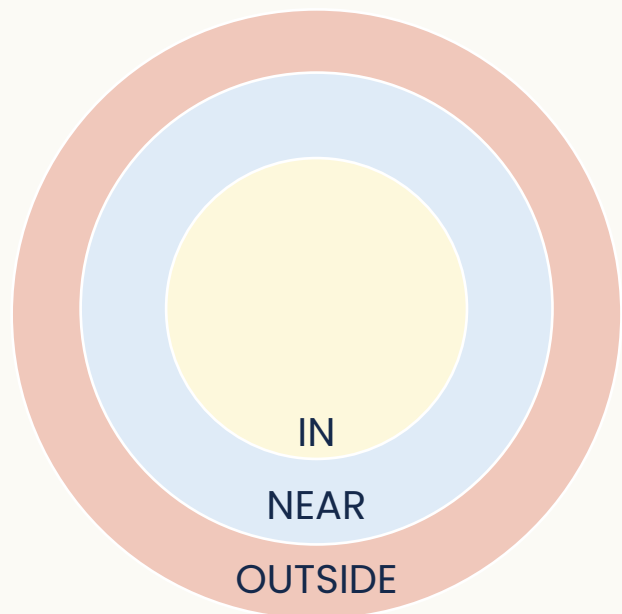
WHICH ARE THE. . . **conversations you can start**

WHAT ARE THE. . . **resources (including time) you can commit or recruit**

Influence isn't always where you think it is. Sometimes the unlikeliest people can have the largest sway. It may not be the person with the highest ranking like the school site principal, but the person with the most contact, like the person at the front desk.

Try this out:

What's in your sphere of influence? Who are the people, or what are the things that you can immediately affect? Draw these concentric circles on a piece of paper, and jot down what is IN, NEAR, and OUTSIDE of your sphere of influence. For example, rewriting our county's bereavement leave might be outside of your sphere of influence, but you may be able to check in more regularly with colleagues who you know are grieving. Use this as a way of lifting up the unexpected areas where you can make a difference.





Grief is Not Held Equally in Our Nation

When it comes to grief and loss, people of color and white people are not having the same experience right now.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been like the flash of an X-ray, exposing the deep fractures in U.S. society – not least by race. New data from CDC shows that the death rates among Black and Hispanic/Latino people are much higher than for white people, in all age categories.

BROOKINGS INSTITUTE

In order to talk about grief and loss within our workplaces, we must recognize that the color of someone's skin may be impacting the way they're experiencing not just their own losses, but the collective traumas of many lifetimes – injustice in deaths from the pandemic, the civil rights uprising following the murders of George Floyd and countless other innocent black lives, and a general lack of acknowledgement that justice has still not been served after 400 years of systemic oppression.

One session of the Lab was dedicated to the conversation on how to meaningfully show up for BIPOC staff who are likely grieving their sense of safety in America, and the deaths of community members at the hands of unjust healthcare and police systems.

We used this Harvard Business Review article as our guide, entitled *How U.S. Companies Can Support Employees of Color Through the Pandemic* by Laura Morgan Roberts, Courtney L. McCluney, Erin L. Thomas, and Michelle Kim. You can read it in full [here](#).

**Due to systems
of oppression,
how would an
employee's
experience
differ if they
were different
in their...**

race

age

tenure

seniority

location

gender

sexual orientation

ability

religion

role

vocalness

How to Walk the Talk of Care

1. Prioritize work tasks frequently so employees can focus on what is most urgent and important.
2. Email employees a reminder to take advantage of their TO/PTO, and perhaps even include a link to the most updated policies on mental health benefits provided.
3. Challenge biased, racist, and xenophobic behaviors in the moment — especially in team settings. When inappropriate jokes are made, ask, “What made you say that?” Or say, “That’s not funny and you need to stop.”
4. Avoid colorblind company communications that minimize the disproportionate strain on employees of color.

Reflecting on showing up vs. performative care

Activism isn't about perfection or performance – it's about education and endurance

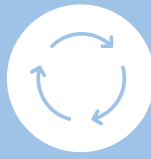
"I am appalled the more I think about the failures of those in power in being present to discuss anything involving brown and black people especially involving grief and loss."

GRIEF READINESS LAB PARTICIPANT

REFLECTION QUESTION: Do you think your organization is showing up rather than performing?

If so, how? _____

If not, what could you do personally to ensure that they are? _____



Stages of Grief Readiness

Navigating grief and confronting life after loss is not a linear process; there's no time stamp on someone's grief. Still, it can be helpful to walk through what it's like to be a grieving employee by breaking the experience down into phases. This allows us to understand what's working and to identify what parts of your organization's employee journey needs closer investigation.

If you are experiencing [grief] yourself, you may have a better understanding of what you are going through or what you are internalizing, to better understand your emotions and not think that something's wrong with you; because everyone goes through it at some point in their life.

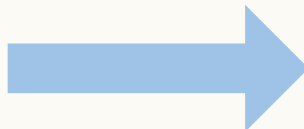
PAT SANBORN
State Health and Wellness Coordinator, Carson City, Nevada

Get ready



Put clear protocols, training and cultural norms in place to make sure our organizations aren't caught off by a loss.

Welcome back



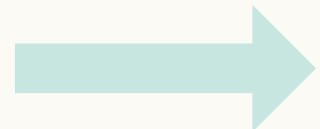
Both humanize and standardize the way you welcome an employee back.

Equip & engage



Equip teams to foster psychological safety, and minimize the absenteeism that comes with times of hardship.

Keep it up



Create a culture of ongoing support, not just in times of crisis.

Here's a deep dive into each of the four phases, with reflection questions for you and your team to answer together.

1. GET READY:

Put clear protocols, training, and cultural norms in place to minimize the negative impacts of your organization being unprepared for a loss.

STARTING QUESTION:

Name one policy or structure (formal or informal) that your organization already has in place to support grieving employees. How are grieving employees identified? Whose role is it to carry it out? Does it happen consistently?

DEEPER DIVE QUESTIONS:

1. What policies or support systems do we have in place?
2. Are those policies being followed? Are the benefits well known and being used? Is there any inequity in how these benefits are being administered or received?
3. Do we feel confident that everyone in management roles could gracefully support and engage an employee who was struggling?
4. Do we know what's legally required in my state, or industry standard with peers/competitors? What are other organizations doing?
5. Is our leadership team recognizing that Grief Readiness in the workplace is a priority? If not, how can we be stronger internal champions?

2. WELCOME BACK:

These next questions will guide you toward both humanizing and standardizing the way you welcome an employee back from a loss-experience.

STARTING QUESTION:

Is there a consistent way that death losses are honored in your staff? If so, what is it? If not, how has it differed across different circumstances?

DEEPER DIVE QUESTIONS:

1. In the event of someone taking leave or experiencing a loss, what will we communicate right away to the employee, the leadership team, their colleagues, their clients? What do they want us to communicate vs. them?
2. How will we handle the work they were supposed to do? How do we set expectations with other teammates?
3. Is there a small budget for a gift or other gesture so we can let them know the team has their back?
4. How would we respond if this person were: more senior, had more tenure, were higher paid, a different gender or race? Is our re-entry plan equitable?
5. Is this a loss experience that qualifies someone for paid leave? When can they use it? If not, in what instances does our organization override or extend the policy to offer additional days off?

3. ENGAGE AND EQUIP:

Equip teams with grief sensitivity, and minimize the absenteeism that comes with times of loss.

STARTING QUESTION:

How is workload shifted, if at all, for someone who's experienced a death loss? How is that communicated to colleagues who may be taking on an additional load?

DEEPER DIVE QUESTIONS:

1. Does this person's manager have the bandwidth/ability to have a conversation with them, and distribute work as needed? What decision-making power do they have?
2. Do managers have a resource they can turn to for support?
3. Is there a different role that might be better suited for this person during this time?
4. How can you continue to instill confidence?
5. How and how often will you check-in? In-person? Email?

4. KEEP IT UP:

Create a culture of ongoing support, not just in times of crisis.

STARTING QUESTION:

Are there any systems in place to check in on employees following a known death loss?

DEEPER DIVE QUESTIONS:

1. How will you continue to stay connected with them? Can you set a reminder in your calendar to contact them on significant dates, or after a certain amount of time?
2. How will you celebrate wins and give continual feedback?
3. How can peer support be cultivated between people who are struggling?
4. How will you check in with other teammates who had to absorb more work, and show your appreciation?
5. What would you do differently next time? How can you continually improve your responses?

As with any issue, the people lower on the socioeconomic ladder are going to be less supported in Grief Readiness. The cold nature of the beast is that money is going to be diverted to where the need is most urgent. Unfortunately, what that ends up being in a grief event is a short-term fix, or a triage. It's "what can we do for two weeks", and then the grieving person is left to their own devices. Whereas, in a resourced program, support is sustained long-term. There's follow-up, a sustained program, people can get help for many months. There are records, and full-time counselors, in comparison to schools with meager resources.

TIM LEA

Suicide Prevention Educator, Buckelew Programs, Novato, CA



Do Your Research

Talk to your team:

Chances are, some of the questions above may have been stumpers. We recommend having conversations with staff members of different tenures, experience levels identities, and roles to hear what it's truly like to be a grieving employee within your organization. Do not simply rely on your own gut response, as you are then only reacting as someone with your particular privileges and biases.

Here are some questions to guide your research conversations:

- What are you observing about what it's like to be an acutely grieving person in your organization?
 - What resources are available to them?
 - What policies are in place?
 - Who is responsible for shifting their workload? Communicating to the team? Checking in on them?
- What are you observing about how colleagues interact with acutely grieving colleagues?
- In what way is your organization not fully grief-ready? (i.e. In our organization, we're not fully grief-ready because ...)
- What might have to change in order to properly address this? (i.e. Wouldn't it be amazing if ... ?)
- To get started on this idea, what is actionable in the next 6 months? (i.e. I can start working on this by ...)

My organization emphasizes “worker wellness” but when I recently asked for bereavement leave it took four follow-ups for me to get a response.”

GRIEF READINESS PARTICIPANT



Managing Through Loss

In conversations with grieving employees, we've heard repeatedly that two people at the same organization, same tenure, salary, position, and department can have wildly different grief experiences at work depending on one factor: **who their manager is.**

This directly relates to how equipped the manager feels to address grief in the workplace, and currently depends on factors like:

- Whether a manager has experienced a loss themselves and may be more empathetic
- Whether they've been in their role longer and know what resources are available or what rules are malleable
- The day-to-day relationship between manager and employee

How can we initiate better conversations with grieving members of our team, and instead of avoiding the elephant, address it with consideration and respect? Here are some basic principles we recommend keeping in mind and practicing.

Ten Principles to Guide Conversation with Grieving Employees:

#1 Be conscious of time and place

Surprising someone with a conversation checking in on their mental and emotional health is an alarming experience for the employee. It's important to give folks a heads up that a conversation is coming, so that they can find privacy, and be prepared. At the least, we should get their consent before asking them to open up. Start with, "Is this an okay time to check in on how you're doing in relation to your loss?" instead of, "While we're on the phone, I noticed you have been missing some deadlines. How are you dealing with your grief?"

#2 Stay away from cliché sayings & attitudes

It can be easy to turn to phrases like, "There's always a silver lining," or, "Things happen for a reason," or the other stuff you read on generic greeting cards. But from our experience, that tends to frustrate people. We also know that saying nothing at all can be worse than saying the wrong thing. Even a shift as simple as "How are you doing ... today?" can be a powerful way to start a conversation.

#3 Offer support that's specific

We have all heard the saying, or have ourselves said, “Let me know if there's anything you need, or any way I can help.” and then the end of the conversation. We suggest offering specific ways you might support a grieving colleague or employee. For example, asking whether they want a muffin or not with the coffee you're already grabbing for them, or offering to take notes in a meeting so that they can follow up later. The more specific, the better.

#4 Identify their options, but reaffirm their agency

While we want to enter a conversation with a specific plan in mind, or with a list of the person's options available, it's also critical we give our team the agency to choose. What helps one person might be detrimental to another. One person might want to keep their head down and continue working at their desk, while another will need to work from home. A third employee might need to shift work altogether to something that allows them to work independently while they regroup. At the end of the day, we are each our own best experts.

5 Knowing less is more

Remember, you can have a conversation that checks in on employee's professional needs without touching on any of the details about their personal lives. You aren't their therapist and you're not (necessarily) their best friend. You only need to know that something is going on and only to the degree it is relevant. Here's a question we recommend using to start the conversation, if you get the sense someone doesn't want to talk about the personal details.

“I don't need to know the details, I just need to know if something going on, and what you need in this time to make sure no balls get dropped.”

#6 Avoid advice giving or assuming you know what's best for them

It is our natural instinct as human beings and as professionals to want to fix things, or to think back to what's worked for us when we've been in similar situations. But that can often turn into projection, which prohibits us from recognizing the uniqueness of each person's situation. What we want to do is ask the kinds of questions that can help an employee get clear on what's best for them, without driving towards a specific agenda. Even if you've also experienced a loss and want to relate, it's best to not compare situations or advise unless they ask for it.

#7 Listen and ask open & honest questions

We recommend asking open and honest questions that don't drive towards a specific agenda or satisfy a personal curiosity, but that help the individual come to hear their own truth on the topic. So, consider questions that shift from the first set, to the second.

FROM:	TO:
"Why haven't you ..."	"How can I, as a manager, be most supportive to you right now?"
"Why didn't you respond to the card I sent you ..."	"This must be really hard. How do you want me to let the team know?"
"I can't believe you're ..."	"At the moment, what's the best way for us to check in about all of this?"

#8 Erase the pity face and instill confidence

"You poor thing!"

"I can't believe you're already back at work!"

"You look terrible!"

While these phrases might sound sympathetic, and may come from a place of care, they're very rarely helpful. What we hear is that comments from colleagues that help restore confidence go much farther than comments of pity. For example, a loss can jeopardize a family's financial security for numerous reasons. If appropriate, finding ways to reinforce that they're doing great (all things considered), can go a long way toward helping someone regain a sense of ease and control in an otherwise chaotic time.

So instead try:

"Great addition in that meeting."

"I heard your presentation went really well."

"That was great. Can you show me how you did that?"

If someone is at risk of losing their job, by all means don't build false confidence, but instead find ways to deliver clear feedback and expectations and see where they can meet you.

#9 Make a plan and follow up

Way too often, the last time someone checks in with an employee on their grief is also the first time. Set a calendar reminder to check back in, even if it's just a quick email or a note on someone's desk letting them know you're thinking of them and offering them specific support. Oftentimes death anniversaries, holidays, and other big days can be grief triggers, so be sensitive to those times in months and the year to come.

#10 Ask yourself, how would an employee's experience differ if they were different in their...race, age, tenure, seniority, location, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, role, or vocalness?

Last, but not least—and, in fact, last and **the most**—we must examine how the way we show up for grieving employees is informed by their identity, earnings, title, etc. Would I be having the same conversation/offering the same amount of help/sharing the same resources if this person was of a different skin color, loss type, age, tenure? Bias creeps into grief. Be aware of yours, and act accordingly.



BEING THERE IN THE WORKPLACE:

Interested in a guidebook to help your team show up for grieving colleagues? Download our Being There in the Workplace Guide, available [here](#).



Caring for Yourself, While Caring for Others

Participants attended the Lab as mental health professionals committed to supporting educators, students, and others in school ecosystems in times of need.

But we're all human beings, too, grieving our own losses.

Here are some of the themes that emerged in conversation about how we as care providers care for ourselves.

Know your red flags.

One of the participants brought up the importance of knowing our own tells, or red flags, when we're nearing burnout. What are the physical, social, emotional, and mental signs that show us we need to back down, or care for ourselves? It's important we identify them before we're past the point of burnout.

Lead by example.

Oftentimes, employees don't take advantage of grief resources that are available. As mental health leaders, we need to walk-the-talk of care by reaching for support when we need it, too. Our vulnerability will allow others to follow suit.

Normalize conversations about care.

"There were deep gratitude moments hearing Pat Sanborn share her story, so you can see how this plays out in real life. When you put a face to an experience it becomes very real. Just hearing the conversations confirming what I've been advocating for, that's where the most benefit for me came from."

Amy Castellanos | Project Aware Coordinator, Phoenix, AZ

REFLECTION QUESTION: Describe a time when you learned a lesson in caring for yourself while caring for others. What was your takeaway?

Continued Reading:

One of our sessions featured Pat Sanborn (State Health and Wellness Coordinator in Carson City, Nevada), speaking on how she tends to her own grief while also supporting the mental health of others. Read a letter she wrote for [School Mental Health Crisis Leadership Lessons](#).

Leaning In and Leading Out to Renew: A Story of Holding Grief Personally and Professionally, Together

Continued listening:

“Burnout and How to Complete the Stress Cycle.” An interview between Brene Brown and Drs. Emily and Amelia Nagoski. [Listen here](#).



Crafting Your Grief Readiness Plan

What's your plan to bring more equity and proactiveness into how your organization responds to grief?

Use this questionnaire to clarify which piece of the puzzle you want to start with. Fill this out on your own, or with colleagues who are also interested in Grief Readiness. Share your ideas with us at atwork@thedinnerparty.org.

THE PROBLEM: What specific grief-related problem do I want to solve? Where are we feeling a lack of Grief Readiness the most? (e.g. employees unaware of existing grief resources, managers shouldering too much when a member of their team is grieving)

WHAT: What is my idea for how to make my organization more Grief-Ready? (e.g. a training for managers to be more grief equipped, updating grief resources available to staff, a consistent way of commemorating and memorializing the death of a campus member)

WHY: What is my objective? Why am I trying to implement this plan?

WHO: Who is this plan going to impact? Who needs to be involved?

WHEN: When can I begin? What are the milestones?

HOW: What resources do I need to move this idea forward? What stakeholders do I need to recruit? What are the blocks in my way?

I'LL KNOW I'M SUCCESSFUL WHEN: What goals do I have? How will you know I've been successful?

ANYTHING ELSE?



Crafting Your Bereavement Leave Policy

Here are some of the factors to consider as you craft your own bereavement leave policy, adapted from the “The Employer’s Guide to Setting Up a Bereavement Leave Policy” by [Gusto](#).

What’s required in my state?

There are no federal bereavement leave laws requiring employers to offer paid or unpaid time off and the vast majority of states don’t have bereavement laws in place.

The exceptions are:

- Oregon, which requires that employers with 25 or more employees in Oregon in the current or previous year offer bereavement leave. That leave is up to two weeks, and it must be taken within 60 days of when the employee learned of the death. Oregon doesn’t, however, require the leave to be paid. Employees qualify for bereavement leave if they have worked at least 180 calendar days and an average of 25 hours a week before taking the leave.
- Washington state, which requires all employers to provide bereavement leave under the state’s paid sick leave laws.
- Illinois has a more limited law: Illinois’ Child Bereavement Leave Act requires employers with at least 50 employees to provide up to 10 work days of unpaid leave upon the loss of a child.

If there aren’t state requirements, what should my employer offer?

Most employers include bereavement leave in some capacity. According to a report by the [Society for Human Resource Management \(SHRM\)](#), 88% of employers offer paid bereavement leave for their full-time employees. Of those employers, the average length of leave offered is one to four days, depending on the employee’s relationship with the deceased.

If you choose to adopt a bereavement leave policy, it's important that you communicate it to your employees clearly and in writing. That way, there aren't any surprises when someone wants to use it. If you decide to set up a policy, make sure it includes answers to common questions. Clearly explain the following:

- What bereavement leave is and how an employee would qualify to take it (for instance, in the case of an immediate family member's death)
- How many days are available for bereavement leave and if the days can be taken non-consecutively
- If paid and/or unpaid leave are available—and how much of each
- In the case of paid leave for shift workers with variable rates of pay (like higher rates for night shifts), clarification on rate of pay during the leave
- If verification of loss (such as a funeral home notice or published obituary) is required
- How to request leave and track the time accordingly
- If extended leave is an option, provide clarity on whether any benefits are paused (e.g. a vesting schedule)

You'll need to create your company's leave policy based on any applicable state laws, the needs of your employees, and what you can realistically offer. If you currently don't have a plan in place and are looking to create one, you may want to poll your workers to see what an ideal policy would look like.

Who is considered immediate family for bereavement leave?

Generally, any of the following could be considered immediate family:

- Spouse or domestic partner
- Parents and stepparents
- Children and stepchildren
- Grandparents
- Grandchild
- A spouse or domestic partner's immediate family member

That said, unless you're governed by state bereavement leave laws, you're free to set your own definition of an immediate family, and you can even allow for other close relatives. Ensure that

your policy's definition of family is broad and inclusive of all employees and their families. (For example, be sure that your definition of family includes domestic partners and their immediate family.) [This template from SHRM](#) can serve as a guide, and The Human Rights Campaign Foundation is a resource to help ensure that policies are equitable for LGBTQ employees.

Resources during and after bereavement

In addition to time off work, you may consider offering additional resources and support, such as:

- Remote work. If an employee must travel to attend a funeral or manage arrangements, you may want to offer remote working opportunities if possible.
- Flexible hours. Estate-related tasks tend to be easier to handle during normal business hours. If you're able to offer flexible hours for a few weeks after an employee returns from leave, this may be a welcome benefit.
- Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). [Employee Assistance Programs](#) generally offer a broad range of support resources, from grief counseling to legal services.



Where Do I Go From Here?

**Grief Readiness, like grief itself, is not a checkbox
or a one-and-done process.**

While our focus in the Lab has been on acute grief, the loss of someone significant is not healed, fixed, cleaned up, and forgotten after year one.

This work of becoming Grief-Ready, like the work of grieving, is a process. This work of recognizing where we need to deepen in our humanity, as well as clarify our communication around supporting the grieving people around us, and the grieving person inside of us, is ongoing. We are all works in progress when it comes to showing up well—for ourselves, and for our teams.

So if you finish this Lab report with more questions bubbling than crystal clear answers, you're exactly where you need to be. We need more spaces where we can pause, become aware of what needs improving, and then start to plot our path forward.

[Grief Readiness] is a long game. This isn't a short, check the box type thing. You have to look long term. We have to be okay that this work happens in incremental changes over time. Just keep highlighting the benefits of this work. Yes it's long, yes it's tedious and requires incremental changes. But the health of your employees is the benefit.

AMY CASTELLANOS
Project Aware Coordinator, Arizona

Commitments from participants:

Want some inspiration on what next steps are? Here are commitments from the Lab received in a follow up survey:

Will be talking with the team to see how we can implement some protocols for our small team and reach out for keynote speakers to present during in service for staff and interns.

I am committing to doing more research on the topic but also take the necessary breaks. I am committed to bringing this topic to my team at my district in the hopes that it will infiltrate all sites in the district.

To identify where I am able to make changes within the various organizations I work in whether private sector, or nonprofit and in community forums I am involved in.

To collaborate with other like-minded people to develop a presentation for my supervisor, our superintendent, and the school board about the need to address Grief Readiness and our district grief policies and processes.

Speak up.

Engage others in a brave conversation about grief to gather perceptions and open up the space for sharing.

Reflection Section:

My commitment to myself is: _____

My commitment to my team is: _____

What is your “most elegant next step”? _____

An elegant step is one that acknowledges what is known and unknown, and what the capacity of this group actually is. An elegant step allows humility, allows people to say ‘actually we need to do some research’ or ‘actually we need to talk to some folks not in this room’ or ‘actually we need a full day to build this plan out into something realistic and attainable’. In any conversation – and i would say in any moment in life – there is a next elegant step – one that is possible and strategic based on who is taking it and where they are trying to go. Find it and you cannot fail.

ADRIENNE MARIE BROWN
Author of emergent strategy and
pleasure activism



Additional Resources:

PARTNER RESOURCES:

MHTTC

<https://mhttcnetwork.org/centers/global-mhttc/grief-sensitivity-virtual-learning-institute>

- [Responding to COVID-19 Grief, Loss, and Bereavement](#)
- [Tools for Educators during a mental health crisis](#)
- [School Mental Health Crisis Leadership Lessons: Voices of Experience from Leaders in the Pacific Southwest Region](#)

Coalition to Support Grieving Students

School Crisis Recovery & Renewal Resources

Grief in the Workplace, from the The Grief Recovery Method

National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

- [Supporting grieving students during a pandemic](#)
- [Virtual Memorials During the COVID-19 Pandemic. School Crisis Center.](#)
- [Helping peers cope with crisis and loss during pandemic](#)
- [Presentation for educators and other school staff: When school starts back.](#)
- [GSSI Virtual Training: Presentation for school mental health professionals: When School Starts Back](#)

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP):

- [Responding to Death in the COVID-19 Context: Guidelines for Administrators and Crisis Teams.](#)

SELECT ARTICLES:

Grief in General

- [Forneret, A. How People Of Color Can Experience Grief Differently Than White People. Huffington Post. April 21, 2020.](#)
- [Gilbert A. Every Pandemic Death Leaves Behind a Circle of Grief. The New York Times. April 12, 2021.](#)

Workplace Grief

- [Berinato, S. That Discomfort You're Feeling is Grief. March 23, 2020. Harvard Business Review.](#)
- [Gaskell, A. Miscarriages: The Costly Workplace Taboo. Forbes. April 21, 21.](#)
- [Petriglieri, G and Maitlis, S. When a Colleague is Grieving. Harvard business review. July, 2019.](#)
- [Pliner, E. Lessons From Leading Through Loss. Forbes. April 21, 20.](#)

- [Roberts L. and McCluney C. and Thomas, E., and Kim M. How U.S. Companies Can Support Employees of Color Through the Pandemic. May 22, 2020.](#)
- [Tigar, L. 7 Tips for Thoughtfully Dealing with Grief in the Workplace. Fast Company. February, 2021.](#)

Grief in Schools

- [Harmeet, K. Teachers Have Lost Colleagues to Covid-19 And Worry About Being Next. But, They Say, No One's Listening. CNN. February 3, 2021.](#)
- [Nierenberg, A and Pasick A. The Impact of Teacher Deaths. They Have Shaken Communities and Upended the School Reopening Debate. New York Times. January 29, 2021.](#)

SELECT BOOKS:

For additional book recommendations, please visit The Dinner Party Lab's Bookshop.org page.

The Grieving Student: A Guide for Schools, Second Edition by David Schonfeld, MD, Marcia Quackenbush, MS, MFT, CHES

Healing Grief at Work: 100 Practical Ideas After your Workplace is Touched By Loss by Alan D. Wolfelt

Grieving While Black, by Breeshia Wade:

The Dying Art of Leadership: How Leaders Can Help Grieving Employees Excel at Work, by Anthony & Guy Casablanca

Superhero Grief: The Transformative Power of Loss by Jill A. Harrington and Robert A. Neimeyer

The Aftergrief: Finding Your Way Along the Long Arc of Loss by Hope Edelman

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About

ABOUT THE PS MHTTC:

The Pacific Southwest MHTTC provides the school mental health workforce in the Region 9 states and territories, including: Arizona, California, Hawaii, Nevada, and U.S. Pacific Islands of American Samoa, Guam, Marshall Islands, Northern Mariana Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau. The Pacific Southwest MHTTC's area of focus is on Youth and Young Adult Mental Health.

Our programs, coaching, and consulting focus on:

- State leadership (e.g., departments of education, child services, behavioral health)
- District, county, and local education leadership
- Professional school mental health associations (e.g., associations for school psychologists, school counselors, school nurses, school-based health centers)
- Community-based organizations that provide mental health services to school communities
- The Pacific Southwest MHTTC provides:
 - Resources and connections to organizations (e.g., peers in the field)
 - Consultation & thought-partnership calls with our specialists (see more about our team below)
 - Virtual and in person trainings, workshops, and presentations

WORKPLACE RESILIENCE, AN INITIATIVE OF THE DINNER PARTY LABS

Workplace Resilience brings peer-to-peer support practices into organizations to better support employees who are struggling with loss. We reestablish trust after difficult times and use the shared experience to build a deeply connected, energized and effective culture. We work with organizations across sectors, of all sizes, essential and nonessential alike, to become more grief

sensitive in how they approach company policies, management skills, and team culture. Whether the grief is arising from a death loss, or just loss of normalcy during the COVID-19 pandemic, our focus is on creating workplaces and teams that are emotionally resilient through it all. Partners include Redfin, Banner Health, Warner Music Group, Good Shepherd Services and more.

ABOUT THE DINNER PARTY LABS:

Workplace Resilience is a project of The Dinner Party. The Dinner Party works to transform some of our hardest conversations and most isolating experiences into sources of community support, candid conversation, and forward movement using the age-old practice of breaking bread, and is home to The Dinner Party, a platform for grieving 20-40 somethings to find peer community and build lasting relationships, currently active in more than 100 cities and towns worldwide.

THE END GOAL?

Our goal is to give people self-permission to talk about things that we normally choose to hide, with others who have lived it, too. We foresee a day in which people find amidst their deepest struggle the source of their deepest strength by connecting with others who've been there too, in an environment that's accessible and familiar, and marked by deep connections over time; a day in which grief is free of stigma and silence; and in which those who've lived through loss or hardship, whatever its form, are recognized not as objects of pity, but as better listeners and better leaders, characterized by profound empathy, resilience, agency, and a commitment to living a life of meaning.

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Special thanks

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