It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Crisis:

Understanding and Managing Grief Attacks During the Holidays

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Choking on Grief

…My *fight-or-flight* response stayed activated since the scene where I tried to shake my father back to life…. A profound helplessness coiled through my spine, hunching me over and forcing my shoulders to sink… I either took short, clamped breaths that tightened my chest, causing my heart to race… or I released all of my air at once through automatic, uncontrollable, deep, deep sighing…physically *choking* on grief.

The most crippling aspect of my grief was enduring pangs of pain, lightening bolts striking the center of my chest—repeatedly, relentlessly. Unconscious of my actions, I walked around tapping or palming my breastbone, trying to soothe the unnameable ache…. I could feel the muscle squeezing, aching, yearning, missing him. Searching the web, I diagnosed myself with takotsubo cardiomyopathy, *broken heart syndrome*.

Linita Eapen Mathew, Teacher and Author, *The Revelations of Eapen*

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.

C. S. Lewis, Author of
A Grief Observed

Grief Attacks

What are they?

- Sudden and frequently unexpected upwellings of grief-related anguish
- Both a stress and an attachment reaction:
  - ***Subjective Fear:*** panic or alarm in being separated from an attachment figure
  - ***Physiological reaction:*** motivates "search and recover" activity
- Explosive, total-body experience

Grief Attack Questionnaire:

Construction and Validation

- Recruited 247 adults struggling with a loss through death
- 58% White with proportional representation of Black, Hispanic and Asian Americans
- Approximately equal participation of women and men
- 60% lost nuclear family member
- 42% lost to chronic disease

Sherman A. Lee & Robert A. Neimeyer

Death Studies
Journal of Clinical and Basic Psychosomatics

Scale Construction

23 items:

- 13 DSM 5-TR panic disorder symptoms
- 8 DSM 5-TR prolonged grief disorder symptoms
- 2 Clinical observations
  - *Wanting to die rather than live without deceased*
  - *Irresistible sobbing or crying*

Each rated on 5-point scale, from not at all to overwhelmingly over the last month

Grief Attack Questionnaire

Instructions: Think of your most recent experience with a "Grief Attack." A grief attack is often described as a sudden and frequently unexpected upwelling of grief-related anguish. During the duration of a grief attack, a person could experience a strong surge of emotions, thoughts, and/or physical symptoms, which can feel overwhelming and uncomfortable. Please indicate how *intensely* you felt each of the following experiences during your ***most recent*** grief attack. Indicate zero for the items below that did not match your grief attack experience. Simply put your rating in the column to the right of each item.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all	Slightly	Somewhat	Quite a bit	Overwhelmingly

		Rating
1	Palpitations, pounding heart, or accelerated heart rate	
2	Sweating	
3	Trembling or shaking	
4	Sensations of shortness of breath or smothering	
5	Feelings of choking	
6	Chest pain or discomfort	
7	Nausea or abdominal distress	
8	Feeling dizzy, unsteady, lightheaded, or faint	
9	Chills or heat sensations	
10	Numbness or tingling sensations	
11	Feelings of unreality or being detached from one-self	
12	Fear of losing control or "going crazy"	
13	Fear of dying	
14	Feelings of longing or yearning for the deceased	
15	Had thoughts about the deceased	
16	Felt confused about your role in life or felt like you did not know who you were anymore	
17	Had trouble believing that the deceased is really gone	
18	Felt emotional pain related to the death of the deceased (e.g. anger, bitterness, sorrow)	
19	Felt emotionally numb or detached	
20	Felt that life is meaningless without the deceased	
21	Felt alone or lonely without the deceased	
22	Irresistible sobbing or crying	
23	Wanting to die rather than live without the deceased	

A Disabling Grief

The personification of fear forced my eyes to shudder, leaving them stuck in *searching* mode, disallowing my brain to read or retain information. And though my external vision was weak, my internal sight was overactive, pushing scenes of my father taking his last breath to the front of my mind. These symptoms had collided with me before; I knew my grief had coupled with post-traumatic stress disorder.

…A surprising manifestation of traumatic grief was memory impairment. I struggled to connect thought to action as a block prevented the two from meeting. I forgot basic instructions like *watering a plant* or *cutting carrots*…. In short, I could not bring forward information that was deemed unnecessary, and anything outside of my father's death was unnecessary.

Linita Eapen Mathew, Teacher and Author, *The Revelations of Eapen*

Grief Impairment Scale

Instructions: Using the scale (0 to 4) below, please indicate how often (in the past 30 days) you had difficulty functioning because of your grief. We define "grief" as your reactions to your significant loss.

0 days (never)		1 to 3 days (seldom)		4 to 15 days (occasionally)		16 to 29 days (often)		30 days (always)
0		1		2		3		4

1.	Experienced problems with *thinking* because of your grief. Some examples include: • Difficulty with attention (e.g., unable to concentrate on an important task). • Memory problem (e.g., forgot, lost, or could not remember something important). • Difficulty with a decision (e.g., made a poor decision; was indecisive).	?
2.	Experienced *health problems* because of your grief. Some examples include: • Sickness, pain, or discomfort (e.g., cold symptoms; abdominal pain; felt sick). • Sleep disturbances (e.g., unable to fall or stay asleep). • Low energy (e.g., feeling exhausted).	?
3.	Engaged in *unhealthy activity* to cope with your grief. Some examples include: • Alcohol or Substance use (e.g., pain killers; cocaine; heroine; methamphetamine). • Unhealthy Eating (e.g., overeating or skipping meals). • Self-Destructive Behavior (e.g., damaging self or objects; reckless driving).	?
4.	Unable to fulfill an *important responsibility* in life, such as work/school, housekeeping, and/or caring for others, because of your grief. Some examples include: • Work or School (e.g., absent/tardy; failing assignment/exam; poor quality work). • Housekeeping (e.g., unkept rooms; dusty/dirty surfaces; uncleaned dishes/clothes). • Caring for Others (e.g., unable to provide food/shelter; did not provide adequate supervision or tend to medical needs).	?
5.	Unable to *positively engage with others* because of your grief. Some examples include: • Avoided a significant person, place, or event. • Fought or argued with others. • People avoided you or treated you in a hurtful way (e.g., insensitive comments).	?
	TOTAL SCORE	?

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Grief Impairment Scale

Lee & Neimeyer, *Death Studies*

Validated measure of disruption of daily functioning caused by grief

Assesses 6 biopsychosocial domains:

1. **Thinking** (attention, decision, memory)
2. **Health** (pain, sleep problems, energy)
3. **Unhealthy activities** (drug use, eating problems, self-destructive behavior)
4. **Responsibilities** (work, school, housekeeping)
5. **Caring for others** (children, elders)
6. **Social engagement** (avoidance, conflict, isolation)

GAQ scores >34 predict significant impairment

Factor Analysis of GAQ

4 subscales:

1. **Panic:** trembling, sweating, numbness, faintness
2. **Yearning:** thoughts of deceased, longing, emotional pain, sobbing
3. **Disorganization:** unreality, fear of dying, losing control, loss of self
4. **Despair:** meaninglessness, wanting to die, loneliness, disbelief

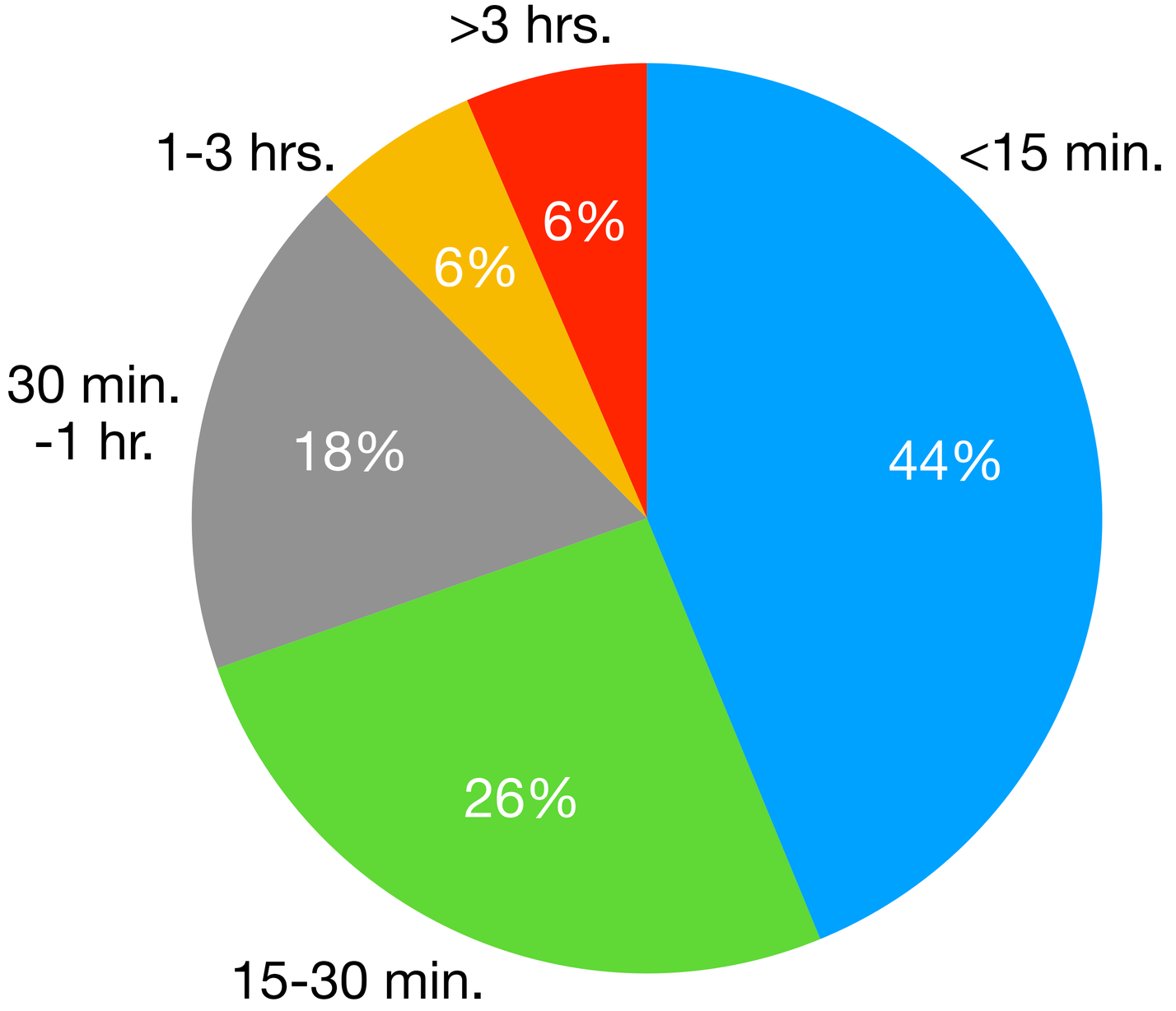
Duration of Grief Attacks

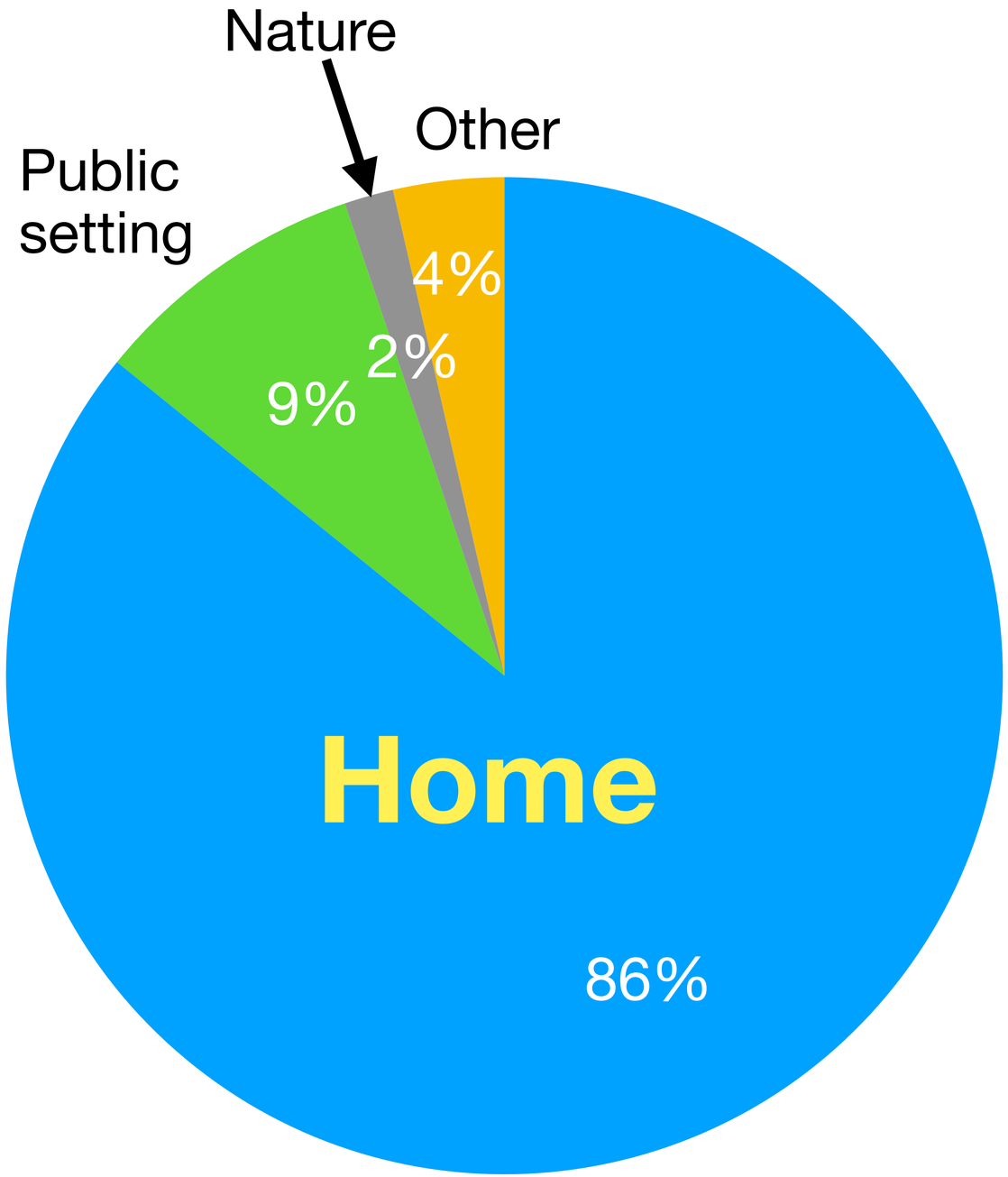
Take away message:

Most attacks are brief, though intense

30% are extended, testing one's endurance

90% of mourners reported 0-2 attacks in past week





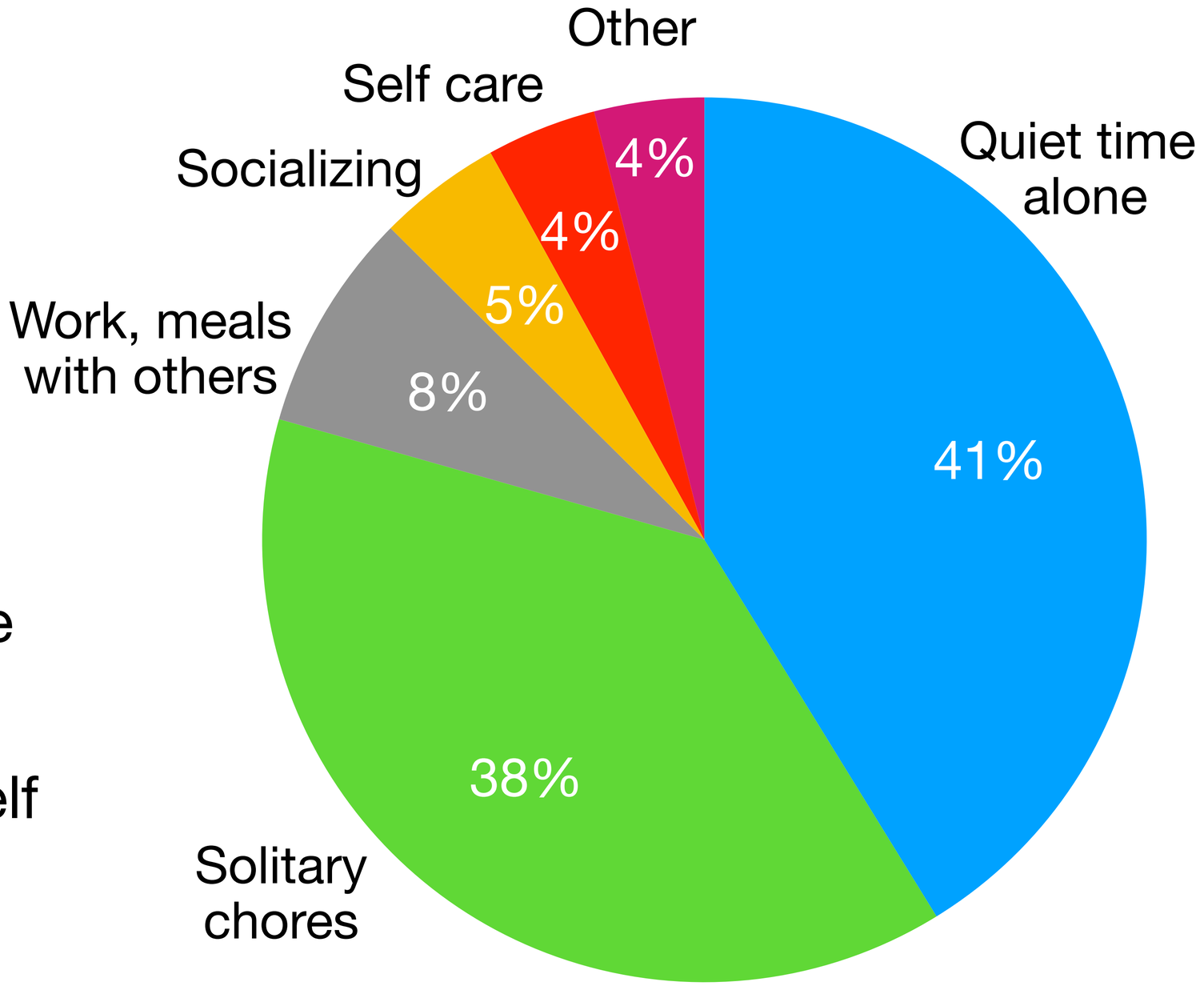
Contextual Triggers for Grief Attacks

Take away message:

To minimize grief attacks, reduce time at home

Nature provides the greatest refuge

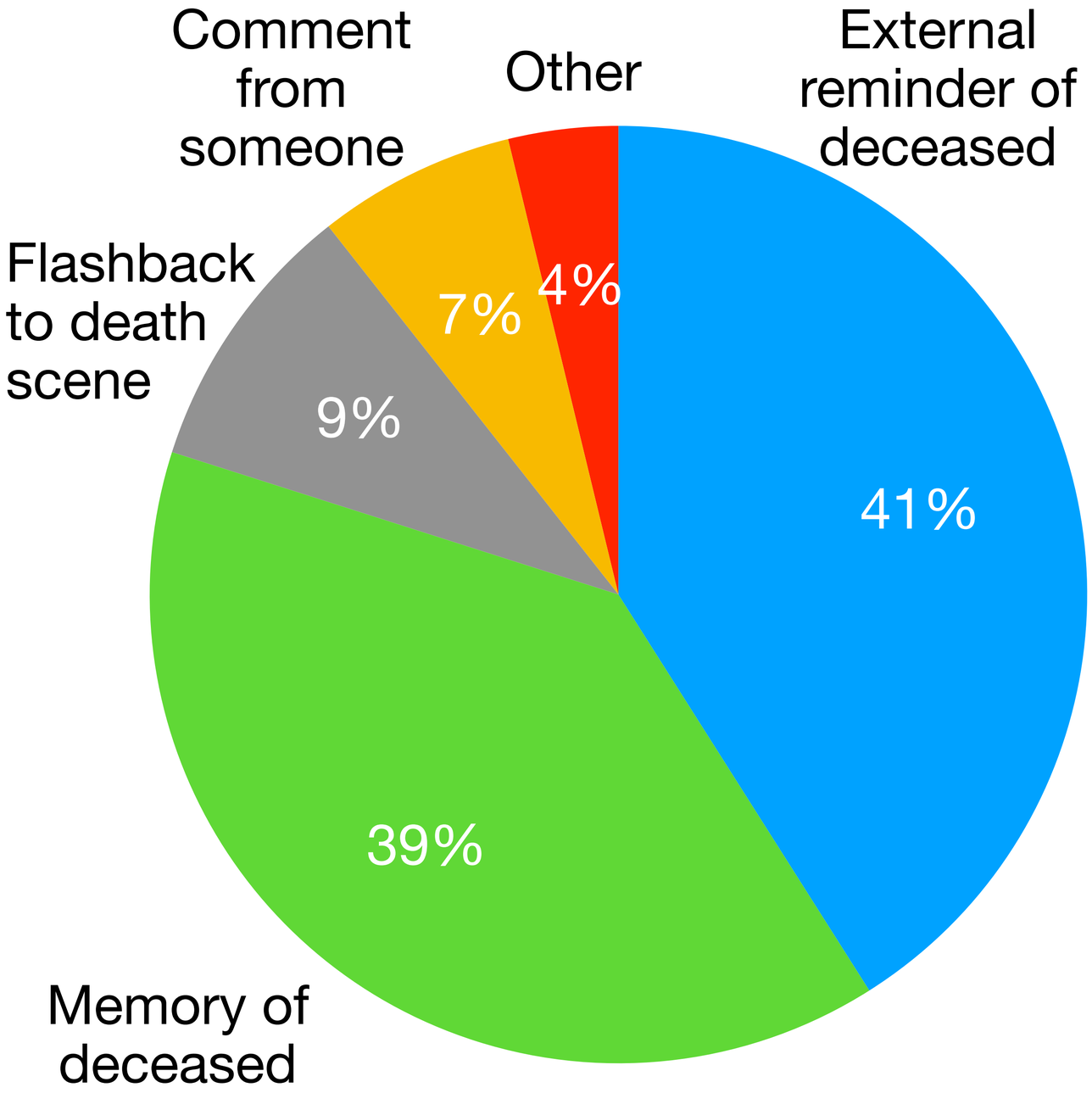
Activity Triggers for Grief Attacks



Take away message:

Quiet, routine moments invite grief attacks

Genuine engagement with self and others buffers mourners from them



Situational Triggers for Grief Attacks

68% had no idea attack was coming

Take away message:

Triggers can arise in the world or in the mind

Exposure therapies are essential

Impact of Grief Attacks

Frequently mentioned effects:

- Difficulty breathing, tight chest
- Blurred vision, headache, insomnia
- Vomiting, fainting, collapse
- Sitting, crying, public loss of control
- Self-isolation, avoidance by others
- Started drinking, substance use
- Chronic stress, high blood pressure, ulcers
- Emotional breakdown, suicidal thoughts
- Accidental injuries in kitchen or work
- Losing control while driving, accidents
- *Strong predictor of biopsychosocial impairment in daily functions (GIS)*

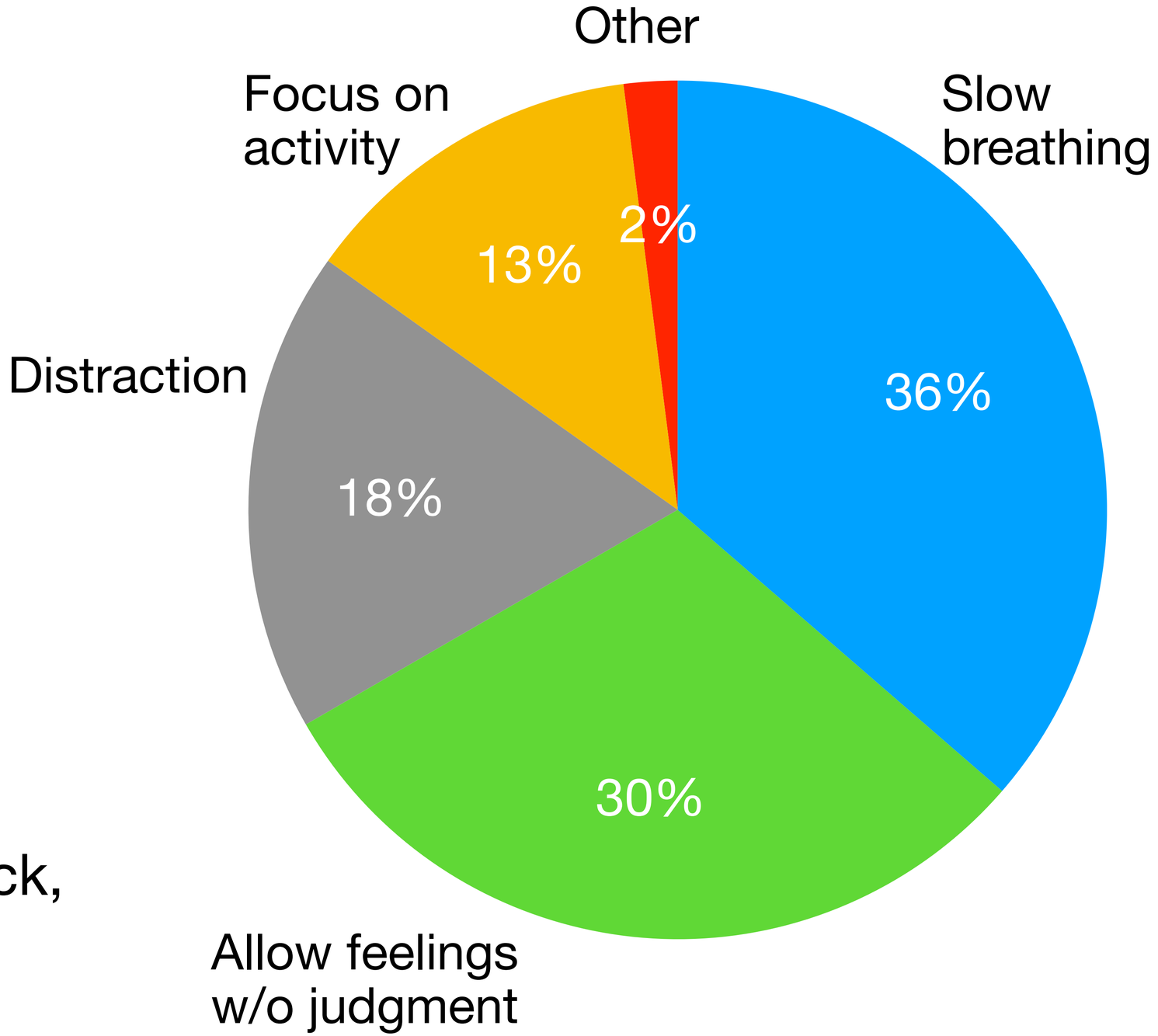
Coping Efforts

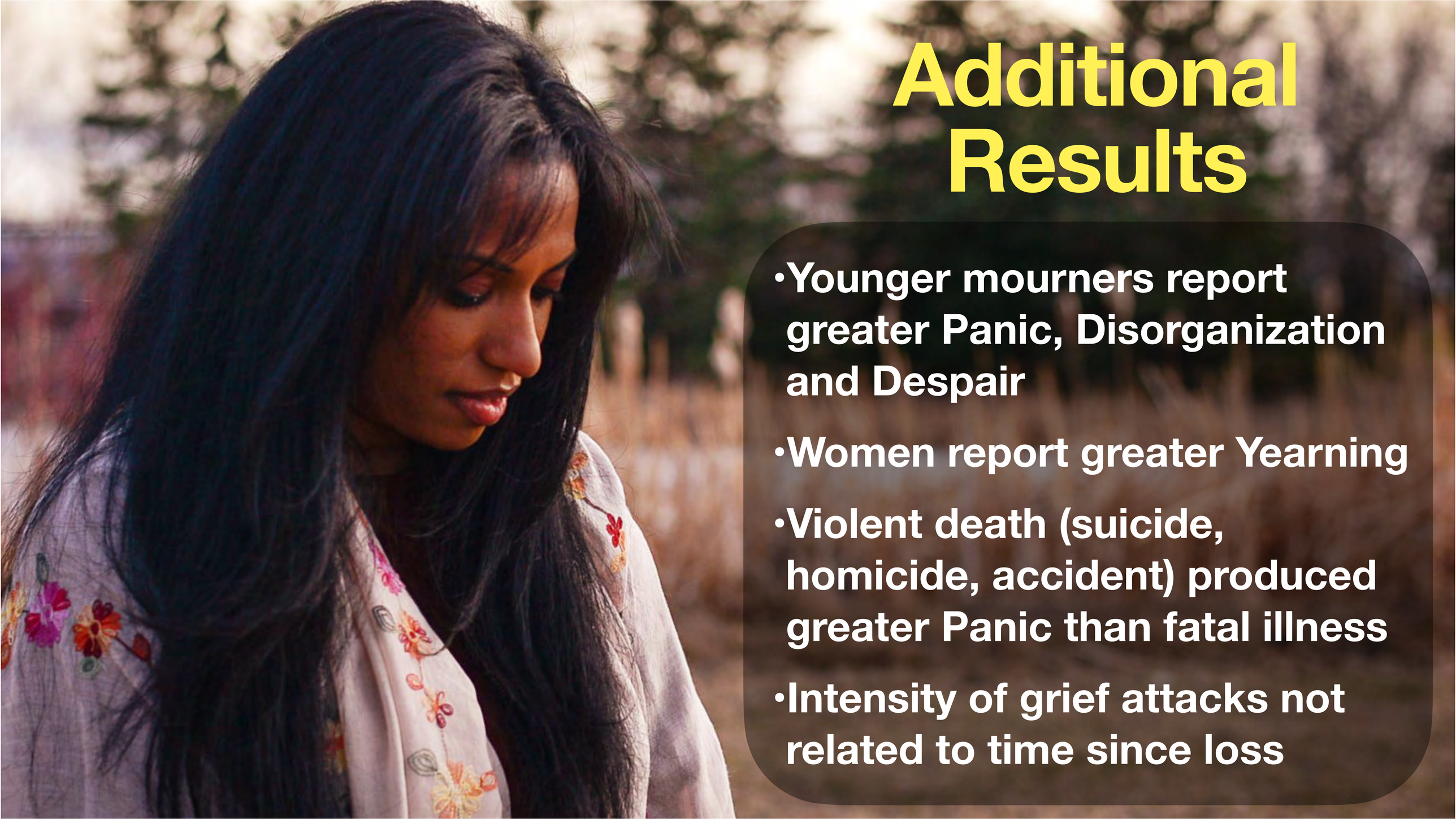
Take away message:

Practice breath work

Avoid catastrophic interpretation, suppressing emotion and self-criticism

Though only 4% were able to completely “turn off” the attack, 75% found their coping somewhat or very helpful





Additional Results

- Younger mourners report greater Panic, Disorganization and Despair
- Women report greater Yearning
- Violent death (suicide, homicide, accident) produced greater Panic than fatal illness
- Intensity of grief attacks not related to time since loss

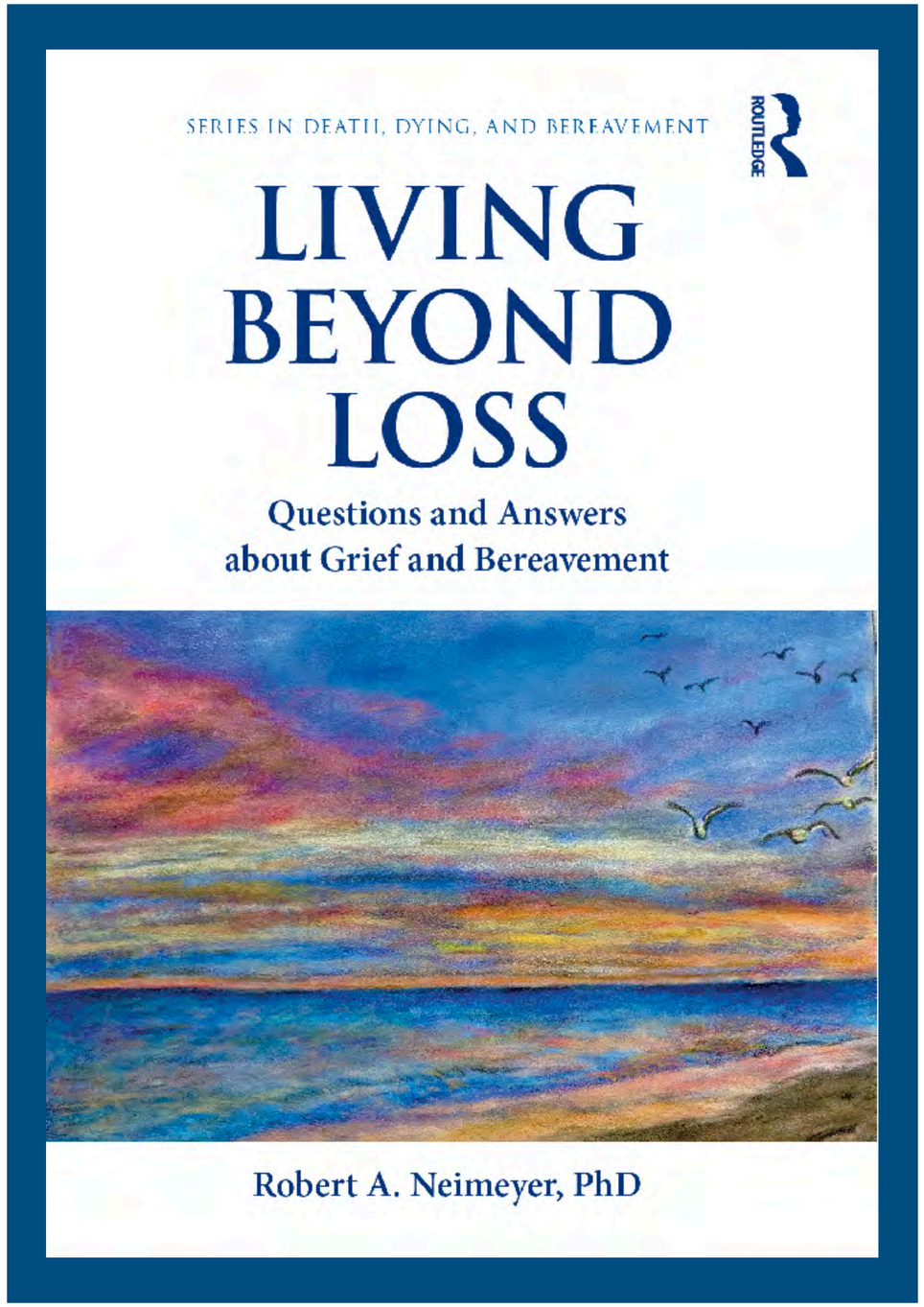
Treat Yourself Well

On your own, with support figures, or in grief therapy, seek:

- **Emotion regulation**, slowing breathing, thoughts & movements
- **Mindfulness**, giving fluid attention to your stream of consciousness, observing your feelings without judging them
- **Gradual exposure** to triggers to diminish their power
- **Reaffirming a non-physical bond** to your loved one rather than letting go
- **Reconstruct your post-loss identity** to find meaning in your evolving story

Top 10 Tips for Coping with Grief Attacks

1. *Just observe. What do the feelings have to teach?*
2. *Break the cycle. Don't feed the fear.*
3. *Practice compassion. Start with yourself.*
4. *Breathe through it. Grief attacks are time-limited.*
5. *Home is where the hurt is. Step into the natural world to be refreshed.*
6. *Expose yourself. Confront the triggers gradually.*
7. *Re-story the loss. And restore meaning in your life.*
8. *Don't let go. But find new ways of holding on.*
9. *Seek help where it hurts. Use the GAQ to find the sore spots.*
10. *Reach out to friends and family. And when they need allies, contact a grief therapist.*



Resources

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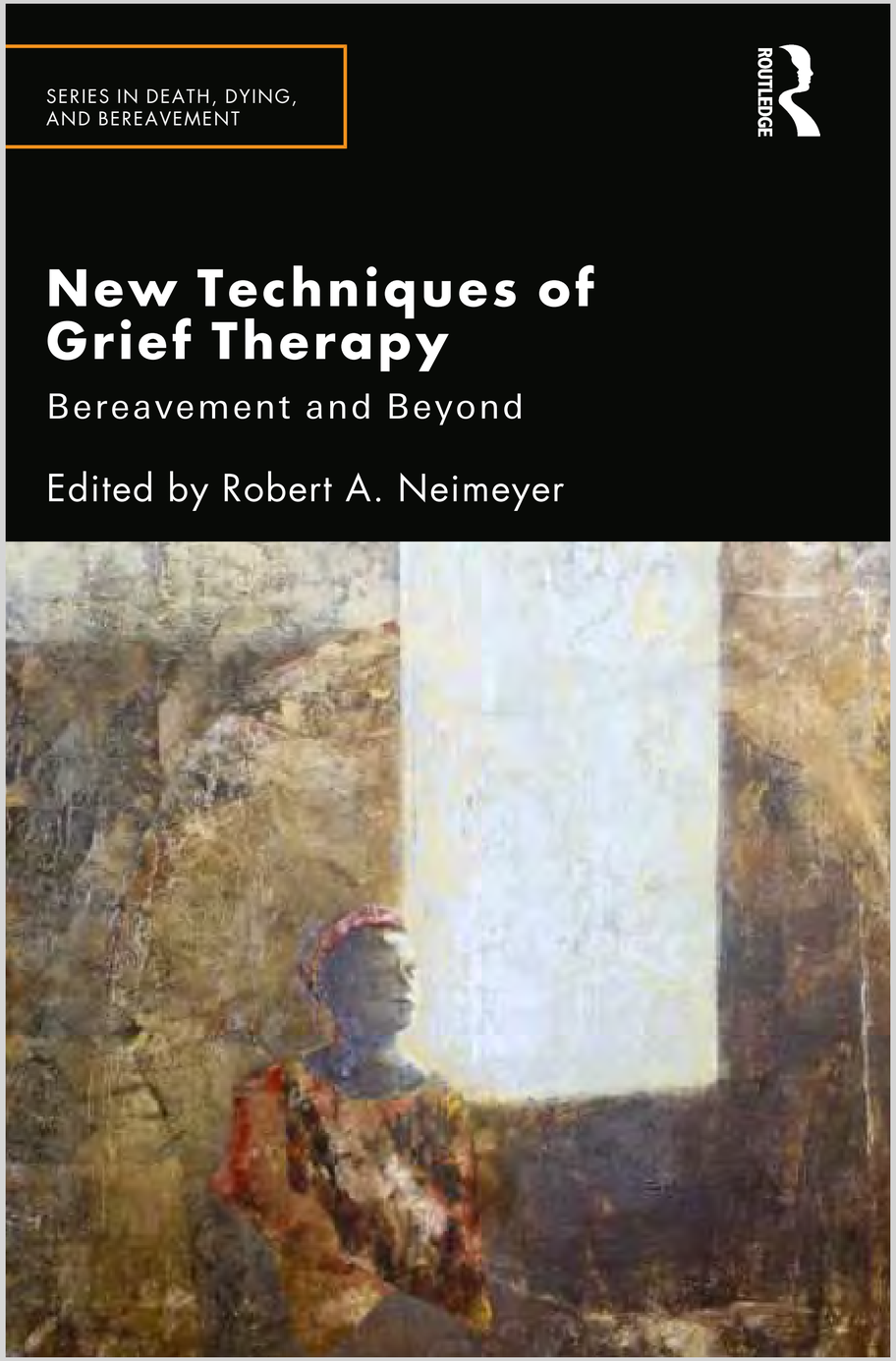
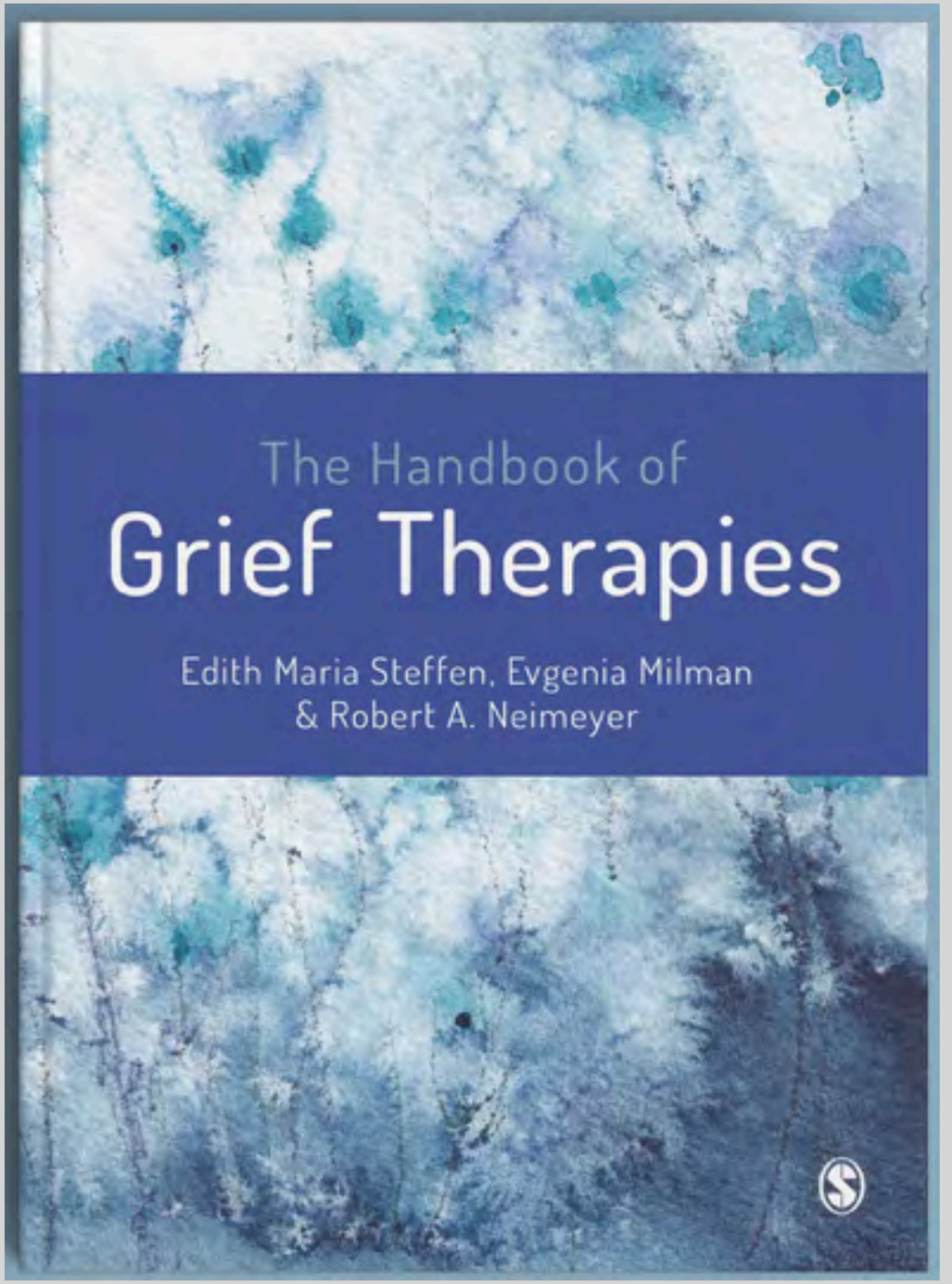


Clinician's Toolbox

Portland Institute
For Loss and Transition



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