**Morada da Paz, Parnamirim, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil**

**"Grief Professionals"**

1. Introduction and Contextualization

The experience of grief is a universal human occurrence, marked by emotional, spiritual, social, and cultural aspects. Although inevitable, death remains a taboo subject in many cultures, which can be especially challenging in professional environments. For employees working in funeral services and cemeteries, for instance, it is a constant presence in their daily routine.

Within the context of Morada da Paz, one of the largest funeral service groups in Brazil, professionals are exposed daily to the pain of grieving families, facing emotionally challenging situations often without adequate preparation to handle such demands. Acknowledging this scenario, the Grief Psychology department has developed the project “Professionals of Grief,” with the aim of caring for those who care, valuing the mental health of these workers and promoting a new awareness of their professional role.

As Kübler-Ross (2008) highlights, death must be understood as part of the life process, not as a traumatic interruption. When ignored or trivialized, it can silently affect the health of those who face it daily.

According to Morin (1970), death breaks with the logic of productivity and denial of time — when placed before us, it reveals our finitude and forces us to confront what is essential. For workers who deal with death on a daily basis, this constant exposure can generate both deep reflections and defense mechanisms that numb their emotions.

Norbert Elias (2001) also notes that modern society has pushed death to the backstage of life, delegating it to specialized institutions, which contributes to the dehumanization of the dying process. In this sense, the workers in these environments become silent representatives of an experience that society as a whole seeks to avoid.

In light of this, the proposal to care for these professionals aligns with what Boff (1999) calls the ethics of care: a commitment that is not merely technical, but deeply human, in which the act of caring involves empathy, presence, and mutual responsibility.

This view is also supported by Corrêa (2003), who states that listening to and acknowledging the psychological pain linked to death are essential tools to humanize the experience of grief — not only for those who lose someone, but also for all those who accompany this process from behind the scenes.

2. Justification

Although they are fundamental parts of the machinery of end-of-life care, workers such as gravediggers, ceremonial staff, attendants, hearse drivers, and other collaborators in these services rarely receive emotional training or symbolic recognition for the impact of their work.

Chronic exposure to contexts of pain and loss, combined with the low symbolic value attributed to their professional roles, can lead to psychological suffering, emotional exhaustion, normalization of others’ pain, or, conversely, the development of empathetic blockages that hinder compassionate service.

In our experience at Morada da Paz, it was common to hear from funeral agents — those who visit families to retrieve the deceased — a deep sense of resentment due to the lack of recognition for their work. They often reported being treated poorly during that initial contact with grieving families, who at times responded with harshness. For our agents, it was difficult to understand that their presence often made the loss feel real for those families — signaling the confirmation of a reality they never wanted to face: that someone they loved was truly gone.

These feelings, shared by our agents, further reinforced our commitment to put the Professionals of Grief project into action.

In short, the project was born out of the need to:

- Promote emotional care and qualified listening for these professionals;

- Strengthen the identity of these workers as Professionals of Grief;

- Reduce the impact of continuous exposure to death;

- And, as a result, enhance the quality of care provided to grieving families.

The denial of death, as described by Norbert Elias (2001), leads to social silences and discomforts that extend into professional environments. In many settings, those who work with death become invisible — even though they deal with one of the most profound human experiences. And how can someone commit to delivering excellent work if they do not feel recognized?

3. Creative and Innovative Concept

The Professionals of Grief project is based on the principle that caring for others is only possible when there is genuine care for oneself. While this idea may seem overused, it gains even greater relevance when inserted into a Western culture that values productivity, performance, and the pursuit of happiness — often silencing or marginalizing experiences of pain and suffering. In this context, professionals who deal daily with death and grief are constantly exposed to others’ pain, often without having safe spaces to emotionally process these experiences. Neglecting self-care can lead to cumulative psychological suffering, fostering emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of helplessness.

Winnicott (1971) already warned that "true care is only possible when there is a sufficiently sustained self." The absence of this support can lead to what Christina Maslach (2001) describes as burnout: a state of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, common in emotionally demanding work environments. Furthermore, Norbert Elias (1989), in discussing society’s denial of death, highlights how the concealment of this theme in public spaces contributes to the emotional isolation of those who professionally live alongside it.

Therefore, caring for professionals who deal with grief is not merely an act of empathy — it is an ethical and strategic necessity for them to carry out their roles with sensitivity, presence, and genuine support for grieving families. Creating spaces for listening, emotional processing, and symbolic recognition is thus an essential step in building a more humane institutional culture, aware of the complexities surrounding the experience of grief.

By combining psychological support, professional reflection, and ongoing training, the project proposes a humanized and transformative approach that recognizes employees as individuals with emotional rights and as protagonists of meaningful work. Its innovation lies in challenging the invisibility of these workers and promoting a symbolic construction of professional identity. It is not only about providing support but also about fostering belonging, recognition, and personal development.

The humanized approach to care, according to Boff (1999), acknowledges dignity and vulnerability as essential aspects of the human condition, especially in contexts of pain and finality.

Inspired by authors like Norbert Elias, who discusses the denial of death in contemporary societies, and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who values listening and empathy in the face of suffering, the project centers listening and relational bonds as the core of care and transformation.

Additionally, as Corrêa (2003) affirms, grief requires recognition and validation—not only for those who experience a loss but also for those who professionally witness it.

Taking a further step toward innovation, the project is expanding beyond cemeteries and funeral homes and reaching other places where death also occurs: hospitals. There, healthcare professionals who dedicate their lives to preserving life often do not recognize themselves as part of the grief process. Yet, they are constantly confronted with loss — loss of patients, of connections, of expectations.

This accumulation of losses, often silenced by the fast pace of hospital work, can cause emotional fatigue, affective distancing, and even psychological illness. In an environment where the ideal of “healing” prevails, death is frequently perceived as failure — rather than a natural part of life. This perception hinders emotional processing and compromises holistic care.

Bringing Professionals of Grief into hospitals means expanding its reach and social relevance. It means offering listening and training to teams that live with death daily but rarely find institutional spaces to reflect on it. It means helping doctors, nurses, technicians, psychologists, and others to:

- Recognize themselves as individuals also affected by grief and loss;

- Care for their mental health, preventing emotional exhaustion and psychological suffering;

- Strengthen humanized care practices, especially during moments of death and the delivery of bad news;

- And thereby offer more empathetic and respectful support to grieving families.

As Kübler-Ross (1994) emphasized, speaking about death helps us find new meaning in it— and only when healthcare professionals allow themselves to acknowledge the impact of death on their own paths can they humanize how they guide patients and families through it. By entering hospitals, the project reaffirms the value of institutionalized, compassionate, and critical listening — recognizing grief as an inseparable part of the caregiver experience.

Continuing its path of expansion and innovation, the Professionals of Grief project is also reaching other spaces where grief manifests silently, yet profoundly — such as veterinary clinics and hospitals. This means recognizing and addressing a kind of loss that, though significant for many, is still often socially invalidated: grief over the death of a pet.

According to Walter (2020), disenfranchised grief (a term coined by Doka, 1989) occurs when a person’s loss is not socially acknowledged, making it harder to receive support or validation for their pain. Pet grief is a classic example of this: many people feel deep sorrow after losing an animal companion but are embarrassed to express it or seek help for fear of judgment or minimization.

In this context, professionals working in veterinary settings — veterinarians, assistants, receptionists — become key witnesses to the suffering of pet owners. However, they too often experience grief, especially in cases involving euthanasia, sudden death, or long-term relationships with animal patients.

By bringing the Professionals of Grief project to these settings, we aim to:

- Offer training and discussion groups that help teams understand the grief processes experienced by pet owners;

- Create emotional care spaces for the professionals themselves, who also deal with frequent and emotionally taxing losses;

- Contribute to a culture of more humanized and empathetic support during animal farewells, strengthening the bond with pet owners and the mental health of staff.

This approach reinforces the inclusive and sensitive nature of the project, expanding its view of the many forms of grieving and recognizing that grief is not limited to human losses. In doing so, Professionals of Grief reaffirms its commitment to ethical and respectful acknowledgment of pain — in all its manifestations.

Ultimately, this entire movement contributes to re-signifying the place of death in caregiving environments, bringing health and mortality together in a more ethical, sensitive, and responsible field. By expanding the project beyond funeral services, we break the notion of death as an exclusively terminal event, disconnected from institutional daily life. We begin to recognize it as part of the human journey — present in hospitals, homes, clinics, and in our emotional ties with animals.

In this sense, Professionals of Grief becomes a cultural and transformative tool: it proposes that caring for others includes recognizing pain, that professional practice must also embrace emotion, and that institutions can be places not only of technical efficiency, but of presence and humanity. It is, therefore, a project that not only supports grief — but repositions it as a legitimate and worthy experience of care in every space where life happens and, inevitably, comes to an end.

4. Detailed Project Description

The Professionals of Grief project operates through two main pillars, with ongoing and targeted actions focused both on caring for employees and on developing their professional identity.

PILLAR 1 — EMPLOYEE CARE

Focus: Promoting emotional health and preventing psychological distress.

Implemented actions:

Monthly Psychological Listening Groups:

- Facilitated by psychologists.

- Held with different departments (gravediggers, ceremonial staff, customer service, transportation, cleaning, etc.).

- Address recurring themes in professional routines (such as grief, suicide), or topics that arise from psychologists’ contact with teams (such as alcoholism, social vulnerability, religious and gender intolerance).

- After the discussion, the space is opened for free sharing by employees.

Brief Individual Psychological Support (on-call sessions):

- Offered based on spontaneous demand or referral by the team.

- Addresses situations such as recent losses, grief due to suicide, emotional suffering, social vulnerability, suicidal ideation, among others.

Care actions on sensitive dates:

- Planned around dates like All Souls’ Day, Christmas, or in specific contexts such as during the pandemic or after impactful losses within the team.

- Includes symbolic acts of support, messages, group conversations, or moments of listening and tribute.

PILLAR 2 — PROFESSIONAL TRAINING AND IDENTITY

Focus: Strengthening the identity of workers as Professionals of Grief and improving the quality of care for grieving families.

Implemented actions:

Thematic Workshops and Trainings:

- Topics covered: grief, suicide-related grief, disenfranchised grief, loss of pets, spirituality, active listening, psychological first aid, importance of rituals, among others.

- Conducted with different departments and, when needed, adapted to each team’s language and reality.

Leadership Training for Content Multiplication:

- Leaders receive structured content.

- They are guided to replicate it within their teams and submit follow-up reports documenting the process.

Reflective and Creative Writing Activities:

- Employees are invited to express personal and professional reflections on the topics discussed in the workshops through writing.

- These writings foster engagement, self-awareness, and deeper understanding of the subject matter.

Internal Appreciation Campaigns:

- Symbolic and communicative actions to reinforce employee recognition as Professionals of Grief.

- Includes bulletin boards, videos, testimonials, and tributes.

Ongoing training, grounded in psychoeducation, is one of the pillars of the Professionals of Grief project. By offering clear, accessible, and applicable information on the phenomenon of grief and its various manifestations, the project helps reduce stigma, misunderstandings, and maladaptive responses to the pain of others.

According to Worden (1998), psychoeducation allows individuals to better understand the emotional processes involved in loss, fostering both compassionate care for others and emotional self-preservation.

By developing a broader and more conscious view of their role, employees begin to act with greater empathy, preparedness, and a sense of purpose—truly embodying the identity of a Professional of Grief.

5. Expected Results / Impacts

The Professionals of Grief project was born from the core commitment to transform a silent, yet powerful reality: the pain carried by those who care for the pain of others. Today, we are already witnessing the fruits of a journey that has redefined relationships, strengthened professional bonds, and established a culture of care that extends beyond the physical walls of our facilities. As the project continues, we aim to achieve:

- Reduction in indicators of psychological distress and occupational stress;

- Greater sense of belonging, self-esteem, and recognition among employees;

- Reinforcement of the symbolic identity of workers as Professionals of Grief, with a clear understanding of the dignity and importance of their role;

- Significant improvement in the quality of support provided to grieving families, with more empathetic, sensitive, and respectful approaches;

- Consolidation of a humanized organizational culture grounded in listening, care, and ethics.

More than numbers, the impact of the program can be felt in the words of those who live this transformative process day after day:

“The Grief Psychology sessions help me understand and better manage my own emotions. That way, I can support others with more empathy, respect, and sensitivity.”

Cleide, Ceremonialist – RN

“Psychology is care for the soul. It’s the place where pain finds a voice, where silence is listened to with respect… Those who care for others also need to be cared for.”

Rosiana Solidade – Ceremonialist, Morada da Paz/RN

“Grief psychology was essential for me. I had lost my mother and was ready to give up on everything. I was welcomed with such empathy and respect that I found strength to keep going.”

Beatriz – Essential Salesperson, Natal

“I realized grief is everywhere — in big and small losses, in visible and invisible pain. Grief psychology taught me to recognize and validate all forms of sorrow.”

Lucineide Bento – Ceremonialist, Morada da Paz/RN

“The support I received saved my life. I was having very dark thoughts… but I was met with words that reconnected me with the desire to live.”

Rafael Silva – Funeral Agent, RN

These testimonials reveal that the project saves stories, rebuilds people, and gives new meaning to work. It’s not just about mitigating suffering — it's about fostering a new ethos for the funeral industry: a space where grief is respected and professionals are emotionally equipped to offer — and receive — care.

Beyond the institutional setting, the project’s impact extends outward. By expanding into hospitals, clinics, and veterinary spaces, the program promotes intersectoral practices that create a broader care and listening network, where death is no longer simply an absence, but an invitation to ethical support.

“The grief training helped me see more clearly how we, as veterinarians, are also deeply affected by loss. I’ve had to perform euthanasia and comfort guardians during painful goodbyes, but I never had a space to process those emotions. The training gave me empathy, tools, and listening — for myself and for others. Today, I practice with greater awareness, respect, and humanity regarding pet grief.”

Beatriz Silva – Veterinarian, PE

“As a nursing technician, I’m used to caring for people in critical moments, but I never had space to deal with the many losses I’ve witnessed. The grief training helped me understand that feeling the pain of death isn’t weakness — it’s humanity. I’ve learned to recognize my own grief, to better support families, and above all, to care for myself. Today, I feel more emotionally prepared and more connected to the human side of my profession.”

Tatiana Lima – Nursing Technician, RN

Looking ahead, the project also aims to achieve broader and more impactful long-term outcomes, such as:

- Reinforcing Morada da Paz’s reputation as a national reference in humanization within the funeral sector;

- Actively contributing to transforming the culture of death in Brazil, bringing it out of silence and into open dialogue;

- Strengthening employees’ self-image as active agents of emotional care in society;

- Creating an emotional, institutional, and social legacy that upholds dignity at the end of life.

As Edgar Morin stated, “facing death with awareness is an act that humanizes us.” By placing care at the center of the work experience, the Professionals of Grief project not only humanizes grief — it humanizes the world of work itself, reclaiming listening, presence, and empathy as the foundation of every profession that touches lives.

6. Final Considerations

Caring for those who deal with death on a daily basis is both an ethical and human imperative. The Professionals of Grief project is grounded in listening, appreciation, and the collective construction of meaning. It acknowledges that grief is not only experienced by those who lose a loved one, but also by those who silently witness every farewell.

By integrating emotional support and professional development, the project enables employees to recognize themselves as powerful, compassionate, and essential individuals — not merely task executors, but people who uphold, with dignity, the rituals of passage.

In a world that silences death and romanticizes productivity, the Professionals of Grief project offers a powerful counterpoint: care as a radical practice, recognition as a health strategy, and listening as a tool for institutional transformation.

Caring for those who care for death is, above all, a civilizing act. It is the recognition that these professionals occupy a liminal space — between the end of one story and the beginning of another: the story of rebuilding. They are silent witnesses to collapse, but also seeds of symbolic reconstruction. That is why they must be acknowledged not only for the roles they perform but for the humanity they sustain amid pain.

By offering listening, training, and symbolic recognition, the project operates in the quiet spaces of institutional silence, turning grief into a legitimate field for emotional elaboration — not just for those in mourning, but for those who accompany the grieving process each day. And by expanding its scope to hospitals and veterinary clinics, it reaffirms that death is present in all places — and that care must reach it wherever it occurs.

As Judith Butler (2004) emphasizes, grief is also a way of recognizing the interdependence that defines us as human beings. By acknowledging the emotional impact of loss — even when it is unnamed or socially unrecognized — we become more attuned to the pain of others and, therefore, more ethical. The Professionals of Grief project embodies this ethic: an ethic of connection, presence, and mutual recognition.

The legacy it seeks to leave goes beyond the institutional sphere. It is an invitation to all of society to reframe how we understand death, labor, and humanity. As Kübler-Ross (2008) beautifully concluded, “People are like stained glass windows: they sparkle when the sun is out, but their true beauty is revealed only when darkness sets in and a light from within shines through.”