

Grief Tending: Why Space to Reflect is Crucial for the Homelessness Sector



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Working in homelessness services involves repeated exposure to death, loss, and emotional strain. This article explores the importance of creating structured spaces for reflection and grief across all levels of the workforce. It argues that acknowledging moral injury and collective grief is essential for ethical practice, organisational learning and staff wellbeing. It also highlights how memorialisation can support meaning-making, retention, and systemic change within the sector.

Working in the homelessness sector means forming professional relationships in conditions of a profoundly personal nature. Staff working in outreach teams, supported housing services, daycentres, and specialist health and social work settings walk alongside people through moments of immense vulnerability, personal crises and experiences of stigma and systemic inequality.

When someone you work with dies, it is never just “part of the job”. After twenty-two years working in the homelessness sector, I carry the memory of too many people who have passed away before realising their hopes for a stable life. Each of their losses has had a profound effect on me and my professional practice. In my various roles supporting homelessness and inclusion health sectors in the UK, Europe, and North America, my experiences have found purpose in challenging the professional tendency to rush past grief, treating the deaths of the people we support as regrettable operational issues to be quickly moved on from.

This article reflects on the role of creating spaces for front-line staff, managers, and strategic leaders to process their feelings when someone dies. These spaces acknowledge a hard truth: in a system shaped by precarity and preventable harm, death is not rare and the emotional impact on professionals can be profound. However, rather than adding to feelings of helplessness and failure, this article posits that making space for grief is essential to ethical practice, to collective learning and to the long-term health of the workforce and our sector at large.

Making Room for Grief: Tending to Moral Injury

When a person dies, staff often carry a dense mix of feelings: sadness, guilt, anger, helplessness, fear, and injustice. Without space to process these emotions and transform them into something meaningful, they rarely just disappear;

instead, they harden. Practitioners I've had the privilege to work with, from specialisms and services across the sector, tell me about how this can show up as cynicism, hopelessness, emotional withdrawal, burnout, and ultimately lead to decisions to leave the sector altogether. Their reflections mirror the learning in FEANTSA's recent publication about staff wellbeing.

Reflection and emotional expression are not indulgent, nor a distraction from service delivery or strategic leadership. Reflection is a necessary condition for learning, improvement, and leadership. This is no different when reflecting on death as on other workplace experiences and professional practices.

Scholars at Durham University describe “the experience of sustained and enduring negative moral emotions - guilt, shame, contempt and anger - which results from the betrayal, violation or suppression of deeply held or shared moral values” as ‘moral injury’. Moral injury “involves a profound sense of broken trust in ourselves, our leaders, governments and institutions to act in just and morally “good” ways”. Creating spaces that legitimise grief and encourage reflection can go some way to countering the forces that drive moral injury, by building the conditions for positive change in the organisations and systems they work for and within, and by reflecting and acting on the systemic forces that drive premature and undignified deaths.

The year-long series of *Breathing Room* sessions that I was invited to host on behalf of the Museum of Homelessness modelled how creating space for grief in the homelessness sector can support the frontline workforce to process grief, anger, frustration, and loss whilst remaining connected and energised around their work. Those involved shared that the opportunity to recount memories, to call out injustices, and to access peer support outside of their individual organisations was supportive

of their desire to continually advocate for systemic change and practice improvement, even in the face of ongoing resource pressures, local system barriers and political uncertainty. Grief tending, as a reflective and collective practice of changemaking, can be a remedy to moral injury.



Image: Museum of Homelessness graphic about the Breathing Room

Learning Without Blame: The Role of ‘Safeguarding Adult’ & ‘Homelessness Fatality’ Reviews

In the UK, the practice of Safeguarding Adult Reviews (SARs) and Homelessness Fatality Reviews (HFRs) provides an important opportunity to transform reflection into learning and action. Debriefing practices and learning reviews that follow deaths are crucial opportunities to blend practice improvement work with opportunities for grief and personal reflection. The multi-agency learning events and 1:1 meetings that form part of these review processes move beyond statistics to ask relational and systemic questions about how and why someone died, and what can be learned about how agencies worked together to support them. Crucially, they are not about apportioning blame, but about learning together to prevent

future deaths and enable people to live more safely by accessing the support they need.

Participating in or engaging with reviews can be both painful and meaningful for staff and managers. Done well, learning events and reflective spaces that form parts of these reviews can allow practitioners and managers to voice what they saw, what they feared, and where they felt blocked by policy or resource gaps. They acknowledge and hold space for moral injury and system fatigue. They place focus on actions and improvements that agencies can implement to prevent future deaths and strengthen local systems. Importantly, reflective learning activities affirm that emotional responses are linked to real, systemic issues - not personal inadequacy.

Conducting reviews after someone has died can help transform grief into knowledge, action, and change. They bring to the surface gaps in practice, inter-agency breakdowns, and structural failures, and offer a framework for frontline practitioners to share their learning and ideas with local Safeguarding Adult Boards and other governance spaces. Importantly, fatality review activity can take many forms according to who, what, and when is being reviewed, and organisations should develop ways of learning from deaths that suit their expertise and context.

Vicarious and Anticipatory Grief: Tending to the Needs of Sector Leaders

It would be understandable but inaccurate to position grief only at the frontline of service delivery in the homelessness sector. Whilst it is absolutely correct to ensure that those most connected to an individual have space for grief and reflection, my experience points to the importance of ensuring that operational and strategic leaders also have these opportunities. Indeed, evidence from trauma-informed care is clear: a focus only on frontline practice inhibits the organisational growth needed to develop truly trauma-informed ways of supporting the people and communities we serve.

I work 1:1 and in groups with strategic managers and leaders, as part of reviews and in coaching and leadership development relationships, usually following a death or other profoundly challenging situations that occur in the practice of our work. I hear often how they feel conflicted about expressing grief, concerned it may be viewed as “unprofessional” and uncertain as to its usefulness in making real the learning and improvement needed after someone has died. In contrast to frontline workers, managers and leaders often speak about the cumulative toll of death on their wellbeing and leadership practice, and how fears about future deaths loom large when supporting teams and individuals. They speak of concerns that they are “failing” their teams and of the vicarious impact of particularly traumatic deaths, as well as feelings of personal responsibility, tension with system partners and deepening frustration at wider policy issues.

This reflective work with leaders suggests that emotional reflection can work in tandem with problem-solving about organisational cultures, system barriers and strategic governance. In fact, this work suggests that grief tending plays a vital role in developing leadership practice and organisational change processes to prevent and respond to deaths.

Memory, Meaning and Memorial

Responding to grief is also about memorialisation. My work with the Museum of Homelessness has transformed my understanding of this, learning from community members that people who die while homeless should be remembered as more than tragic statistics and reports, as people with full and complex lives, relationships, and histories. Creating memorials - whether physical, digital or ritual - gives staff and communities a way to honour those they have lost by ensuring they are not forgotten.

Contributing to memorials can be a form of meaning-making for an individual, and an opportunity to deepen professional relationships. In Breathing Room discussions, staff and managers spoke about

the healing role of laying flowers, of creating memorial books, of attending funerals, and of hosting remembrance parties to honour those lost. Importantly, memorialisation brings staff, service users and the wider community together around a shared purpose. Grief is not only about pain and sadness; it's also about celebration, joy and collective acts of remembrance. In acts of remembrance shared by professionals and service users, the foundations of trauma-informed relational practice - safety, collaboration and trustworthiness - can be strengthened, built and rebuilt after loss.

Managers and leaders often reflect that the act of witnessing and remembering can be motivating and connecting. The annual remembrance ceremony at St-Martin-in-the-Fields Church in London is an example often cited as important to senior leaders, reconnecting them with why they entered the sector and what they want to achieve. Creating space for grief and remembrance with sector allies and allowing time for celebration, joy, and laughter in honour of those who died reminds those of us in leadership why we are here in the first place.

Memorialisation takes many forms, and each individual, team, and organisation will have its own way of approaching this. Learnings from memorial practices and events across the UK suggest starting small, always including a shared meal, reaching out to local places of worship for support, and, most importantly, ensuring that family, friends, and people with lived experience shape how they want to remember those lost.

Why This Matters for Retention—and the Sector's Future

The homelessness workforce is chronically overstretched, under-resourced, and emotionally burdened by profound individual and systemic harms. When grief is ignored, the cost is attrition and the loss of some of our most knowledgeable and insightful workers. Frontline practitioners, operational managers, and strategic leaders know that without reflective spaces and honest conversations about the hardest aspect of this work, roles become unsustainable and opportunities to bring about real change are overlooked.

Providing 1:1 and collective spaces to process grief, learn from deaths, and participate in remembrance is an important part of healthier team and organisational cultures. It builds collective resilience rather than relying on individual coping strategies. It acknowledges systemic harm whilst holding personal agency and accountability with candour and care. Ultimately, it helps people remain connected to their work, committed to embedding learning and energised to take action. For managers and strategic leaders, these mechanisms provide leadership confidence and an acknowledgement of the depth and breadth of the responsibilities they hold. In short, tending to grief is a key remedy against moral injury and towards a healthier sector.



Image: Lucinda Macpherson, Dying Homeless Project Annual Vigil 2024.

Looking Forward: Learning from the Living

This article has reflected on the support we can offer our workforce in response to the deaths of people experiencing homelessness. Yet there is a final, crucial point that should not be overlooked. While reflection and learning after death is vital, real progress lies in learning earlier and from success as well as from failure. A focus on death alone risks missing opportunities to learn about what is working well, to celebrate goals achieved, and to plan for good endings. The challenge, therefore, is to apply the same depth of listening, curiosity, and care to the experiences of the living as to the memory of those who pass away.

Creating space for grief is not about accepting death as inevitable. It is about honouring those who have been lost, sustaining those who remain, and employing learning to energise and replenish our efforts towards ending homelessness and the fatal harms it perpetuates.

ENDNOTES

- 1 https://www.feantsa.org/files/Themes/misc/2025/Staff-wellbeing/Staff_wellbeing_final.pdf
- 2 The Breathing Room was a one-year series of reflective practice sessions, creative memorial spaces and discussions, hosted by the Museum of Homelessness as an offer to the homeless community and to front-line practitioners and managers working in the sector. Breathing Room spaces offered a 'safe container' to talk about grief, loss, and the factors that influence both. More than 50 practitioners from organisations across England and Wales participated, offering their memories, honest reflections, problem-solving skills, and peer support.
- 3 Homelessness Fatality Reviews were established in England in 2019, with the aim of ensuring that every death affecting someone who experienced homelessness was recorded, reflected on and learned from. The practice is now recognised as best practice by the UK Ministry of Communities, Housing and Local Government, and more than 20 local authorities across the country now regularly undertake HFR's following the deaths of individuals experiencing homelessness in their areas.
- 4 [Office for Health Improvement and Disparities \(2022\), Working definition of trauma-informed practice, UK Government, 2 November 2022](#)