



# “So Sorry Your Grandma Died. Get That Paper In.”: Graduate Teaching Assistants’ Experiences of Student Grief in the Communication Classroom

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**Keywords:** grief, student grief, graduate teaching assistants, critical grief pedagogy

**Abstract:** Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) are faced with managing how to respond to student disclosures of grief in the classroom but often lack grief training from their universities when these instances occur. Good and Mad grief, and Critical Grief Pedagogy (CGP) are the frameworks for which this study is positioned. Through interviews with GTAs in the United States, we explore their experiences when engaging with student grief disclosures and revealed three main themes: *regulations and boundaries*, *transactional exchanges in institutions*, and *the classroom being a human space*. We also discuss how GTAs use CGP to manage these interactions. We further suggest that GTA training should include CGP to help prepare future instructors for student grief and welcome grief into the classroom.

## Introduction

Grief is defined as a human communicative process that varies according to the person and the loss experienced (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005). Grief can be experienced and expressed in a variety of physical, emotional, and cognitive ways (Doka, 2016). However, in the Western part of the world, norms surrounding grief expect people in general, and students more specifically, to keep grief hidden. With the COVID-19 pandemic, grief and loss were illuminated in the classroom. Students and teachers were faced with having to manage their grief and communally cope with what was occurring in the world (Craw & Bevan, 2022). Pre-pandemic, and in the post-pandemic world, grief is ubiquitous; anyone at any moment might be coping with various forms of grief. Societal expectations to keep grief hidden can make it difficult to engage in all aspects of life.

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In this study we explored the experiences of grief in higher education through Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTA) experiences. Scholars argue that grief is rarely focused upon in pedagogical research, therefore quieting individuals experiencing grief in academic spaces (Zink, 2009). We apply Critical Grief Pedagogy (CGP), which allows us to break through the notion of *good* grief, where grief is controlled, privileged, and hidden. In doing so, we then can engage in Mad Grief where we resist good grief practices and welcome loss (Poole & Ward, 2013). It is essential to challenge academic narratives that silence grief because they are governed by rules that are "grounded in systems of power . . . all of which affect and reflect where and how we grieve, who can grieve, and who or what we are allowed to grieve" (Willer, 2022, p. 3). Higher education is a space where grief is discouraged, and not considered *normal*. Currently, we do not have language to talk about grief in the classroom; however, one framework to explore this is through good and mad grief.

## Good and Mad Grief

Grief is a normal, yet challenging emotion that everyone experiences. Currently, the Western concept of normal grief has a clear set of expectations. A normal expression of grief follows a linear timeline, where the individual experiencing grief will go from disorientated to productive (Foote & Frank, 1999). In fact, the medicalization of grief has been added to the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), stating that normal grief will take place within 2 to 12 months and clearly delineates what makes grief (ab)normal (APA, 2013). However, this limits and restrains one's grief experiences.

Medical prescriptions of grief are troubling because there is no time limit to grief. Grief does not exist in a one-size-fits-all fashion and can be experienced in a variety of ways (Doka, 2016). Restricting experiences of grief to what is medically and societally acceptable denies and silences the range of experiences that accompany grief. We are disciplined to show grief in a way that is considered normal and good. According to Poole and Ward (2013), in their work on storying grief and resisting the practices that silence experiences of loss, they define good grief as,

quiet, tame, dry, and controlled . . . It does not make a scene . . . It does not sweat, race, wail, smash, and howl. It does not tell the truth about itself . . . It has a time limit and a limit on the range and intensity of moods, behaviors, and emotions that may be displayed. Good grief is gendered, staged, linear, white, and bound by privilege and reason. (p. 95)

These rules for what constitute normal or good grief present challenges within the classroom. Grief is not limited to the loss of a loved one, it can be experienced during a breakup (Robak & Weitzman, 1995), a divorce (Doka, 2016), loss of a pet (Packman et al., 2014), and more, which is what students often experience. This is troubling, since there are many ways that grief can enter instructional spaces, making it important to find ways to give voice to grief in academia. Poole and Ward (2013) give voice to Mad grief defining it as "a resistance practice that allows, speaks, names, affords, welcomes, and stories the loss that comes to us all" (p. 95). In their study, Willer et al. (2021) engaged in a collaborative ethnography which documented the authors' experiences working with the Scraps of Heart Project and connected CGP to student learning through communication assignments and research. Willer et al. (2021) invites others into Mad grief by sharing stories of loss within the classroom, allowing students to witness vulnerability and "be moved to break open their own grief, but also to invite others into a circle

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of Mad griever” (p. 41). We agree with Willer et al. and argue that the classroom is a space to engage in Mad grief. Presently, instructors might not be prepared to embrace grief in the classroom.

To engage in Mad grief in the classroom, students must first engage in self-disclosure surrounding loss. Self-disclosure is defined as intentionally sharing personal information about oneself that others could not learn elsewhere (Derlega et al., 1993). Within the present study we conceptualize grief disclosure as individual(s) intentionally sharing their grief with chosen others. This concept of grief disclosure goes against the notion of Good grief, since “good grief is productive, never interfering with the business, the family, or the community . . . it never goes public” (Poole & Ward, 2013, p. 95), therefore limiting what is thought to be acceptable within the classroom (Hurst, 2009). Grief disclosure instead fits within the essence of Mad grief, speaking about the grief experienced and allowing loss to be witnessed and heard. Given the potential for grief to enter the classroom, it is important for instructors to provide outlets for Mad grief, creating space within instructional spaces for grief disclosure.

Due to the interpersonal dynamic of the student-teacher relationship, there is potential for students to engage in grief disclosure with their instructors. However, when students sought support or disclosed emotional experiences, instructors were unsure how to respond both personally and professionally (Goode, 2023). Instructors witness student trauma and the implicit assumption is that instructors are to provide a solution and/or support for the student, causing potential emotional distress to the instructor (Goode, 2023). Instructors are often left unprepared to manage student’s emotional disclosures (Madden & Del Rosso, 2021), which can place an even larger burden on instructors beyond typical instructional tasks. If this is the experience of faculty, it is important to explore how GTAs just starting their teaching careers manage student grief disclosure.

## Graduate Teaching Assistants

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) account for a large population of undergraduate instruction in higher education (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Gray, 1990). GTAs are graduate students that receive funding to pursue their advanced degree usually by teaching courses in their department. Before entering the classroom, GTAs often receive teacher training (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Gray, 1990) (i.e., how to create a lesson plan, grade assignments). Through training, GTAs are being educated on how to teach their course(s) and are being socialized in the higher education space (Anderson & Hosek, 2022). The mentors and instructors GTAs engage with are the socialization agents that may influence how they engage with students. Since GTAs are learning and being trained as they move through their teaching careers as GTAs, this population is important to research because of their new experiences and identity formation (Hoffmann-Longtin et al., 2021).

GTAs are usually new to teaching and training plays a large role in their experience and in the classroom. Furthermore, GTAs are an imperative population to examine when it comes to student grief disclosures because undergraduate students relate more to GTAs than professors because of the similarities in age and their social status at the university (Gardner & Jones, 2011). Previous research has noted that undergraduate students find GTAs to be more “engaging, organized, relatable, respected, and understanding than faculty members” (Kendall & Schussler, 2013, p. 93). Therefore, students were more likely to seek out support from their GTA(s). Due to the unique nature of GTAs regarding their age, relatability, and more, it is important to understand their classroom experiences. This is especially

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important regarding how they manage students’ grief and their own emotions due to the little support GTAs receive when they complete their teacher training.

## Emotional Labor Expectations

Instructors are not given the space to allow grief from their students, or themselves. When grief is hidden and ignored, it makes it challenging for instructors to manage their role and emotions. Emotional labor is “the development, management, and performance of affective work” (Lawless, 2018, p. 86). Hochschild (1983) makes note that emotional labor is when individuals put on a happy face and are to avoid communicating the negative emotions they may be feeling. Emotional labor is often demonstrated as “sympathy and empathy, one-on-one attention, supportive communication, counseling, general development of personal relationships, and making a person ‘feel good’” (Lawless, 2018, p. 86). Often, emotional labor can lead to job dissatisfaction or alienation in the workplace (Tracy, 2005; Way & Tracy, 2012). Individuals that hold a role in an organization, company, or an institution may be faced with challenges of emotional labor. One institution where employees face emotional labor includes spaces of higher education.

Willer et al. (2021) unpacks how higher education silences grief. Institutions require instructors to follow a US American cultural script for bereavement: “to ‘keep going,’ ‘keep functioning,’ ‘be normal,’ and ‘go back to work as soon as possible’” (Granek, 2009, p. 45, as cited in Willer et al., 2021, p. 28). When looking at higher education as a good or service, emotional labor in the classroom is not a rare entity. Through these expressions, instructors need to respond, provide resources and support, and manage how to move forward. Unfortunately, due to lack of training, instructors feel as though they are not adequately prepared to handle grief disclosure. Consequently, teachers feeling as though they are not prepared to handle student disclosure led to feelings of worry and the potential to fail (Goode, 2023). High school instructors also feel a lack of preparation and understanding of how to best address death and grief in the classroom (Case et al., 2020). Instructors felt as though having formal death education training can help them feel more equipped to manage death in the classroom; however, age and personal experience helped teachers deal with disclosure and made them feel more prepared (Case et al., 2020).

When emotions enter the classroom, teachers must navigate their own emotions and identity (Wolff & Costa, 2017). Much of the labor that teachers experience, specifically emotional labor, goes unrecognized. How to manage emotional labor is rarely discussed and can lead instructors to feelings of burnout and emotional exhaustion (Waldbuesser et al., 2021). One way instructors can manage their emotions and students’ experiences is through critical grief pedagogy.

## Critical Grief Pedagogy

One of the ways scholars have come to resist grief expectations within academia is through critical communication pedagogy (Fassett & Warren, 1). Critical communication pedagogy (CCP) steers educators toward the creation of a more collaborative and supportive learning environment. Extending beyond CCP, Willer et al. (2021) propose Critical Grief Pedagogy (CGP), which “responds to cultural and institutional silencing of grief and loss in academic spaces that reflect broader Western norms” (Poole & Ward, 2013; Willer et al., 2021, p. 28). CGP pushes us beyond the structured expectations of grief.

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CGP has four main tenets, “(1) Demedicalizing ‘inappropriate grief’; (2) Unpacking systems of power that delimit grief; (3) Embodied witnessing of grief narratives; and (4) Developing compassionate communication skills” (Willer et al., 2021, p. 30). This type of pedagogy was proposed in response to the limited focus on grief in the classroom (Willer et al., 2021). The first two tenets challenge the linear and structured nature of grief, highlighting how the medicalization of grief fails to capture the true nature of grief, as well as breaking down the systems of power that further bind grief in such a structured way. The third and fourth tenets build off the demedicalization of grief, giving voice to stories of loss that break from *good grief* and ask students to develop compassionate communication skills. Overall, we seek to extend CGP by exploring GTAs’ experiences with grief. In this study we argue that GTAs wrestle with responding to student disclosure and future GTA training should include practical application CGP to help prepare future instructors for the inevitability of grief disclosure in the classroom. To address this, we ask the following question:

**RQ:** How do graduate teaching assistants respond/experience/engage with students about grief disclosures through the lens of CGP?

## Research Practices

To address the aforementioned broad question, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with GTAs in the field of communication. A thematic analysis was conducted to interpret and make sense of the data. In this section, we outline demographics and procedures utilized in this study.

## Participants

Participants within this study included GTAs who were 18 years or older, currently earning a PhD, active within their graduate programs, previously taught or currently teaching course(s) for their university and were teaching and residing in the United States at the time of the interview. After gaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (Approval Number 22-E-210), a total of 21 semi-structured interviews were collected. Participants were located in the Midwest (13), South (5), Northeast (2), and West (1). Participant ages ranged from 21 to 37 years of age, with 26 years as the average age. Participants gender identity included female (16), male (4), and nonbinary (1). Participants sexual orientation was straight (12), bisexual (4), lesbian (2), gay (2), and queer (1). Participants were White/Caucasian (18), White/Middle Eastern (1), White/Latina (1), and African/Black (1).

## Research Processes

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data regarding GTAs experiences with students’ disclosure of grief in the classroom. Interviews allowed for follow-up questions that gave depth and breadth to the responses provided (Tracy, 2020). Participants were recruited through the Basic Communication Course Listserv and the National Communication Association (COMMNotes) Listserv. Once participants emailed the researchers with interest in participating, researchers sent the consent form to the participants to complete, and an interview was scheduled. Twenty-one interviews were conducted via Teams, Zoom, and in-person. The interviews lasted between 15 minutes to 1 hour, 9 minutes, averaging 38 minutes. Demographic questions were solicited first, followed by questions regarding students’ grief experiences in the classroom (i.e., “Tell me a story about the time when you experienced student grief in instructional spaces”), and graduate teacher training (i.e., “What training, if any, have you had in dealing with student grief?”). Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed.

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## Research Positionality

Both authors have experienced various student expressions of grief. We attended teacher training at the beginning of our programs but had not heard of GTAs receiving guidance when it comes to experiencing grief in higher education. After conversations regarding how to support students, how to adhere to GTA roles, and what the university expects from GTAs, we decided to explore how GTAs manage grief in the classroom, an area that is under researched.

## Data Analysis and Interpretation

A thematic analysis was utilized using Tracy’s (2013) Phronetic Iterative Data Analysis. This form of analysis was utilized because it allows for past literature to frame the study and provides space for organizing the data. First, primary coding was done independently to generate themes and to pull narratives. We individually engaged with the data, reading through all transcripts post data collection. We each spent time with the transcripts, getting to know all participants through their responses. Becoming familiar with transcripts was important for interviews we did not conduct ourselves. After the initial read through, we discussed our thoughts on the transcripts and first impressions reading through the data. We made note of words and potential codes we had documented when reading through the data, such as *transactional*, *human*, and *power*. Once we had established a significant overlap in our observations and initial perceptions, we moved to secondary coding.

Before our second meeting, we individually coded themes. For example, secondary codes from Author One included, “teacher flexibility as response to student grief,” “grief as acceptable in the classroom,” and “grief blurring boundaries” while example secondary codes from Author Two included, “Power dynamic and instructor authority,” “grades and grief,” and “promotion of resources.” After reviewing the transcripts once more and completing this secondary coding process, we discussed our secondary process and agreed on the final secondary codes. For example, we both noted similarities in primary and secondary coding relating to the emotional labor that GTAs felt. Author One had labeled a theme as “The emotional labor of grief in the classroom” and Author Two had labeled a theme as “Support outside of one’s pay grade and role.” Through discussion, we realized that both themes addressed how GTAs felt about the amount of work it took to manage emotion in the classroom. Finally, we created a final codebook, agreed on the exemplars selected, and description of the final codes.

To ensure the rigor of our analytic process, we engaged in reflexivity throughout each stage. We constantly asked ourselves what we found shocking or fascinating, and reflected on how participants shared their experiences and the language used. We engaged the data numerous times and had multiple discussions to explore participants’ responses as a whole. Next, we will describe what we found throughout participants’ narratives.

## Findings

GTA narratives revealed experiences and practices surrounding their student’s expression of grief in academic settings. The shared experiences shed light on how GTAs manage and resist practices that silence grief in academia. Demographic information including race, gender, program year, and how many courses taught at the time of the interview is provided for each participant quoted. The three main themes include *Regulation and Boundaries* (see Table 1 for themes and exemplars), *Transactional*

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*Exchanges in Institutions* (see Table 2 for themes and exemplars), and the *Classroom as a Human Space* (see Table 3 for themes and exemplars).

## Regulation and Boundaries

The first theme explores the navigation of the regulations placed on GTAs in the classroom. Participants discussed university policies and boundaries they need to adhere to and the challenges they faced. Sub themes include emotional labor experiences and drawing from personal experiences of grief.

<b>Sub Themes</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Exemplars</b>
Emotional Labor in the Classroom	GTAs feel that they have to negotiate power dynamics in the classroom and how they respond to student disclosure of grief and loss due to the emotions that are expressed and felt by them and the students.	<p>“I actively encourage them to be open about what’s going on in their lives, because that then helps me as the instructor know, what can I ask them realistically to do today?” (Alan, a White, male, fourth year, who taught seven courses)</p> <p>“But I was also scared that I was like I am a grad instructor. My entire career is ahead of me if I say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing or handle this the wrong way. I am just in so much trouble.” (Jenny, a White, female, first year, who taught eight courses)</p>
Drawing From Personal Experiences	GTAs shared the lack of training they received, making them pull on their personal experiences to help students manage their grief.	<p>“I think I’ve been privileged enough to grow in a family that has a lot of emotional intelligence and like, has instilled that, but none of that has come from any of my academic training.” (Honor, a White, female, third year, who taught 20 courses)</p> <p>“I was like, I get what you’re going through, you know, I’ve been dumped before I’m a young instructor. So I can relate to that.” (Lana)</p>

## Emotional Labor in the Classroom

Participants emphasized that there is emotional management that goes into being a GTA. It is understood that instructors in higher education are often faced with displays of grief from students. When students share what is going on in their lives, it can elicit an emotional response from the instructor; emotional labor is a part of the job. When instructors learn about what their students are experiencing it pushes them to reflect on the emotional labor it takes to negotiate power dynamics in the classroom and how they respond to student disclosure of grief and loss.

GTAs are considered instructors but do not hold the same rank as professors. Many GTAs shared how they feel about their power and role they hold. Even though GTAs might be instructors of record or have autonomy over their courses, they occupy the liminal role of both student and teacher. This blurs boundaries and expectations that come from the university and department. Nicole, a White, female, second year, who taught three courses, shared, “The context is a little difficult where the instructor role traditionally doesn’t really count for emotional interactions . . . It’s not in our job description as much to provide emotional care.”

GTAs find themselves at a crossroads, contemplating how to appropriately care for students. This can impact how GTAs interact with their students, emphasizing their lack of power and authority. When students share their experiences, it can lead to positive outcomes. However, GTAs still think about fulfilling and enacting their role appropriately. Claire, a White, female, second year, who taught six courses, shared her experience with a nontraditional student:

I think she understood that I understood she was a human. And I was not this like Kid Robot that like was putting a class together . . . I think seeing each other than as human beings helped us both understand each other better, and let go of some of those power differentials that we were struggling with.

GTAs feel like their role is to conform to the roles and regulations placed on their position. This creates power tensions and gives them little autonomy in their classroom. GTAs feel bound by the power structures within academic institutions which connects to the second tenet of CGP, resisting the systems of power that limit our experiences of grief (Willer et al., 2021). Responding to student grief in a way that GTAs felt was meaningful for the student confronts the systems of power within academia that limit power and expression of emotion in the classroom.

Additionally, GTAs also reflected on the emotional labor it takes to respond to students. Many GTAs are not aware of the emotional labor that may come with teaching in higher education. Natalie, a White, female, second year, who taught eight courses, stated:

I had no idea of the emotional labor that this position would be . . . there was a lot of me learning that I can only do what I can control . . . , but these emotional situations are not in my control.

Natalie shares how she is left grappling with what students share with her and how she manages her emotions. GTAs must manage the significance of what is being shared while also thinking about how best to respond to students. Many participants shared that this leaves them feeling uncertain when responding. Lana, a White, female, first year, who taught five courses, shared:

You got to know what to say and how to say it without you know, making it worse on the student or you have to be aware of how to handle that situation. Sometimes as a teaching assistant it feels a little bit above my paygrade, but I still feel as though I need to be that person for my students.

Lana, and others, noted how they must think about how to attend to their students in the right or appropriate way. Whether GTAs felt prepared or not to respond to student grief, they felt as though they needed to acknowledge the grief shared. This attentiveness to student grief was recognized as emotional labor and challenged GTAs as they worked to respond compassionately and practice witnessing grief. Responses to expressions of grief should be provided in a manner the respondent thinks are best, rather than providing what might be considered an acceptable response (Willer et al., 2021). GTAs strive to respond in a manner they think fits their teaching style and the student's grief. However, this can present further apprehensions for GTAs given their lack of professional experience managing such circumstances, in addition to managing their lack of power and autonomy within academic institutions. Instructors feel this tension and are often left to manage the situation, leading them to utilize their own experiences.

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## Drawing From Personal Experience

GTAs also shared about the lack of training they received, making them draw from their personal experiences to help students manage their grief. Alex, a White, non-binary, second year, who taught nine courses, stated that, “It makes me think of my own experiences . . . I just think on, back on my own experiences and what how I felt that in that situation and how I would want my students to feel.” When students share their grief with an instructor, the GTAs’ university may not have prepared them for this interaction. The lack of training did not stop GTAs from practicing compassionate communication around student grief. As Alex expressed, they drew from personal experiences with grief. Nicole, a White, female, second year, who taught three courses, shared:

I’ve had my own family health scares, and so we were able to talk about that a little bit . . . I can really relate in a lot of ways of feeling like you have to grow up a bit faster, have different priorities than your peers.

Nicole provides empathy and understanding when students share their grief through her own experiences. Nicole breaks from the notion of *good grief*, connecting with students over shared experiences rather than keeping grief *quiet* and *controlled*. However, not all situations are relatable to the GTAs. Jenny, a White, female, first year, who taught eight courses shared a disclosure from a student who experienced a miscarriage, “I could sympathize with her, but I could never even try to empathize because I have never known that type of pain. And I just I was at such a loss.” Some situations are not relatable, but GTAs utilize what they know and how other experiences can lend themselves in helping in various situations. GTAs’ use of personal experiences to respond to student grief was essential to crafting a compassionate response to students. CGP argues that compassionate communication skills should be done by finding the right fit rather than a prescribed response (Willer et al., 2021). GTAs still felt as though they were unprepared for these expressions, especially if they did not share a similar experience. Participants often felt that the lack of training from their university left them unprepared to craft such responses. Overall, participants shared that behaviors and responses to students were influenced by their family, personal experiences, and upbringing. In addition to their personal connections, participants reflected on the transactional exchange of emotion in higher education.

## Transactional Exchanges in Institutions

The second theme addresses the transactional nature of the teacher-student relationship. Many participants commented on the transactional nature of the classroom, negotiating the amount of flexibility they could provide after student disclosure, and the (in)effective and (un)available support resources that GTAs are instructed to provide.

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<b>TABLE 2</b>		
<b>Transactional Exchanges in Institutions</b>		
<b>Sub themes</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Exemplars</b>
(In)flexibility	Many GTAs reflected on trying to remain flexible when students disclose grief while still having to follow university guidelines and expectations.	<p>"I think sometimes in-person interactions can be more meaningful, where you can really have a presence there with them . . . the online interactions can be a bit more planned out a bit more purposeful, thoughtful." (Nicole, a White, female, second year, who taught three courses)</p> <p>"Because I keep myself flexible, and I'm not always great at it. I want to emphasize that very heavily because sometimes you're just not going to do it right. But as best I can help the problem, help the person and it just makes it easier to deal with if you keep the flexibility going and just understand that you're not always going to do it right. You're just doing the best you can." (Herb, a White, male, fourth year, who taught 14 courses)</p>
(In)Effectiveness, (Limited) Availability and Access to University Resources	GTAs noted they were required to push students toward university resources that provide professional support for student grief, and discussed how helpful and harmful they find those resources.	<p>"Because that's what we're told 20 times over is to not engage with the students but to give them counsel like, you know, the counseling services and I was like, you know, if you want to talk or anything I can listen." (Jenny, a White, female, first year, who taught eight courses)</p> <p>"Because all then I can really do is be like, well, I know that this exists, but I also just tried to get into the Counseling Center and I know that it's going to be a two month wait, so Are you suicidal? Because then you have to wait two months. So I don't really know how to help you beyond this." (Claire, a White, female, second year, who taught six courses)</p>

### **(In)flexibility**

Many GTAs reflected on trying to remain flexible when students disclose grief; working within the institutional guidelines. Some GTAs stated that documentation was required by their universities to provide accommodation; which felt indecorous. Alan, a White, male, fourth year, who taught seven courses, explained, "Do I ask for a pamphlet from your grandfather's funeral? No, so inappropriate, but like I need documentation because that's what the syllabus says like, how do I get documentation?" For Alan, it was challenging to request documentation, and felt it was inappropriate to ask for proof of their loved one's death. This challenged his university's documentation requirement. Alan struggled to be flexible in the face of university policy.

The university request for documentation further seeks to dehumanize the experience of grief; responding to grief in a tidy and staged manner. Seeking documentation follows these principles of good grief and does not provide space for witnessing or having compassion for those experiencing grief. GTAs rejecting university policy when accommodating grief, in their own way, seek to de-institutionalize grief, challenging what is acceptable and institutionally appropriate to request when experiencing grief in an institutionalized setting.

Other participants tried to work with the institutional guidelines and practices. Shelby, a White/Middle Eastern, female, second year, who taught four courses, was aware of how tragedy might impact students, and therefore worded a section of her syllabus:

My sincerest condolences to those who may experience tragedy through the semester. I know from personal experience that a death takes an immense toll to student success. Please reach out to me if you're experienced a tragedy during the semester and feel emotional, physical or mentally unwell. I can help accommodate your needs.

Shelby worked with the university's requirements, while acknowledging the transactional nature of the classroom through official documentation. For others, it was not only important to try and be flexible when students miss class or coursework, but also consider how disclosure in an assignment might impact the grade earned.

Many participants experienced disclosures of grief in assignments and considered how to acknowledge vulnerability while providing the appropriate grade earned. This was challenging for Clark, a White, male, first year, who taught nine courses, who shared, “Because of the disclosure of grief in the speech, I felt fear giving a bad grade. But I also didn't want to give him a better grade because this was disclosing something . . .” Clark struggled to validate the student's disclosure while also providing the earned grade. After careful consideration, Clark provided feedback as to why he assigned the student's grade and commented on the student's bravery sharing with the class. Overall, GTAs are doing their best to provide support and accommodation to students in a system that does not provide flexibility due to grief. However, due to an absence of flexibility and the recommended exchanges, GTAs prefer more controllable mediums for expressions of grief.

Many participants revealed that their students share their grief over email. The online medium can provide instructors and students the space to process a response. Lana, a White, female, first year, who taught five courses, expressed:

Honestly, I like it better when they express grief over email . . . it gives me time to formulate a proper response and helping them and it doesn't put me on the spot like in a face-to-face setting would, and I think it's easier for the student too because they're not seeing me when they're telling me these things . . . I have found it to be beneficial over email for both parties.

Disclosure over email can make the situation less uncomfortable for the teacher and the student. Email lends itself to being transactional and less emotional. Participants felt that email gives them the ability to support students easier and provided the potential for students to share more detail and less emotion.

GTAs expressed that receiving emails about grief is preferred because they can control the response and how to support their student. Alan, a White, male, fourth year, who taught seven courses shared, “Being flexible via email is the best response I've found.” According to Willer et al. (2021), “Embodied responses can include both verbal and nonverbal forms of communication . . .” (p. 31). Through email, students can disclose what they wish. When responding to email disclosure, GTAs have more time to craft a response, more control over how they choose to respond, and practice witnessing the grief narrative

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being presented. For many participants, because of the various options provided by email, it appears to be their preferred method to practice compassionate communication surrounding grief disclosure. It also gives instructors the space to be able to share university resources and connect students to campus services.

### **(In)Effectiveness, (Limited) Availability, and Access to University Resources**

GTAs also remarked on the encouragement to refer students to university resources that provide professional support for student grief, including how helpful and harmful they find such resources. Many GTAs were informed to refer students to counseling services, provide links to crisis hotlines, or follow mandated reporter guidelines. Frankie, a White, female, second year, who taught six courses, stated, “Everything was basically just about, you know, be professional. It’s not your job to help them, send them to resources.” For some, having these resources was helpful and made them feel as though they would make a difference. This was shared by Natalie, a White, female, second year, who taught eight courses, “I typically respond to them with hey, I want you to know that you’re cared for. I’m not necessarily equipped with the right skills to help you through this, but there are people who are equipped for these skills.” While student disclosure was often overwhelming to Natalie, knowing she could provide helpful connections was important to her. In these instances, the academic institutionalization of grief was beneficial. GTAs felt ill-equipped to manage student grief and emotion and felt that relying on the medicalization and institutionalization of grief through referrals to university resources helped them care for their students.

For other GTAs, handing students over to other services was not enough. Many remarked on how they cared for their students, and having an interpersonal relationship with their students was important, rather than engaging in an exchange of services. For many, institutional resources were inadequate at providing help to students. While GTAs understood the importance of the services, they felt that they did not always provide the help students needed at the time. GTAs remarked on the long wait times to access the counseling centers, making them ineffective. Alan, a White, male, fourth year, who taught seven courses, expressed frustration:

And I think that’s a lot of it is like structural barriers to you know . . . students get six sets of free visits, essentially a semester to the counseling center. It is very difficult to get into the counseling center. It’s like a two or three month wait, if not longer . . .

Alan felt it was important to understand the university resources, not only to refer students to them, but also to understand when they might cause more harm than good. Due to university structure, providing such referrals might place the student in more distress, which is alarming considering the encouragement to use such measures. These resources embody good grief practices. Having referral resources provided gives a clear structure for how to manage student grief. There are strategies instructors can choose to address the disclosure, resolving their involvement in the interaction and directing students to professionals more qualified to address their needs. GTAs’ feelings and experiences with institutional resources are mixed. Referring students to these resources is not as clear and *tidy* as it might seem on the outside.

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## Classroom as a Human Space

The final theme highlights the complexity of human emotion that can enter the classroom. Many participants described the classroom as a human space, where emotions will enter for students and GTAs when least expected. Connecting with students when they are experiencing such emotion can lead to interpersonal relationships and learning opportunities.

TABLE 3 Classroom as a Human Space		
Sub themes	Description	Exemplars
“School doesn’t exist in a vacuum”	When students enter the classroom, they cannot leave the outside world behind them; their grief and emotions may affect how they engage in the classroom, with course materials, and assignments.	<p>“I think it’s hard to completely separate what’s going on in your home life with school, especially as college students as graduate students as well . . . I think that grief has its place in the classroom setting, because I wouldn’t expect students that are experiencing grief, to be able to completely separate themselves from that grief to fully participate in class.” (Polly, a White, female, first year, who has taught two courses)</p> <p>“Maybe focusing a little bit more on the outside factors a student deals with because the student that just drops everything in the doors, as a student in your class, like no, but a lot of students live on campus. You know, like that. That’s their home.” (Shelby, White/Middle Eastern, Female, 2nd year PhD student, who has taught four courses)</p>
Working With and Learning Through Grief	When grief entered the classroom, it provided an opportunity for students and instructors to connect interpersonally and create meaningful relationships beyond teacher-student.	<p>“I think grief can be used as not necessarily a learning tool from my end, but possibly a learning tool . . . I mean trying to take your experiences and apply them to the communication theorems and concepts that we’re talking about.” (Polly, a White, Female, first year PhD student, who taught two courses)</p> <p>“I want my students to like me and work with me because I feel like when we have a sort of dynamic relationship . . . I feel like that helps me run my class better because we see each other both as human beings and it’s not a power differential.” (Claire, a White, Female, second year PhD student, who taught six courses)</p>

### “School Doesn’t Exist in a Vacuum”

When students enter the classroom, they cannot leave the outside world behind. Many participants feel as though instructors are not willing to admit how much the outside world enters the classroom and how insignificant course materials and due dates might mean to someone having trouble. Jay, a White, male, fourth year, who taught two courses, shared:

So many teachers are so reluctant to like, admit that students are human and we’re human. I think it takes a certain amount of like humbleness to acknowledge, hey, our class is, not the most important thing in the world and it’s probably not even like on the top 10 of these, students’ important lists.

Expecting students to separate their lives and emotions is unrealistic. Many GTAs remarked on the importance of being aware of what students might be managing outside of the classroom. Claire, a White, female, second year, who taught six courses, stated,

I think it's important to know that school does not exist in a vacuum . . . I think it is foolish to say that you can leave whatever you have at the door and then only exist in the classroom. Because there are a lot of things that students will still bring into the classroom.

When students experience emotions, such as grief, it might not be possible to compartmentalize their lives and emotions. Participants expressed a desire for instructors to embrace the messiness of grief and loss; it is not clean-cut, nor does it follow certain guidelines. Instructors cannot help it when grief blends into other aspects of their lives, and the classroom is no exception. Willer et al. (2021) states, “such pedagogical vulnerability can be the stitch that weaves us Madly together” (p. 29).

Instructors cannot expect students to resolve their grief along an academic time frame. Shelby, a White/Middle Eastern, female, second year, who taught four courses, reflected on her experiences as a student stating, “I felt like a lot of my professors were missing the point that grief is continuous. It doesn't end.” Even as students process their emotions, grief can impact students at (m)any time(s) throughout a class. This aligns with demedicalizing *inappropriate grief* and the idea that grief has a clock attached to it. GTAs recognized the institutional desire for students to resolve grief so it does not interfere with course work. From this perspective, grief not resolved within the academic time frame is a hinderance to academic success. When grief is addressed, and acknowledged, it can create learning opportunities and human connections.

## Working With and Learning Through Grief

When grief entered the classroom, it provided an opportunity for students and instructors to connect interpersonally. Participants felt that they were able to work with students, share in their vulnerability, and create meaningful relationships beyond teacher-student. By dismantling the distinct roles of *student* and *teacher*, many participants felt it created a better classroom environment and relationship with students. For many participants, welcoming grief and opening discussion to work with students' grief was important to their course structure and student success. This was important to participants like Jay, a White, male, fourth year, who taught two courses, when he stated how honored he felt when students want to work with him:

I was very grateful that he, like was actually, open with me and transparent about what was going on. I just felt like it was a, it was a privilege, right? For him to be like, I'm going through this thing instead of being like, either ghosting or, I can't be there. It felt really profound that you know, he expressed that with me.

Jay felt that the student's choice to disclose to him was very significant. Instead of not completing work or missing class, this student was open, something that Jay found to be a *privilege* in a space that does not value expressions of grief. Being a witness to student grief challenges the notion of good grief and creates a stronger instructor-student relationship.

This was also true for Molly, a White, female, second year, who taught 14 courses, who saw value in reciprocating vulnerability. She shared, “She was vulnerable with me and I in response was vulnerable

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with her. I think my empathy towards her, and compassions probably built like a powerful relationship and not like power dynamics, but just like a strong girl relationship.” When students and instructors can manage emotions such as grief together, it creates an opportunity for students to connect with their instructors. Having students be vulnerable with instructors, and vice versa, can allow for relationships that might not have been previously possible.

Furthermore, connections can also be formed between course concepts, theory, and grief experiences. The classroom is a place of learning, but grief will inevitably enter in one form or another. When it does, it does not have to be something that impedes the learning process. Since grief is not an emotion that can be kept out of the classroom, embracing its entrance can provide instructors with opportunities to provide a safe and supportive space for students. This was key to Yasmin, an African/Black, female, second year, who taught three courses who stated:

I think if properly handled, it creates a unique opportunity for students to learn how to communicate in a very different and uncomfortable setting where they can offer support, where they can practice some of the skills that they’ve learned to navigate this uncomfortable situation.

For many participants, when handled with care, it creates an opportunity for students to cope and apply course concepts to their grief experiences. By being open and welcoming to narratives around grief and loss in the classroom, instructors can create opportunities for students to connect course concepts to help process their grief. Inviting grief into the classroom lets students learn how to communicate about difficult experiences and apply concepts on a deeper level.

Academia is not accepting of emotions in the classroom. Many GTAs were aware of this and how it may act as a barrier for students to feel comfortable enough to share how their emotions might be impacting them in the classroom and coursework. While grief experiences might not always be a learning experience, the classroom can still be space that allows students to work through their grief. If expressions of grief do not harm others, or distract from others learning, participants felt that grief in the classroom was appropriate, creating a more human space that academia does not always allow.

## Discussion

Critical pedagogy has been a way for individuals within the academy to resist the structures placed in universities across the United States. Through the extension of CGP, the classroom can be a space where students are called to share their grief and loss. These practices resist the academic norms that silence grief (Willer, 2022). Overall, our study explored how GTAs practiced the tenets of CGP when responding to student grief. These findings show how CGP can be applied to how GTAs respond to expectations of student grief in the academy and welcome grief in the classroom.

The prevailing societal expectation of grief is to keep it hidden and that it will follow a certain set of rules (Doka, 2016). How GTAs learn about and respond to student grief adds to the acceptance of silencing of grief in academic spaces. According to Willer et al. (2021), grief is silenced not only by institutional practices, but through our teaching practices as well. Our findings show that GTAs are aware of their institution’s expectations of grief expression in the classroom. The transactional nature of higher education provides an orderly way of approaching grief, through controlling interactions via

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email, providing resources that may or may not be effective to students, and limiting the amount of flexibility GTAs have when responding to grief. We suggest using CGP to break down how institutions treat what they view as “inappropriate grief” and “unpacking the systems of power” (Willer et al., 2021) to prepare GTAs for how to respond to student disclosure. GTAs illuminated the disciplining of grief in the classroom, the struggle to find ways of managing expectations, and witnessing grief in academia. By examining how GTAs approach expressions of student grief, we can attempt to challenge university structures that limit grief and embrace emotion by training GTAs using CGP.

Additionally, institutional practices further discipline grief through the boundaries placed on GTAs. GTAs are aware of their lack of power and status in the academy. Institutional practices make it difficult for GTAs to fully witness and take part in student grief, since it is not part of their *role* due to the limits of their abilities and fear due to a lack of power. Instructors are often hesitant to welcome grief into the classroom due to the emotion it may provoke (i.e., crying), meaning GTAs are not trained therapists, and can fail to provide the support needed (Willer, 2022). Grief will enter the classroom, whether it is wanted or not, often resulting in a significant amount of emotional labor. Emotional labor is an unspoken part of academic life (Lawless, 2018), and one that GTAs were not prepared for. Research has shown that many instructors are not prepared for the emotional labor that comes with managing student disclosure (Madden & Del Rosso, 2021). To better equip future instructors for the disclosures they may encounter, institutions should prepare GTAs for student emotion. By introducing CGP during GTA training, and recognizing the barriers that confine and discipline grief in the classroom, we can introduce GTAs to the emotional labor they may encounter.

Grief is a human experience, one that cannot be disregarded because one enters the classroom. Based on the experiences of GTAs, scholars can use CGP to invite instructors to break through the neoliberal expectations of grief in academic spaces and take part in grief narratives. It can also create a space for students to learn how to process emotion and apply course concepts. Sharing narratives of grief and loss can improve “recall, affect, and attention” (Kromka & Goodboy, 2019, as cited in Willer et al., 2021, p. 42). By creating a space in the classroom, where instructors engage with student and personal grief, instructors can hopefully reduce the loneliness of the experience (Willer, 2022), embrace humanity, and resist the transactional expectations of higher education.

## **Practical and Pedagogical Implications**

Based on the discussion we outlined, we offer a variety of practical implications for GTAs and the academy. To move past the structures of higher education, university officials need to recognize that grief, emotional labor, and university expectations play a huge role in navigating and supporting the well-being and success of students. Instructors in higher education do not get the support for their emotional labor. Institutions need to be aware of the time and dedication it takes for instructors to manage student grief in the classroom. GTAs are learning at the start of their careers just how much emotional labor goes into being an instructor in higher education, and that grief enters the classroom in various ways. As argued by Lawless (2018), a way to push these structures forward is to think about how we can change it, and if we cannot change it, we should be compensated for it.

Looking at the pedagogical implications, teacher trainings need to focus on the experiences that GTAs may face in the classroom. Goode (2023) suggests trauma informed workshops and other support networks should be in place for faculty. We argue that these should start at the graduate level and suggest

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that graduate programs and departments give training or resources that can aid in navigating difficult conversations. Participants noted that their institutions train them to connect the student with the counseling center, and to not attempt to handle certain situations. This falls into the neoliberal structure of higher education, that the student is a customer, and the teacher/university is the service (Lawless, 2018). However, when the student discloses grief, the instructor is then an owner of the information and the grief. Programs and teacher training could prepare GTAs for the grief and emotional labor that comes with being a GTA and instructor in higher education. By having training and giving the preparation for grief in the classroom, it can limit instructor burnout, as well as making universities, and the classroom, more of a human space.

## Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insight into how the neoliberal institution of higher education influences how GTAs experience grief in the classroom, there are still some limitations that should be considered. Our sample was limited, whereas the participants were all domestic GTAs, mostly identified as female, mostly identified as White, and were located at universities located in the Midwest region of the United States. These limitations are not representative of the GTA population. Future research should aim for broad demographics that represent the GTA population, allowing for greater understandings and experiences to be shared.

Future research should further explore how GTAs feel about the teacher training they received regarding student grief in the classroom and how it did or did not prepare them for experiences of grief from students. Future research should also explore how students feel about grief disclosure with their instructors. This study explored the perspective of GTAs and their experiences with student grief. Exploring what influences students' disclosure and how they feel about sharing grief with instructors can provide valuable insight into grief in the classroom. Additionally, future research should explore how communication faculty react and respond when grief enters the classroom, if communication faculty are introducing grief in the classroom, and how grief is taught in the communication classroom and faculty responses to it.

This essay examined GTAs experience with student disclosure of grief and how CGP can be seen in their responses to student grief. When grief is expressed to GTAs, they experience regulations and boundaries placed on them by the institution, the transactional exchanges in institutions, and the notion that the classroom is a human space. We uncovered the challenges and experiences that GTAs have in the communication classroom. By applying the tenets of CGP to the experiences of GTAs, we can see how GTAs worked to provide a space for grief in the classroom yet struggled to make sense of the disclosure in the face of academic expectations. This piece seeks to illuminate the challenges that GTAs face and how including CGP into GTA training can better prepare graduate students for grief disclosures.

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