



The S Word: Why language matters in grief

BELINDA KOCK LPC, NCC

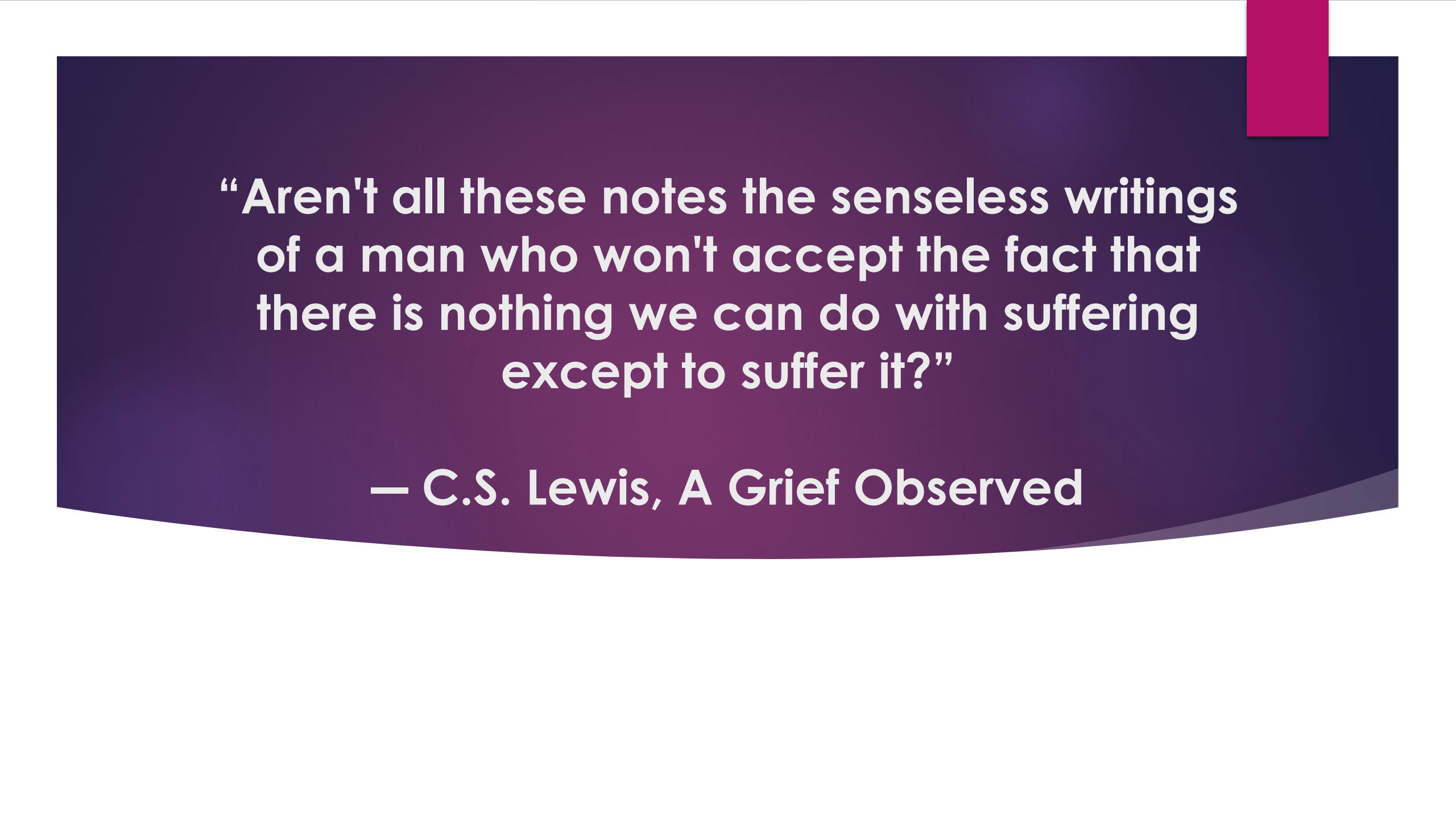
ADEC CERTIFIED THANATOLOGIST

Who Am I & What Do I Do



Objectives

- ▶ Identify common harmful and helpful language used in supporting suicide loss survivors
- ▶ Recognize the effects of harmful and helpful statements on the healing process of a suicide loss survivor
- ▶ Discuss how grief related education for counselors and peer support persons can reduce long term harm for clients



**“Aren't all these notes the senseless writings
of a man who won't accept the fact that
there is nothing we can do with suffering
except to suffer it?”**

— C.S. Lewis, A Grief Observed



What is The S-word?

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Using the paper in front of you, write down as many “unhelpful” S-words you can think of to describe your experience with grief.

You will have 1 minute.

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GO

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STOP

What is Your S-word?

- ▶ Suicide
- ▶ Shame
- ▶ Sad
- ▶ Scared
- ▶ Separation
- ▶ Searching
- ▶ Supposed to
- ▶ Suppress
- ▶ Silence
- ▶ Stupid
- ▶ Seclusion
- ▶ Shitty
- ▶ Survivor
- ▶ Slow
- ▶ Shock
- ▶ Suffer
- ▶ Sin
- ▶ Secret
- ▶ Stuck
- ▶ Should
- ▶ Sorry

What is Your S-word?

▶ Suicide

▶ Shame

▶ -

▶ -

▶ -

▶ -

▶ -

▶ -

▶ Silence

▶ -

▶ -

▶ -

▶ -

▶ Slow

▶ -

▶ -

▶ -

▶ -

▶ -

▶ Should

▶ Sorry

What is Your S-word?

- ▶ Thoughts of Suicide
 - ▶ “I just did not want to live without him.”
- ▶ Shame
 - ▶ “After my son killed himself, people would see me coming down the aisle at the store and would literally stop, make eye contact, and then turn around. The shame that goes along with suicide is so isolating.”
- ▶ Silence
 - ▶ “I guess everyone had to get back to living their lives, because the phone stopped ringing”

What is Your S-word?

- ▶ Slow
 - ▶ “How long will I feel like this?”
- ▶ Should
 - ▶ “Shouldn’t I be over this by now?”
 - ▶ “What you should do is _____.”
- ▶ Sorry
 - ▶ “I am sorry for crying so much.”
 - ▶ “Sorry, I can’t remember anything.”
 - ▶ “I’m sorry to be such a burden.”

How do you help them?

Some of my favorite questions from colleagues

- ▶ “What do I do with them?”

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- ▶ “What do I do with them?”
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 - ▶ You Can’t
- ▶ “What is the best technique to use with a grief client?”

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- ▶ “What do I do with them?”
 - ▶ Nothing
- ▶ “My Client is stuck. How do I get them to move forward?”
 - ▶ You Can’t
- ▶ “What is the best technique to use with a grief client?”
 - ▶ I don’t know

How do you help them?



How do you help them?

Begin by understanding the most important S-word:

Story

How do you help them?

Begin by understanding the most important S-word:

Their Story!

How do you help them?

“Narrative therapy seeks to be a respectful, non-blaming approach to counseling and community work, which centers people as the experts in their own lives. It views problems as separate from people and assumes people have many skills, competencies, beliefs, values, commitments and abilities that will assist them to reduce the influence of problems in their lives.”

(Morgan, What is narrative therapy?: An easy-to-read introduction 2006)

How do you help them?

Some reasons narrative therapy is effective when working with grief:

- ▶ It helps people give voice to and unpack their distinct stories
- ▶ Creates space for people to find new meanings and perspectives
- ▶ Externalizes grief from the person's core identity
- ▶ Focuses on re-authoring personal narratives
- ▶ Gives the griever more control over how loss continues impacting their life

How do you help them?

“Attachment theory provides a fruitful framework for understanding emotional reactions to separation and loss and the process of adapting to these painful events. Moreover, it provides important and testable ideas concerning individual differences in grief reactions.

(Mikulincer; Shaver, An attachment perspective on loss and grief 2021)

How do you help them?

- ▶ “We must say hello on the path to goodbye”
(Alan Wolfelt)
- ▶ “Saying hullo again”
(Micheal White)
- ▶ Reflect & Reframe

Let's try this again

Revisiting our top 6 “unhelpful” S-words

- ▶ Suicide
- ▶ Shame
- ▶ Silence
- ▶ Slow
- ▶ Should
- ▶ Sorry

What are some “helpful” S-words that would help your client reframe their loss?

What is your S-word?

- ▶ Story
- ▶ Self
- ▶ Sanctuary
- ▶ Sacred Space
- ▶ Slow
- ▶ Sitting
- ▶ Seen
- ▶ Safe
- ▶ Soothed
- ▶ Secured
- ▶ Silence
- ▶ Share
- ▶ Solitude
- ▶ Serenity
- ▶ Supported
- ▶ Sympathy
- ▶ Sense
- ▶ Search
- ▶ Soul Work
- ▶ Sorry
- ▶ Survive

Re-story & Reframing

- ▶ Thoughts of Suicide
 - ▶ “Thoughts of suicide are natural when you have experienced the loss of a loved one. Let’s see if we can work together to find extra support outside of our counseling sessions.”
- ▶ Shame
 - ▶ “Before when you shared that people would turn from you in public, it made me think about the word attachment. From the moment we come into this world we have a need to feel seen, safe, soothed, and secure. In what ways, has your son’s death impacted these things in your life?”

Re-story & Reframing

▶ Silence

- ▶ “You say the phone has stopped ringing and people are getting back to living their lives. That must make the house pretty quiet. Tell me how the quiet feels.”
- ▶ “Would you be willing to share a time in your life, before ___ died, that your home was overrun with lots of noise?”

▶ Slow

- ▶ “It feels like this pain will last forever. What would you say if I told you there was no timeline on grief, but if you continue to be intentional about visiting your loss, even making appointments to just sit with your grief, it can become softer?”

What is your S-word?

- ▶ Should
 - ▶ “Don’t should on yourself!”
 - ▶ Humor is a very important part of the mourning process.
- ▶ Sorry
 - ▶ “That is your one I’m sorry for the day.”
 - ▶ “How often do you find yourself apologizing for your grief? Would you be willing to explore this topic with me?”



**“Grief is like a long valley, a winding valley
where any bend may reveal a totally new
landscape.”**

— C.S. Lewis, A Grief Observed

Words of Wisdom Dr. Maya Angelou



<https://youtu.be/0nYXFletWH4>

Let's Get Coffee!

Belinda Kock LPC, NCC, CT

(334) 324-8977

belindak@free2grieve.com

www.free2grieve.com



References