



Reach Across Divides: *Cultural & Difference Focused Practices in Grief Work*

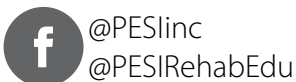
Alesia Alexander, LCSW, CT

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ZNM058020
4/21

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PO Box 1000
3839 White Ave.
Eau Claire, Wisconsin 54702

Printed in the United States

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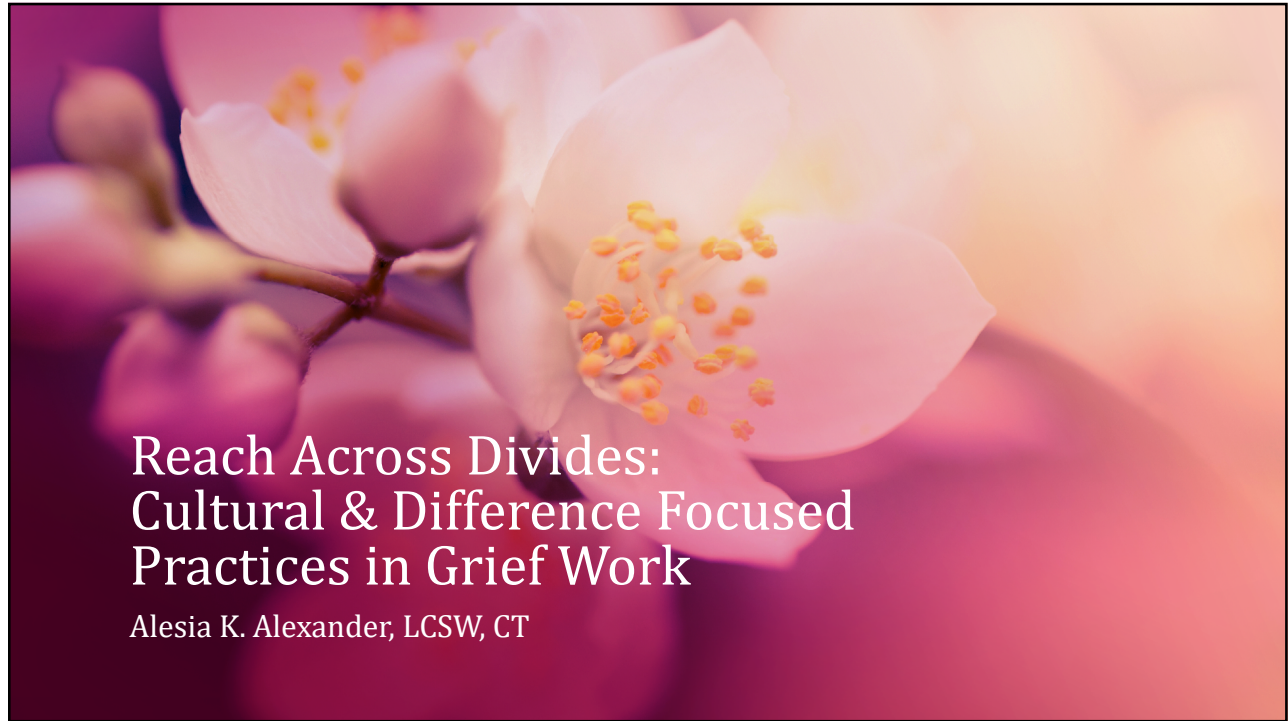
Alesia Alexander, LCSW, CT is a therapist, author and grief, loss and inclusion consultant who serves as co-director of the Tapestries Institute, which provides customized education, training and consultation services to meet the needs of individuals, groups, and organizations interested in doing grief support and inclusion work in their community. Alesia was featured in the PBS documentary Speaking Grief and has worked in community, non-profit, and individualized settings for over 20 years. Certified in Thanatology she has been honored to walk with young people and families living with loss.

Speaker Disclosure:

Financial: Alesia Alexander is the founder and executive director for Project KARMA, Inc. She is a therapist for Zoe Therapy Services.

Non-financial: Alesia Alexander has no relevant non-financial relationship to disclose.

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Reach Across Divides: Cultural & Difference Focused Practices in Grief Work

Alesia K. Alexander, LCSW, CT

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*The grief experience includes the physical and emotional reactions experienced following the **perceived** loss of someone, or something of value.*

This unique and individual experience can affect body, mind, feelings, spirit, attitudes, relationships, and daily living. Its' duration and intensity is determined by the person's race, age, cultural/ethnic background, life experience, relationships, and type of loss.

Grief & Loss

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- Has been described as a PROCESS,
- As TASK oriented
- As an EXPERIENCE
- As a JOURNEY
- As PATHOLOGY...

It matters how **YOU** describe it, in order to inform how you SUPPORT and FACILITATE it...

Grief

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Perception As Inclusive Practice Anchor

- How a person “sees, describes, and experiences” **their** loss is a practical touchpoint for all clinical interventions engaging grief.
- Engaging and empowering this in your spaces creates safety, respect and can support the rapport necessary for inclusive grief support.

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Diversity

Diversity is a **reality** created by individuals and groups from a broad spectrum of demographic and philosophical differences.

This reality can be applied, or exist in multiple settings and situations.

Term used to describe a climate for living, work and play that is respectful, open and equal.

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Diversity

- Can only be restorative if done consistently, and intentionally
- Can just be a surface construct.
- Should be more than “numbers”.
- Can be interpreted as a reflection of a deeper, foundational aspect of an organization

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Intersectionality

- Initially introduced as a Feminist ideology/construct.
- Created by Kimberle Crenshaw, JD to describe disenfranchisement of Black women from social justice, and equality work/movements.
- Useful in grief work as a tool for engaging narrative building and identity clarification for self, professional and community awareness.

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The Work Of Diversity, Inclusion, Intersectionality in Grief

- Responds to:
 - What do you have questions about?
 - Your **Values**
 - Your **Beliefs**
 - Your **Biases**
 - What you want **reflected back** to you in any interaction.
 - **Affirms**, Confirms, Opens you up to *more*, & DIFFERENT Questions
 - Keeps you alert, **PRESENT**...

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Beyond Diversity: Inclusion

- Just another buzzword?
- Who do we mean?
- Requires higher level investment
- Deeper engagement
- Infrastructure inherent
- Liability Killer
- Spirit and Morale Lifter



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Why Should I Care?

- Guides Behavior
- Spirituality
- Sets Multiple Compasses
- Identifies & Clarifies Boundaries
- Supports Self-Care
- Allows Support of Others
- Allows for Goal Setting
- Prioritizing
- Informs Resilience
- Identifies Barriers & Biases

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Why Should WE Care?

Can guide mission/professional development...

- **Identifies & Engages** stakeholders
- **Shows gaps** in Service, Research, Core Competencies
- **Builds** in support for staff
- **Guides** Hiring & Training
- **Grounds** Foundation for INterventions & Models of Support

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Equality vs. Equity

Equality

- Everyone being treated the same.

Equity

- Everyone being given all the access and resources to engage, participate and succeed.



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- Media imagery/**messages** about who people of color are, who LGBTQIA are, neurodiversity, etc.
- **Skewed** perception of what family is, what “functional” is.
- Getting over ourselves enough to let go of long-held ideas about **difference**, who we are.
- **Fear** of offending.
- **Fear** of appearing prejudiced, or racist
- **Shame**, or no- to low - self awareness of our own privilege, and/bias

Barriers to Diversity/Inclusion

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Grief of Difference

- These experiences may be impacted by additional layers of narrative around:
 - Poverty
 - Racism
 - Oppression/Privilege
 - Trauma
 - Abandonment
 - Insecure Attachment Styles
 - Kinship & Community Care, ACCESS
 - Community Narratives around Shame, or Distrust
 - Stigmas or Disenfranchisement

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Gender Issues

- Girls often are given more permission to grieve- but because of hostility in environment; many are choosing *not* to take it.
- Being “hard” or untouchable by pain is more accepted than traditional roles and stereotypes.
- More girls are exhibiting anger in their grief journeys than sadness.
- Requires practitioners to revamp approaches to support to meet these “new” needs.

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- Boys have a full range of emotion, and the ability and **desire** to share and express themselves fully.
- Unfortunately, they learn early on to distrust this desire for deep connection and expression.
- There are clear messages about feelings and intimacy not being acceptable or “manly”
 - Media
 - Families
 - Attachment & Parenting styles
 - Culture reinforces these messages
- This happens across demographics, and can have lasting effects on total functioning, regardless of loss hx., or presenting issues.

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Othering...

- Non-binary, gender nonconforming youth and individuals are not represented in our grief support constructs, and ways of ascribing the modern loss experience.
- Research and inclusive practice must be aligned to engaging the uniqueness of this grief journey as a part of identity formation, resources, living in the queer body, safety, and losses more specifically experienced as a part of this community.

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The Skin *You* Are In...

- How well-defined is ***your*** grief journey?
 - What are your questions?
 - Challenges?
 - Triggers?
 - Where are you at peace?
- How do you define your family of **origin**? **Choice/Curated Community or Family**
- What stereotypes or **beliefs** do you hold?
 - General
 - Specific



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Conscious Community Engagement

- **Involves** your stakeholders at every phase
- **Delivers** clear and respectful messaging
- **Plans** for multiple ways of reaching the community
- Is **sustainable**, and **consistent**

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Barriers to Inclusive Community Engagement

- Funders
- Board of Directors
- Strategic Plan
- Staff Competency
- Your “Public”
- Community of Choice/Population to be Served
- **Self**



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Community Outreach

- **Identify** the “true” leaders
- Gatekeepers are key. **Earn** their respect.
 - Their identities are not always obvious.
- Go to the **source**, cut out the middle man.
- **Enlist** unlikely allies.
- Be **clear** about your goals.
- **Restate** agendas and goals often.
- Be **alert** to the “politics” of the community of interest.
- **Reassess** often, and throughout the process.



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Action Plans

- **Make** an assessment, How great/bad is it?
- **Answer** the hard question(s) first.
- **Work** with the end in mind.
- **Build** in opportunities for communication.
- Build in opportunities for **respect**.
- **GO** beyond the surface.

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Families of Color/Difference

- We must expand our idea of what families of color/difference means.
- Do not make assumption that *only* BIPOC practitioners can work within these systems.
- BIPOC's must confront own bias and challenges associated with identity.
- Respect for the culture/identity mores and norms key to therapeutic success.



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Families in Therapy

- Goal: Create a safe and non-judgmental space for sharing, and for creating “story”.
- Group work is a resource for helping kids and their families put their story and history in perspective.
- Should intrinsically support whatever that storyline is.
- Loss is a defining factor in how a child/teen creates their identity, and develops a script for resilience, and for finding their place in the world at large.

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What Do Kids/Families of Color & Difference Want?

- Authenticity
- Voice
- Validation
- Respect
- Inclusion



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Program Development

- **What** do you want to accomplish?
- Have you **answered the hard** questions?
- **How** can you diversify existing materials and activity plans?
- **Are** existing materials/supplies safe and inclusive?
- **What** are the **physical/cognitive/accomodational** changes that need to be made to plans?
- **Extra logistical considerations?**
- **Plan B?**

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In Group...

Protect the space.

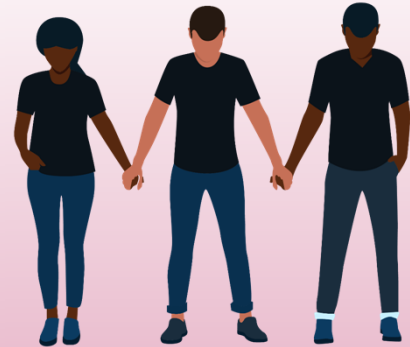
Set clear boundaries.

Know the losses.

Set members up for success in communicating with each other, and across Difference.

In the beginning, **explore myths, and messages** members have about each other, if in a mixed group.

Build in appreciation for the Difference{s}.



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Jamal in Group

- 🌸 Appearance and affect may mask true feelings.
- 🌸 May appear defensive, guarded and hostile even though the prevalent feeling(s) are really fear, anxiety.
- 🌸 Gets messages and cues from all sides that indicate how damaged and unmanageable he is.
- 🌸 Understands the threat he presents to a “therapeutic setting”.
- 🌸 Has desire to live up to this until given other, more accurate cues from group, and from the facilitator.



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Resources

Use of **self**

What is **around** you?

Use **existing** networks.

What is **important** to the kids/communities you are working with?

Relevance

Meaning

Cements your **commitment to understanding** them.

Shows **respect**.

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Ritual

- The symbolic has an important role in how people can heal from loss.
- Many traditions we observe after a death are deeply rooted in ritual
- Kids and BIPOC/D are familiar with the role of ritual in their everyday lives.
- Plays a huge part in how we interact with the world.
- Incorporating the element of ritual can be a very helpful step in interacting with a grieving individual or system.

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Connecting...



Take it back to the village...

- Role of **elders**
- Role of **ritual**
- Role of **males**
- Role of **culture**, and of **individual history/narratives**
- Role of **responsibility** and **accountability** to the larger community
- Role of **connection**

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Curriculum	Outreach	Group Facilitation	Volunteer Recruitment /Training	Inclusion Practices
<p>Considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where did it come from? • Specificity to Community/clients served • Empowerment Based • Strengths Focused • Historical/Cultural Context • Does it ask the right questions? • Flexible? • Responsive? 	<p>Considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you the right ambassador? • What are the collaborations /partners that you need to ID, engage? • What is intent? • Sustainable? • Authentic? • Answers a call • Responsive • “Real” • Organization Perception in Community 	<p>Considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your triggers? • Plan B • Strengths • Empowerment • Offers Choice • Teachable • Mediation Skills • Active Listening Skills • Behavior Management 	<p>Considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who do you need? • Why? • Recruitment Strategies Specific to Need • Authenticity • Specific Training Modules • Open Dialogue • Transparency • Competency • Supervision 	<p>Considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How Serious are you? • Leadership? • Resources • Open • Has Buy-In from Stakeholders • Everyone Participates • Integration vs. “Celebration or Appreciation” • Mission & Values reflect Commitment

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