



Introducing Multidimensional Grief Therapy: A Flexible Approach to Assessing and Supporting Bereaved Youth

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Multidimensional Grief Therapy (MGT) (Kaplow et al., in press), is a theoretically derived, assessment-driven intervention designed to reduce maladaptive grieving (grief that keeps kids “stuck” and unable to adjust), promote adaptive grieving (grief that helps kids to feel and cope better after a death), and help bereaved children and adolescents (aged 7 to 18) lead healthy, happy, productive lives. This intervention is based on the notion that youth grieve in different ways and that “one-size-fits-all” grief treatments lack effectiveness. To our knowledge, MGT is the first evidence-based intervention developed specifically for bereaved youth that directly addresses all three dimensions of grief as described by multidimensional grief theory (Layne et al., 2012; Kaplow et al., 2013; Layne et al., 2017). Based on years of research conducted by the authors, the exercises in MGT are designed to target each dimension of grief (i.e., separation distress, existential/identity distress, and circumstance-related distress) based upon each child’s individual assessment profile as well as their developmental needs and strengths. In a recent study, MGT was found to significantly reduce maladaptive grief reactions, depression, and posttraumatic stress (Hill et al., 2019) among diverse populations of youth.

Given that not every child requires an intensive psychosocial treatment following a death, MGT is also designed to provide a continuum of care, spanning the needs of children who may be experiencing normative struggles after a death to those who are experiencing debilitating grief reactions that make it difficult to function. To do this, MGT uses a two-phased approach. The first phase is designed to provide general grief support and focuses primarily on psychoeducation, normalizing grief reactions, emotion regulation skills, and positive reminiscing activities. Although Phase I can be offered in clinical settings, it can also be provided by bereavement support centers, faith-based organizations, schools or other settings that are focused on tier one supports after a death. The second phase is generally conducted by a trained clinician and is designed to address more maladaptive grief reactions through grief processing as well as identifying and replacing maladaptive thoughts such as “it was all my fault” or “I’m never going to be happy again.”

Clinical decision-making in the context of MGT requires an evidence-based assessment, using validated assessment tools for grieving children and adolescents. One such tool is the Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD) Checklist (Layne et al., 2021), a developmentally sensitive and culturally informed measure that can be used to diagnose PGD in children and adolescents ages 7 to 18. The PGD Checklist can also be scored according to multidimensional grief theory to derive three primary subscales that directly align with each of the dimensions of grief: separation distress, existential distress, and circumstance-related distress.

With more than 290,000 U.S. youth having lost a parent or caregiver to COVID-19, and steep rises in deaths of despair, including drug overdose and suicide, new developments with regard to the



assessment and treatment of childhood grief could not come at a more critical time. By identifying bereaved youth as quickly as possible and providing them with the right form of support at the right time, we have a much better chance of preventing long-term suffering and enhancing resiliency.

References

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- Multidimensional Grief Therapy* is scheduled to be released by Cambridge University Press in March of 2023. For more information and to obtain the book, please check the following website in early 2023: <https://www.cambridge.org/core>
- For more information about the *PGD Checklist* and to obtain the measure, please visit the following website: <https://www.reactionindex.com/>