



NRP JUNE 2026 Education Session

Supporting Grief and Providing Compassion Among Research Professionals: The Forgotten Grievors

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Why Grief Is Inherent in Clinical Trials



Emotional Bonds with Patients

Clinical trial staff develop strong emotional connections with patients over lengthy periods, deepening the impact of patient loss.

Dual Mission and Emotional Burden

Balancing scientific progress with patient care creates emotional strain, especially when patient outcomes are poor.

Cumulative Grief and Burnout

Repeated patient losses accumulate over time, contributing to emotional exhaustion and staff burnout in clinical trials.

What Grief Is and How It Manifests



Multifaceted Grief Response

Grief affects emotional, cognitive, physical, social, and spiritual aspects of individuals in complex ways.

Non-Visible Grief Signs

Grief may manifest as numbness, irritability, withdrawal, or difficulty concentrating rather than visible sadness.

Grief Triggers and Complexity

Unexpected triggers can reactivate grief, highlighting its non-linear and unpredictable nature in the workplace.

Organizational Support Importance

Broad understanding of grief in organizations helps employees seek support and reduces distress and isolation.

Cumulative and Chronic Grief in Research Settings



Nature of Cumulative Grief

Cumulative grief involves multiple losses over time without sufficient recovery, leading to subtle emotional decline.



Compassion Fatigue and Moral Distress

Chronic grief can cause compassion fatigue and moral distress, a reduced emotional engagement and causing internal conflict.



Organizational Response

Addressing cumulative grief needs organizational support and leadership to promote emotional wellbeing and research integrity.

Unique Grief
Experiences of
Clinical Trial
Employees

Dual Roles: Scientist and Caregiver



Dual Role Challenges

Clinical trial staff balance strict scientific protocols with compassionate patient support, creating emotional complexity.

Scientific Role Focus

Emphasizes objectivity, data quality, and adherence to regulatory compliance for trial success.

Caregiving Role Impact

Involves emotional support, trust-building, and advocacy for patients facing difficult realities.

Emotional Tension and Integration

Suppressing grief can lead to distress, but acknowledging dual roles promotes emotional integration and job satisfaction.

Disenfranchised Grief in the Workplace



- Nature of Disenfranchised Grief
 - Disenfranchised grief occurs when grief is unacknowledged, unsupported, and unmanaged, especially in cancer clinical trial workplaces.
- Impact on Employees
 - Unrecognized grief can lead to isolation, self-criticism, and emotional withdrawal among employees.
- Barriers to Support
 - Lack of grief recognition reduces help-seeking from peer support and mental health resources.
- Cultural Change for Healing
 - Leaders must validate grief and create supportive spaces to foster healing and compassion in the workplace.

Moral Distress and Feelings of Helplessness

Causes of Moral Distress

Moral distress occurs when ethical actions are known but blocked by systemic or institutional constraints in clinical trials.

Emotional Impact on Employees

Moral distress can lead to guilt, frustration, helplessness, and emotional disengagement among clinical trial staff.

Addressing Moral Distress

Ethical dialogue, reflective spaces, and leadership support help normalize experiences and reduce staff isolation.



Coping Strategies and Support for Employees

Healthy Individual Coping Strategies



Acknowledging and Reflecting

Recognize and name loss to process grief; use journaling and mindfulness for emotional tracking.

Peer Support

Connecting with trusted colleagues normalizes grief and fosters a sense of shared experience.

Physical and Creative Routines

Maintaining healthy sleep, nutrition, movement, and creative outlets helps buffer grief's effects.

Setting Boundaries

Establish intentional limits on workload and emotional availability to prevent overwhelm.

The Role of Peer and Team-Based Support



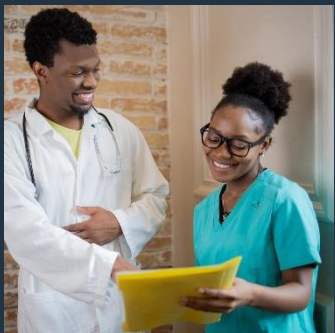
Acknowledging Patient Losses

Openly recognizing patient losses in team settings reduces grief isolation and validates emotional responses.



Structured Debriefings

Nonjudgmental debriefings help teams reflect on clinical and emotional challenges for shared learning.



Building Resilience and Connection

Sharing stories and honoring patients, fosters resilience and strengthens team purpose and trust.

Knowing When to Seek Additional Help



Recognizing Warning Signs

Warning signs like prolonged sadness, irritability, and sleep problems indicate the need for additional support during grief.

Seeking Professional Support

Accessing counseling or mental health services provides a confidential space to process complex emotions safely.

Role of Organizations

Organizations should communicate resources clearly and normalize mental health care to reduce stigma and support employees.

Benefits of Timely Help

Early intervention protects employee well-being, team function, and patient care quality in clinical trial settings.

Leadership, Culture, and Honoring Loss

How Leaders Can Support Grieving Employees



Acknowledging Grief Openly

Leaders set the tone by openly recognizing patient losses with compassion, fostering a supportive culture.

Normalizing Grief Conversations

Effective leaders encourage open dialogue about grief while respecting individual coping preferences.

Modeling Healthy Behaviors

Leaders demonstrate self-care and vulnerability, encouraging staff to do the same.

Creating a Compassionate Organizational Culture



Recognizing Grief in Work

Acknowledging grief as part of cancer clinical trials helps employees process emotions healthily and reduces internalized distress.

Embedding Compassion at All Levels

Compassion must be integrated from leadership to frontline teams to share coping responsibility and sustain culture.

Balancing Accountability and Humanity

Compassionate cultures improve engagement, ethics, and effectiveness while reducing burnout and fostering loyalty over time.



Honoring Patients and Finding Meaning

Rituals of Remembrance

Moments of silence, memorial boards, and reflections honor patients and help transform grief into gratitude.

Meaning-Making and Resilience

Reflecting on patients' contributions fosters resilience by framing loss within a narrative of impact and hope.

Compassion and Science

Supporting grief processing reinforces that compassion and scientific research are complementary commitments.

Evaluation

Post-session evaluation:

<https://go.unc.edu/JunNRPEval>

or scan the QR code.

Attendance Certificate: Download certificate, BEFORE submitting the eval, is found at the end of the post session eval survey.

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