

Grief & Bereavement Literacy Series

Session 21: “Inking the Bond”

Presenters:
Susan Cadell, Co-Founder Grief Matters, Professor, Renison University College School of Social Work
Melissa Reid Lambert, Founder Calming Tree Counselling and Psychotherapy Therapist, CTCP
Stephanie Levac, Hospice Social Worker, Bethell Hospice; Research Coordinator, Renison University College, School of Social Work

July 31, 2025: 12pm-1pm PST

Agenda Item	Discussion
Introduction & Objectives	<p><u>Objectives</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The presentation explores three key models of grief; challenges outdated notions and highlights how tattoos serve as tools for meaning-making and connection in the grieving process.
Presentation Key points	<p><u>Three Models of Understanding Grief</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grief involves oscillating between: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loss-oriented activities (facing the reality of the loss). Restoration-oriented activities (rebuilding life post-loss). It's a non-linear, dynamic process, reflecting real human experience. Two-Track Model of Bereavement (Ruben) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Track 1: Functioning in daily life. Track 2: Ongoing relationship with the deceased and the death story. Emphasizes no time limit on grief; it may persist for years. Continuing Bonds Theory <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The relationship with the deceased doesn’t end but transforms. Grief is not about "moving on" but maintaining an evolving connection. <p><u>Grief Literacy & Public Health Model</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grief Literacy: A multidimensional capacity involving knowledge, skills, and values to understand and support grieving processes. It emerged from public health efforts to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Triage grief support in palliative care Identify low (60%), moderate (30%), and high-risk (10%) bereavement populations Advocates for a grief-literate society, where professionals ask meaningful questions (e.g., about tattoos) to deepen connection and support. <p><u>Tattoos in Grief & Meaning-Making</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Memorial tattoos serve as continuing bonds and expressions of loss and memory. The research project “Stories from the Skin” (2016–2017) documented these tattoos, allowing people to share: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tattoo stories Mementos of the deceased Tattoos were shown to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Honor relationships with deceased loved ones (including pets) Act as conversation starters in professional and personal contexts Strengthen family bonds, as seen in a story of siblings getting their grandfather’s signature tattooed.

	<p><u>Memorial Tattoos as Expressions of Grief, Love, and Connection</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The presenter presents research findings on memorial tattoos and how bereaved individuals use them to express grief, maintain continuing bonds, push back against stigma, and foster connection.• Tattoos function as deeply personal memorials, often symbolizing life, love, and ongoing connection rather than just loss.• They also serve as tools for advocacy and resistance; confronting silence and societal taboos around death, miscarriage, suicide, and grief.• Memorial tattoos can strengthen relationships within couples and across families, and provide a tangible, lasting tribute that tells a story.• The research reveals that the narrative of the person’s life often takes precedence over the details of their death in these commemorative tattoos.
Lived Experience	<p><u>Melissa’s Story:</u> a therapist and social worker from Kitchener-Waterloo, shares her personal experience of grief and memorialization through tattoos.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• After the death of her son Flynn 23 years ago, she had a butterfly tattoo created to honor him. The design discreetly includes his name, allowing her to choose when and with whom to share its meaning. Over time, the tattoo evolved to include dragonflies for her other three sons and a hummingbird for her daughter, symbolizing the ongoing bonds with all her children.• The tattoo became a full sleeve, visually representing her journey through grief. The shoulder portion, dark and shadowed, symbolizes the pain of loss and the grief for a family she would never fully have. As the tattoo extends down her arm, it includes more negative space, illustrating how life before grief felt more open and joyful compared to the condensed, shadowed experience after loss.• Feeling that the concept of death was underrepresented in her first tattoo, she later added a second piece on her left arm. This tattoo features orchids, particularly a single blue orchid referencing the floral arrangement at her son’s funeral, to directly honor death itself. She discusses how colorlessness in this tattoo evokes the traditional visual cues of death in media.• Overall, her tattoos serve as evolving, deeply personal expressions of grief, love, memory, and continuing bonds with her deceased and living family members. <p><u>Stephanie’s Story:</u> a hospice social worker and research coordinator who began working with Susan two years ago during a master's placement from Renison.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• She shares a personal story about a sentimental locket left to her by her grandmother, Dorothy, which she typically only wore on special occasions like graduations and weddings. Wanting a more permanent and personal way to carry her grandmother’s memory, she decided to get a tattoo based on the locket.• The tattoo incorporates three symbolic flowers:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Daffodil: her and her grandmother’s birth flower,○ Holly: her mother’s birth flower,○ Forget-me-not: representing shared memories of her grandmother passed down through her mother.• She explains that grief and death were normalized topics in her family; her mother works in oncology, her aunt in long-term care, and she herself in palliative care. The tattoo symbolizes her view of grief and continuing bonds: carrying loved ones with her daily, either through memories or physical representations like tattoos.
Q&A Discussion	<p>Rich discussion among grief professionals, researchers, and participants reflecting on memorial tattoos as a form of legacy work, grief processing, and personal expression. The conversation explores both personal experiences and insights from broader research.</p> <p>Key Themes:</p> <p>1. Memorial Tattoos as Legacy and Connection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tattoos are used to honor deceased loved ones and keep their memory present. Examples include tattoos of handwriting, fingerprints, thumbprints, and symbols meaningful to the deceased.• A touching example: two cousins got “Mary Ellen” tattoos on different shoulders to reflect their grandmother’s ambidexterity.

	<p>2. Timing of Getting a Tattoo After a Loss</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Timing varies widely:<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Some get tattoos within days or weeks (especially if planned before the death). Others wait months, years, or even decades, depending on emotional readiness, finances, health, or family acceptance. Tattoos can be spontaneous or come after deep contemplation. <p>3. Tattoos as a Healing Ritual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The process of being tattooed can serve as a ritual and cathartic release, allowing mourners to sit with their grief and memories. It can offer emotional grounding and intentional reflection. <p>4. Family Dynamics and Approval</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not all family members support tattoos. Some participants hid tattoos due to disapproval. Others found meaning in negotiating family acceptance or even honoring the deceased by choosing something they wouldn't have liked ("I honor her by dishonoring her"). <p>5. Grief, Community, and Shared Experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Memorial tattoos can build family or community bonds when multiple people get matching or themed tattoos. Tattoos allow shared grieving and storytelling. <p>6. Planning and Barriers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some individuals plan tattoos far in advance, waiting for:<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Financial means.◦ Legal age.◦ Distance from disapproving environments.◦ Clarity on what design best reflects the relationship. <p>7. Physical and Emotional Relationship to Tattoos</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Participants described touching, moisturizing, or showing tattoos as a way to maintain a physical connection to the deceased. Tattoos serve as both emotional comfort and ongoing tribute. <p>8. Public Visibility and Consent to Share</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Visibility of tattoos leads to curiosity; asking about them respectfully is generally welcomed. People choose how much to share based on their mood, comfort, and setting. Tattoos can spark conversations about death, grief, and meaning, helping reduce stigma. <p>Conclusion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Memorial tattoos are a deeply personal yet socially resonant form of grief expression, legacy creation, and emotional healing. They can foster connection, storytelling, and even advocacy, while empowering the bereaved to define their own ways of remembering.
Closing, Future Sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">❖ Video recording❖ Upcoming Session: Aug 28th session: <i>Experiencing Grief as a Health Care Provider</i> Register❖ Past sessions: https://www.bc-cpc.ca/echo-project-new-home/echo-project-past-series-and-resources/#1694021429157-e9440b18-3da4❖ Action Plan: https://www.bc-cpc.ca/about-us/activities/new-projects/bereavement-study/grief-and-bereavement-support-in-bc-a-collaborative-improvement-action-plan/❖ Other Links: Joshua's podcast link: https://www.griefdreams.ca/