



Grief & Bereavement Literacy Series

Session 23: “*Waking Experiences of the Deceased: From Bereavement to End of Life*”

Presenters: Paul Adams, Joshua Black, Marney Thompson

November 25th, 2025: 12:00pm-1:15pm PST

Agenda Item	Discussion
Introduction & Objectives	<u>Learning Objectives</u> • Discuss central findings from academic research on waking experiences of the deceased. • Describe issues commonly raised regarding these experiences. • Identify factors that may predict their occurrence.
Presentation Key points	<u>Terminology Clarification</u> • Waking experiences: Neutral term preferred over “visions” or “hallucinations.” ○ “Visions” is ambiguous and interpreted differently by participants. ○ “Hallucinations” implies pathology and may misrepresent normal grief-related phenomena. ○ Experiences may include seeing, hearing, feeling touch, or smelling the deceased. <u>End of Life (EOL) Experiences</u> • Research shows EOL dreams and visions are very common: ○ Kerr (2014): 88% reported EOL dreams/visions ○ Dam (2016): 63% reported EOL dreams/visions • These may occur while asleep or awake, and many people experience both. • Themes identified: ○ Comforting presence, reassurance, guidance ○ The deceased waiting for them ○ Preparing to go somewhere ○ Traumatic memories or distressing presence • Highest comfort ratings occurred when the deceased appeared. • Frequency of seeing the deceased increases as death approaches. • These experiences should not be dismissed as delirium; research shows clear differences between cognitive dysfunction and EOL experiential phenomena. • Dr. Christopher Kerr’s work (TED Talk, publications) highlights the value and meaning of these experiences. <u>Transition to Bereavement Experiences</u> • Public awareness focuses heavily on EOL visions, but bereaved individuals also frequently report waking experiences. • Misunderstanding may cause bereaved individuals to fear these experiences mean they will die soon. • Importance of recognizing these experiences as part of the grief journey, not exclusively EOL. <u>Prevalence in Bereavement (Research Findings)</u> Study 1- Loss of partner/spouse: • 44% heard the deceased • 35% felt touch • 23% saw the deceased • 51% had at least one waking experience in the prior month

	• 74% had dreams of the deceased • Combined: 83% experienced either a dream or waking experience Study 2- Pet loss: • 27% heard • 22% felt touch • 13% saw • Overall: 32% had an experience in the prior month • 59% had dreams • Combined: 68% had either a dream or waking experience These numbers show similarities to EOL prevalence (63–88%). <u>Relationship Between Dreams and Waking Experiences</u> • Significant association: Individuals who dream of the deceased are more likely to report waking experiences. • Suggests a possible shared psychological or neurobiological mechanism. <u>Factors That May Predict These Experiences</u> • Trauma symptoms (intrusion, avoidance, hyperarousal) increase likelihood. • Avoidant attachment style may be associated—suppressed emotions may lead to these experiences functioning as emotional regulation. • Post-traumatic growth: ○ Waking experiences positively related to growth in <i>acute bereavement</i> (first 1–2 years). ○ Relationship diminishes several years after loss. <u>The Grieving Brain (Neuroscience Perspective)</u> • According to Dr. Mary-Frances O'Connor: ○ Grief is a form of learning: the brain must update its prediction systems to recognize the loved one’s absence. ○ Parts of the brain continue expecting the person to appear—possibly contributing to waking experiences. • Processes linked to attachment neurobiology. <u>Cultural and Interpretive Considerations</u> • Some individuals interpret these experiences as after-death communication. • No scientific method can confirm or disprove this interpretation. • What matters is how the experience is understood and whether it brings comfort or distress. • Cultural beliefs shape interpretations (e.g., soul not at rest, reincarnation). • Clinicians should avoid assumptions and listen for meaning.
Professional and Personal Experiences Supporting the Bereaved	❖ <u>Conversation With Marnie- 35 Years in Bereavement Care</u> <u>Background & Training</u> • Marnie has worked in bereavement support for approximately 35 years at Victoria Hospice, starting as a student and volunteer. • She noted that grief-related experiential phenomena (e.g., sensing or experiencing the presence of the deceased) were not included in her academic or professional training. • She emphasized that her colleagues also lacked education in this area during their schooling. <u>Why These Experiences Are Under-Discussed</u> • Experiences often remain unspoken due to:

	○ Stigma and fear of being perceived as “strange.” ○ Silence- many do not disclose these events unless someone else does first. ○ Academic resistance to topics that lack “hard science” evidence. • Marnie believes such experiences “fly under the radar” because people fear judgment. • She acknowledged increasing academic interest and appreciated efforts to bring legitimacy to the topic. <u>Common Themes in Practice</u> • These experiences often emerge naturally in counseling sessions. • Marnie sometimes initiates conversations by gently exploring clients’ beliefs about what happens after death. • Reports from bereaved individuals include: ○ Sensing the deceased in waking life- almost always described as positive. ○ Dreams that may be distressing not because of what happens in the dream, but because the dreamer doesn’t understand the “message.” • She highlighted that people with fewer spiritual frameworks may be more distressed because they lack a lens to interpret the experience. <u>Group Dynamics</u> • In bereavement groups, once one person shares an experience, others often follow—reinforcing how common these experiences truly are. <u>Signs and Symbolic Connection</u> • Signs can include: ○ Music meaningful to the deceased appearing at timely or unexpected moments. ○ Objects or natural occurrences (e.g., animals, coins, flowers). • Marnie shared a personal story from graduate school where three flowers cast into the ocean symbolically reflected the death of a close friend- an experience she viewed as a “sign” of transition. ❖ <u>Conversation With Paul- Personal Story Following Suzanne’s Death</u> <u>Background</u> • Paul’s wife Suzanne lived with metastatic breast cancer for four years. • Their two teenage children experienced grief differently: ○ Son experienced intense anticipatory grief. ○ Daughter was more in denial, experiencing greater grief after Suzanne’s death. • Paul focused so heavily on supporting his children that he often avoided acknowledging his own grief. <u>Experiences of Continuing Bonds</u> • Paul had not previously encountered discussions about post-death sensory experiences, even while leading work in the Grief Alliance and participating in bereavement groups. • After Suzanne’s death, Paul experienced: ○ Visual misperceptions- thinking he saw her while out walking. ○ Auditory experiences- hearing her voice call his name from another room. • As a rational, non-spiritual person, he pushed these experiences out of mind and initially labeled them as “auditory hallucinations.” <u>Impact of His Daughter’s Disclosure</u> • His daughter, then 14, reported hearing her mother speak to her. • Her disclosure: ○ Helped Paul acknowledge his own experiences.
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	○ Normalized the events for both of them. • This moment highlighted how individuals may dismiss or repress such experiences unless validated by others. Reflections • Paul emphasized: ○ The deeply individual nature of grief. ○ How easily people assume they are “the only one” having such experiences. ○ The importance of normalizing these phenomena so that grieverers do not fear they are “going crazy.” • He learned only later- through conversations with the presenter that such experiences are common and meaningful in grief.
Closing, Future Sessions	❖ Video recording ❖ Upcoming session: <i>Jan 28th session: AboutGrief: An Action Plan and New National Grief Portal</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/