

1A. ADOPTION GRIEF & HIDDEN LOSSES - FROM MY PERSPECTIVE AS AN ADOPTIVE PARENT

Presenter(s):

Virginia Olivas, Assistant Professor, Practicum Education Faculty LADCFS + UCLA Academy of Workforce Excellence, Program Coordinator, Azusa Pacific University

The presenter, both an adoption professional and an adoptive parent, will discuss adoption grief and loss as well as helpful interventions that promote healing based on lived experience as well as over 25 years as a professional in the field of adoption. Concepts from the presentation will be based on Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew by Sherrie Eldridge as well as Seven Core Issues in Adoption and Permanency by Sharon Kaplan Roszia and Allison Davis Maxon.

Learning Objectives:

1. Participants will be able to recognize two hidden losses as identified by adult adoptees.
2. Participants will acquire knowledge about one of the seven core issues in adoption and identify practices that promote healing.
3. Participants will explore how they can apply learned knowledge from adoption hidden losses and core issues to their work as professionals in child welfare.

Virginia Olivas, MSW, is in her tenth year as a member of the Azusa Pacific University practicum faculty in the MSW program. She serves as the program coordinator of the LA DCFS/UCLA Academy of Workforce Excellence Child Welfare Stipend Program. Virginia primarily teaches in the APU MSW program where she teaches Generalist Practicum I & II and the DCFS Child Welfare Supplemental Seminar class. Virginia also teaches child welfare class in the APU BSW program. As a bilingual and bicultural social worker, Virginia has over twenty-five years of experience in child welfare, with a specialization in adoptions and working with the Latino community. Virginia served as the Program Manager at Latino Family Institute for twelve years. She continues to work as a permanency-planning mediator where she mediates post-adoption contact agreements, which serve to honor connections for adoptees with their birth/first families. Virginia is passionate about child welfare both as a professional and an adoptive parent. In 2006, Virginia and her husband adopted a sibling set of three children, and she integrates her experiences into her presentations.

1B. FROM TEXT MESSAGES TO GRIEBOTS: HOW TO NAVIGATE THE GRIEF-TECH LANDSCAPE WITH YOUTH

Presenter(s):

Melissa Lunardini, Chief Clinical Officer, Help Texts

Technology is fundamentally reshaping how young people experience, process, and seek grief support. As digital natives, today's youth naturally turn to technology-based tools before or instead of traditional support like therapy or groups, making it essential for bereavement providers to understand this evolving landscape. This presentation explores the full spectrum of grief-tech, from established, evidence-informed text-based interventions, AR/VR, Gaming, to emerging AI applications like grief bots that enable ongoing conversations with deceased loved ones. Participants will begin by examining the current barriers to accessing bereavement support and how technology-based tools fit within the public health model for grief care. We'll then trace the evolution from simple digital memorials to sophisticated AI-powered "grief-tech" applications, touching on how these tools intersect with core thanatological theories including continuing bonds, meaning-making, the dual-process model, and attachment theory. Throughout, we'll analyze both the opportunities and risks these technologies present for young people. We will conclude by offering guidance on how to evaluate digital grief tools and simple ways to increase online safety, preparing attendees to guide young people through digital grief spaces with thoughtful engagement rather than restriction or avoidance.

Learning Objectives:

1. Describe the public health model for bereavement care and identify where technology-based tools fit within that framework.
2. Discuss the evidence base for text-based grief support and its potential value in reaching underserved populations, including youth.
3. Analyze both the opportunities and risks that emerging AI grief technologies present when supporting bereaved young people.
4. Apply practical strategies for evaluating digital grief tools and increasing online safety.

Melissa has focused expertise on grief and loss with over 20 years of experience across various mental health settings. She holds a Ph.D. in International Psychology with a focus on trauma, as well as an MBA and a master's degree in psychology with a concentration in Marriage and Family Therapy. With a clinically trained background, Melissa specializes in childhood bereavement, hospice and palliative care, grief and AI technology, and trauma. She has developed innovative programs and evidence-based interventions across various industries, including healthcare, education, and non-profit. As Chief Clinical Officer at Help Texts, Melissa oversees the delivery of global mental health and grief support via text message. She ensures all content is clinically sound and culturally sensitive; she also leads subscriber support and research initiatives and plays a key role in AI and product development. A Fellow in Thanatology, Melissa is a sought-after presenter and researcher. Her work on text-based grief support has been published in preeminent journals and presented at international conferences.

1C. A GRIEF & LOSS PROGRAM UTILIZED BY LAUSD MIDDLE SCHOOLS USING MUSIC THERAPY TECHNIQUES

Presenter(s):

Arvis Jones, Founder, Damon's Center for Grief, Loss and Trauma

This workshop will focus on a 2-year program that the presenter developed for Los Angeles Unified School District Middle Schools. When grief occurs, there are some communities who resist any type of mental health services. Some reasons for this resistance is caused by the beliefs that you have to be “crazy” to get counseling; the family does not share anything that happens at home; males who cry and show feelings are weak; or there is nothing wrong and if you just ignore your feelings the pain will automatically go away over time. These are just some of the reasons that families do not reach out to receive counseling services. As a result of this resistance, children, youth and teens may be unable to move past the grief and/or trauma experience. This lack of help can lead to behaviors such as depression, low self-esteem, anger, low grades, drug use and involvement with the justice system as in gang involvement. This workshop will help to address how, by offering a Grief, Loss and Trauma groups during the school day, children and adolescents get much needed help to address these issues. This will be an experiential and “hands-on” presentation; with heavy influence placed on how Music therapy interventions along with journaling and art can offer ways to connect with youth. The program's success was determined using various tools, i.e., Child and Adolescent Functional Assessment Scale (CAFAS), The Youth Outcome Questionnaire (YOQ), and The Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children (TSCC). When grief or trauma occurs, there are communities who resist any type of mental health service. This workshop will explore how by offering support groups during the school day, students receive much needed help with the issues that “avoidance” of grief and trauma issues may cause. The presentation also focusses on the social aspect of a support group vs. one-on-one counseling.

Learning Objectives:

1. Participants will learn how to use 3 Music Therapy techniques to connect with Grief and Loss Youth.
2. Participants will learn how to use Music Therapy techniques to foster a safe therapeutic environment for young people during school.
3. Participants will learn 3 techniques to encourage communication when words fail.

Arvis Jones received a Bachelor of Arts Degree from California State Long Beach with a Music Therapy Certificate and a Master of Arts Degree in Clinical Psychology from National University. Arvis was the first African American Music Therapist employed by Arts & Services for the Disabled and the first Music Therapist at the Los Angeles Child Guidance Clinic, working with children and youth of all ages who have emotional and environmental problems where she developed a program to address the needs of children and youth ages 2½ to 22 years. Arvis was the first Assistant Director of a Grief and Loss program for Children in Los Angeles, where she helped to provide a supportive environment for families who were experiencing grief and loss. Arvis, who developed a grief and loss program that was used in nine middle schools of LAUSD, is currently facilitating a Grief and Loss group for mothers. She collaborated with the Mayor's Crises Response Team and the Los Angeles Police Department.

1D. YOUTH MAKING MEANING AFTER GRIEF AND LOSS

Presenter(s):

Claire Towle, LCSW, Clinical Director, Taking Time: South Bay

Sophia Donald, Founder, Lemons to Lemonade

Hugh Saetia, Founder, Eternat Canvas Foundation

Lily Farber, College Student, Student/volunteer

Heidi Ambrose

Meaning making refers to the process by which a person tries to understand, integrate, and live with a loss in a way that restores a sense of purpose, identity, and coherence in life. The workshop will highlight three youth who have made significant contributions to helping children and families find joy after loss and have found meaning after their personal losses. The workshop will begin with an overview of making meaning, the definition, theories to support the value and key concepts will be identified. The speaker will discuss the application of meaning-making principles to support individuals experiencing loss. Then, three youth will be introduced, and they will share their inspiring stories.

- Sophia Donald, Founder, Lemons to Lemonade, Age 17 (www.lemonstolemonadefoundation.com)
- Hugh Saetia, Founder, the Eternal Canvas Foundation, Age 16 (www.eternalcanvas.org)
- Lily Farber, Age 22, Bereavement volunteer and founder of a bereavement support group when in high school.

After the youth share there will be:

- Time for questions and answers.
- A group discussion of how professionals can help their clients find meaning and purpose and restore joy to children and families. Members will have the opportunity to share how they have been able to apply meaning principles to support others.
- There will also be time for participants to share how they find meaning and joy for themselves as they help the others navigate grief and loss.

Learning Objectives:

1. Definition and significance of making meaning after loss
2. Identification of key concepts and theories
3. Application of making meaning principles to support individuals experiencing loss.

Claire Towle is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker who has over 30 years of experience combining direct clinical care, supervision, teaching, and management responsibilities. She has been certified in trauma, bereavement and Thanatology. Claire has worked in outpatient medical settings and is experienced in working with children, youth, adults and families. Ms. Towle was the Director of The Gathering Place, a center for loss and life transitions, and was the Associate Director of Bereavement Services for Providence Trinity Care Hospice. She had a private psychotherapy practice specializing in grief and loss. Claire has provided multiple presentations on grief and loss, health and mental health topics. As a lecturer with the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, she taught graduate MSW students. In 2022, Claire co-founded Taking Time: South Bay (Taking Time), a non-profit bereavement center, serving the South Bay of Los Angeles. She is CEO and Clinical Director of the program. Taking Time (takingtime.org) provides one-one bereavement counseling, bereavement support groups and information and referrals. The program is also contracted to provide bereavement services for Alcove Beach Cities, an innovative youth wellness center serving youth ages 12-25.

Sophia Donald, Founder, Lemons to Lemonade | Age 17 | Dana Hills High School When I was five, my dad died of a sudden heart attack. A few years later, I moved from Memphis to Orange County, leaving behind not just my childhood home, but the community that had helped me through my grief. As an only child raised by an only parent, that move felt like a second loss — and I quickly realized how isolating grief can be without support. In Memphis, I had the Center for Good Grief, a place where I could talk, connect, and feel understood. In Orange County, I found nothing for kids like me. So, I decided to change that. I wrote a grief workbook launched Lemons to Lemonade, and now I have lead-free summer camps, monthly meetups, and a soon-to-launch mobile app to support grieving kids. The response has been inspiring — over 20 volunteers from Hoag Hospital joined us to serve our first camp, proving what I knew all along: Orange County needed this. 1 in 11 kids will lose a parent or sibling before age 18. I'm advocating to make sure those

kids have the support I was lucky to receive — because no child should have to grieve alone.

Hugh Saetia, 16 years old, 11th grade. Mira Costa High School I lost my mother to gastrointestinal cancer when I was 6 years old. Her passing shaped my childhood and became the beginning of my understanding of grief. After her death, my babysitter Marylin MacAlister became a maternal figure for five years, and when her son passed away, seeing her grief helped me understand how universal loss is. I have managed my loss by trying to create meaning from it. I learned to let my grief guide me toward helping others who are going through similar experiences. This led me to create the Eternal Canvas Foundation, where I paint memorial portraits for families, especially in underrepresented communities. My goal is to offer comfort and give people something permanent to hold onto. My experiences have taught me compassion, purpose, and the importance of supporting others through their hardest moments.

Lily Farber, University of Wisconsin-Madison Loss: Father/Date of death: February 18, 2009/ Age at time: 5 years old/illness: Glioblastoma (brain tumor) After losing my dad at five years old, my family and I frequently attended a local grief organization called Brooks Place for support services. Despite being so young, I explicitly remember the supportive environment and various activities they facilitated. I remember feeling like no matter what I felt - whether it was sadness, rage, confusion, etc., there was a place for me to express it there. Early on in high school I became aware of a local program called The Gathering Place that offered support groups for various age groups for those experiencing loss. My mom had introduced me to the program and mentioned she was interested in working with the adult/parent-aged group. I learned that they had a group for 5–9-year-olds and were instantly interested in helping and supporting them however possible. I was able to assist in facilitating the weekly meetings for the little ones. We'd do various activities to encourage them to express themselves such as drawing, having guided discussions, playing time, etc. I totally fell in love with this role and helping these kids.

Hedi Ambrose: I lost my mother when I was 17 from suicide back in 1976. There were no indications or signs of severe depression. It was incredibly sudden. And no note. At that time, therapy or grief support groups were not prevalent or mainstream to provide support from such a horrible loss. I was on my own. It was incredibly isolating and I had no idea how to deal with this loss. I had to move from New York to Los Angeles and start my college life as I continued to stuff the feelings from this loss and then moved further down so I would not have to feel anything. It took decades for me to finally find help in grieving this loss. Many years after graduating college, I decided to get my MSW because I wanted to become a therapist and help individuals 12-25 years of age deal with loss. I did not finish my education, but it was the best year of my life as I was around like-minded people who were compassionate, empathetic and wanted to help others. During the past decade, I have been interviewed by several authors who have written books on loss and suicide and in some small way, I felt that if I could just help one person feel supported and understood I have helped someone. Fast forward to now...I am retired from a long career in owning a successful TV advertising business. In my retirement, I am working with Taking Time and support groups in my Church helping others feel supported while going through grief and loss. This is my way of giving back and using my gifts and what I have gone through to be of service. I am thrilled to see the abundance of grief and loss support that is available to everyone now as no one should have to go through this alone.

1E. WHAT DO YOU MEAN MOMMY WON'T BE AT MY BIRTHDAY? HOW TO PREPARE CHILDREN WHEN THEIR PARENT IS DYING OF A TERMINAL ILLNESS

Presenter(s):

Lauren Schneider, MSW, LCSW, Senior Advisor of Programs & Training, OUR HOUSE New York City

In the event that treatments have failed to stem the course of a life-threatening illness and a parent or someone close is at End-of-Life few clinicians feel prepared to advise clients how to prepare their young children and teens for their person's inevitable death. In many families' children are allowed to maintain hope until that person dies because adults are reluctant or ill-equipped to break the news that their special person is dying. Then the children are shocked, and angry when they draw their final breath, feeling that they didn't know it was going to happen or didn't get to say good-bye. In this workshop, participants will gain an understanding of the importance of sharing, in age-appropriate language, the real name of the illness, when and if the patient enters hospice, or chooses a medically assisted death and when their death is imminent, how to break the news that their person is dying. Participants will gain tools including films, books and games to use to facilitate this process with toddlers as well as school-aged children and how to help the family with anticipatory grief. The impact of the clinicians' own feelings about death will also be explored.

Learning Objectives:

1. Understand the importance of using direct, age-appropriate language and how it helps children prepare for the death and eases transition to the the grieving process.
2. Learn tools from popular children's films and books to use to help children understand concepts of cancer and death.
3. Acquire language to use when explain when discussing death, dying, what happens to the body as well as beliefs about the afterlife and

Lauren, a nationally recognized expert on Child & Adolescent Grief, directed the Children's Program for OUR HOUSE Grief Support Center for 24 years. In that role Lauren provided trainings for mental health clinicians, educators, clergy, health care providers and graduate students throughout the community empowering them to work with grieving clients. Since her retirement, Lauren has been overseeing the training of staff and volunteers as well as program design for the NYC branch of OUR HOUSE. Lauren is the author of "Children Grieve Too: A Handbook for Parents of Grieving Children" and contributing author of "You Can't Do It Alone: A Widow's Journey through Grief and Life After". She also created "My Memory Book...for grieving children". Lauren is an Associate Producer of "One Last Hug...and a few smooches" an Emmy award winning HBO documentary about children's grief as well as "One Last Hug...12 years later", soon to be released. Lauren is the recipient of the 2017 Dr. Michael Durfee Award and the 2014 H.U.G. award; and is a member of J William Worden's study group. Lauren maintains a private practice in Los Angeles specializing in grief and loss.

1F. EASING THE WEIGHT OF CARRYING ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS

Presenter(s):

Karina Bravo, Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, University of Massachusetts Global

Martha Morgan Gobert, Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, University of Massachusetts Global

Sara Lee, Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, University of Massachusetts Global

Nakisha Castillo, Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, University of Massachusetts Global

This interactive/experiential workshop addresses the profound toll that continuous exposure to others' trauma takes on helping professionals. Participants will explore how intense stress uniquely impacts those in caregiving roles, examining the neurobiological and psychological effects of bearing witness to suffering as part of daily work. The session reviews how to recognize the warning signs of compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatization in themselves and colleagues. Participants will learn to identify and establish healthy boundaries that protect their emotional wellbeing without compromising the quality of care they provide. The workshop emphasizes that self-care is not selfish indulgence but professional necessity. Participants will engage directly in experiential self-care activities designed for immediate stress relief and long-term resilience building. This workshop is designed for all helpers, including (but not limited to), educators, social workers, healthcare providers, counselors, and first responders. By the end of this session, attendees will leave with a personalized action plan for preventing burnout while maintaining their capacity for compassionate and effective service.

Learning Objectives:

1. Understand the effect that intense stress has on helping professionals.
2. Recognize the common reactions/signs that a service provider is experiencing. compassion fatigue or vicarious traumatization. Identify and establish healthy boundaries to prevent burnout.
3. Learn and engage in self-care experiential activities.

Dr. Bravo is a Licensed Marital and Family Therapist who earned her doctorate degree from Loma Linda University. Her career has been focused on helping at-risk children and their families. Her extensive training and experience make her well-rounded in her understanding of children and their needs. She is currently a full-time faculty member for the University of Massachusetts Global (formerly Brandman University) and teaches at the graduate level to help future professionals hone their expertise in early childhood mental health.

Martha L. Morgan Gobert, PhD, is an Associate Professor and Psychology Assistant Clinical Director in Marriage & Family Therapy program at University of Massachusetts Global. Dr. Morgan is an American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) Clinical Fellow and an AAMFT Approved Supervisor. She is committed to engaging her students in developing the knowledge and skills needed to provide therapeutic services for the clients they serve. Dr. Morgan Gobert's clinical experience includes treating individuals, couples, and families via telehealth. Her current research focus is on social location and clinical supervision. She has presented her work at national and international conferences.

Dr. Lee is the Assistant Professor of Psychology and Assistant Field Director in the Marriage & Family Therapy program at the University of Massachusetts Global. Dr. Lee is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in California. She has been serving the community as a therapist, clinical supervisor, and trainer/consultant in the greater Los Angeles area. Dr. Lee is a clinical fellow at American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) and an AAMFT Approved Supervisor. Dr. Lee has taught the Masters and Doctoral programs in an adjunct capacity at different MFT programs.

Dr. Nakisha Castillo's roots stem from her Jamaican and Filipino heritage. She is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT) and a dedicated educator, currently serving as an Associate Professor of Psychology and Clinical Director within the MFT program at UMass Global. With over a decade of experience in mental health, Dr. Castillo has worked extensively with underserved and unserved families, particularly within the homeless population. She is a published author and co-author, frequently sharing her expertise at conferences, webinars, and workshops both nationally and internationally. Beyond her professional roles, Dr. Castillo is deeply committed to mentoring young adults

and students, guiding them in discovering and achieving their personal and professional goals. Her work is fueled by a passion for reducing suffering and cultivating hope in the lives of others.

1G. SUICIDE PREVENTION AND POSTVENTION IN SCHOOL COMMUNITIES: BALANCING SAFETY AND SENSITIVITY

Presenter(s):

Emily Cummins-Polk, MSW

Jocelyn Meza, PHD

Stephanie Murray, MA, PPS, LEP

Franklin Romero, MSW, LCSW

Grief following a suicide is often complex and layered. In school settings, this complexity requires a careful balance between honoring family wishes, cultural sensitivity, supporting individual and collective grief, and maintaining student safety. This panel presentation uses a facilitated discussion format to explore real-world challenges and collaborative strategies for prevention and postvention, with a focus on how school communities can respectfully navigate family preferences while protecting the well-being of students and staff.

Learning Objectives:

1. Discussion regarding how suicide-related grief uniquely impacts school communities and families
2. Explore approaches for supporting family wishes while upholding safety and prevention responsibilities
3. Identify practical prevention and postvention strategies through shared discussion and panel insights

Emily Cummins Polk, M.S.W. Currently in a newer role as Social Emotional Wellness Coordinator, Emily is a social worker in Lennox School District with over two decades of experience providing school-based services to children and families as well as professional development to staff. Responding to a clear need for more comprehensive services, Emily co-founded Juntos, a thriving district-embedded non-profit serving students, families, community members and staff with a focus on trauma informed care. Emily was a founding member of the Trauma Informed Task Force of Greater Los Angeles and currently serves as one of the co-chairs of CASRT (Child Adolescent Suicide Review Team). Emily was awarded Counselor of the year in 2017 by Lennox District, School Mental Health Professional of the year in 2024 by LACOE and proudly accepted the Albert Rodriguez Civic Leadership Award awarded to Juntos by Community Partners in December of 2016. Emily is a native of LA and received her B.A. from Northwestern University in 1998 and her master's in social Welfare from UCLA in 2002.

Dr. Meza is an Assistant Professor In-Residence in the Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences and a bilingual licensed clinical psychologist at UCLA. Currently, she is the Director of the Youth Stress and Mood (YSAM) Program and the Principal Investigator and Founder of the Health Equity & Access Research & Treatment (HEART) lab at UCLA. Her research interests include studying socio-ecological risk and protective factors for suicide and self-harming behaviors among youth (including children, adolescents, and young adults). Dr. Meza's work aims to integrate psychological, cognitive, and sociocultural influences to predict suicide and self-harm behaviors and, importantly, to identify therapeutic targets for culturally responsive interventions for youth. In addition, Dr. Meza is expanding her research to adapt evidence-based psychosocial interventions for diverse youth, particularly youth that are impacted by the child welfare and juvenile justice system.

Stephanie Murray has been a practicing school psychologist for over 30 years with the Whittier Union High School District and is a Licensed Educational Psychologist. She serves as a Co-Chair of the Mental Wellness Committee for the California Association of School Psychologists, and a Co-Chair of the LA County Child and Adolescent Suicide Review Team, active in the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Network, and has been very active in suicide prevention in Los Angeles County for over 25 years, providing trainings and consultation for school districts throughout the county and the state. Stephanie contracts with LA County Office of Education on their Suicide Prevention Ongoing Resiliency Training to provide expertise and training. Stephanie also serves on the Student Mental Health Policy Workgroup through the California Department of Education. Stephanie received her bachelor's degree in Sociology from UCLA, and both Masters' degrees, in School Counseling, and in Educational Psychology from Loyola Marymount University. In October of 2025, she was awarded the Nadine Lambert Outstanding School Psychologist award by the California Association of School Psychologists.

Franklin Romero, MSW, LCSW, Los Angeles County DMH-Partners in Suicide Prevention Franklin Romero is a native Angelino who earned his B.A. in Social Work from California State University, Los Angeles and his master's in social work from the University of Southern California. Franklin currently is the supervisor for the Partners in Suicide Prevention unit, which provides Suicide Prevention Training and Education Countywide. Franklin has experience in the areas of child welfare, providing counseling and psychotherapy services to families and children at DMH as well as conducting crisis response and mental health assessments with the Psychiatric Mobile Response Team (PMRT). Franklin also has gained medical social work experience at Children's Hospital of Los Angeles in working with patients at the end-of-life stage, working with families and children who have been recently diagnosed with an illness, conducting child abuse assessments, and helping families and individuals cope with grief and loss.