



LTL Grief Education Program Director Blog Post

As a grief activist, I live, breath and sleep grief and loss. It is a passion. I provide support, education, training, and I am present with others through their pain. For me, it is a way of living fully; it is a way of strengthening resilience; and it is a way of being grateful for all the people who share their stories with me. I learn from them. It is always a reciprocal relationship.

I consider myself very fortunate – as a grief educator with **Learning Through Loss** (www.learningthroughloss.org), I witness, every day, the difference that educational conversations and support programs for grief can have in the lives of youth. So, I take for granted my knowing how necessary this conversation and support is.

But, we live in a society that largely stigmatizes grief. We hear messages that grief is a weakness, or a mental illness. We receive messages that we should just get on with life, and that grief is something we need to suck up on our own.

I have a request of you.

Just for a moment, I ask you to pause, and think back to your youth. Think back to your first loss experience. Was it your beloved pet dying? The death of a grandparent? The separation of your parents? The break-up of your first love? A best-friend moving away? Or perhaps, the death of a parent?

Take a moment to remember.

What was it like as a young person to experience this loss? Did you feel supported? Did you understand grief? Did you know what to expect? Did you feel comfort in knowing where you could find support? Did you feel reassurance in knowing you had people to talk to? Did you feel “normal”?

The truth is, for many of us, the answer to these questions is no.

Very few of us had the opportunity to learn about grief and loss in school, let alone have specific resources to connect with to help us through the emotional turmoil, and provide us with hope for navigating a new and changed world. Even the most well-resourced family can be left on shaky, unknown ground when loss hits home.

Currently there are no programs or curriculum within the school system to address grief and loss as an essential life-skill that needs to be learned. And, there is a lack of resources, money and staffing within schools to make this a priority.

It is time to change this. And, this is what **Learning Through Loss** is doing.

Through our educational programs we have meaningful conversations with over 3,000 youth a year in Greater Victoria schools. Catch a glimpse of our school-based educational conversations through this Vital People Link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZIfkweFN54>

Through our specialized eight-week support groups, youth struggling with loss have a place to connect with their peers, gain invaluable support, and most importantly, find strength and hope in their own resilience and capacity to survive, adapt, and grow through loss.

"[the program] allows you to think and relate to different life situations and improve the way you deal with them"

Grade 10 student, Claremont Secondary

"I could understand myself and others better"

Grade 8 student, Royal Oak

"It made me feel OK about grieving in the future"

Grade 9 student, Lambrick Park Secondary

"It was calming. I know I'm not alone"

Grade 7 student, Journey Middle School

"Highlighting some of the results of overlooking or suppressing grief gave the girls reasons to address it and hope for positive change. Due to the exceptional delivery of this workshop we were able to access emotions with our students that had never before been disclosed, with a NEW language and deeper understanding of loss."

Counsellor, Artemis, Alternative Education for Girls

Through our specialized knowledge, we are connecting with other professionals, teachers, counsellors and parents to further increase the capacity of individuals, families and the community to respond to loss and grief in supportive ways.

*Our partnership with **Learning Through Loss Society** has provided a much needed knowledgeable resource and educational support for many of our students including those most in need. As well, the developmental work that the **LTL** society has done with our Grade Eight students and with educators within our district has enriched our learning community bringing a deeper level of understanding regarding how to optimally support those among us through loss. The **LTL** society brings a specialized body of knowledge and experience to our community which increases and deepens the support that we can offer our students and families in our school and district.*

Doug Mollard, PhD, Counsellor, Royal Oak Middle School, President of the Saanich Counsellor's Local Specialist Association

I have the privilege to speak with some of the most vulnerable youth – those without homes, those struggling with anxiety, addiction and mental health, and those in youth custody. Underlying all of these unique individuals with their unique situations is a common theme: loss. Stemming from this, maladaptive coping strategies to manage their over-whelming grief that makes them feel crazy, alone and different.

It costs society thousands of dollars a year to support just ONE youth who is struggling through homelessness, addiction, mental health, and correctional facilities (p. 294 Youth Justice Services Program, 2012 Annual Report, Office of Auditor General, Ontario). In BC, it costs approximately \$215,000 per year for each youth in custody (p. 5, Kids, Crime and Care, 2009).

In 2013 **Learning Through Loss** spent less than \$60,000, our bare minimum, to run all of our programs, reaching over 3,500 youth and youth-serving professionals. Even if only ONE youth was impacted by our services and remained on a healthy life path because of our programs, we would be maximizing our community's return on investment.

This program has been an essential service that we have referred many of our students and families to over the years. Whether students have experienced divorce, moving, death of a pet or loved one, the first referral our counselors make is to the Living and Learning Through Loss Program. The fact that there is no fee associated with the services opens up the access for all of our students, especially our most vulnerable.

Tina Pierik, Student Advocate, SD # 63, Critical Incident Response Team Coordinator

Just imagine what we could do with more to invest in our youth, and community! I know I share my visions with all of my great team at **Learning Through Loss** the potential we have to expand the breadth and depth of our reach.

LTL offers a sanctuary for teens to understand the complexity of grief and gives them opportunity to process their experiences. There are no other resources in Victoria providing this priceless service.

Judy McKenzie, Project Alive, Critical Incident Response Team

It is time to break down the stigma of grief. Grief is a collective experience that needs to be witnessed, supported and shared. It is one thing we all have in common with one another, so let's capitalize on this and through it strengthen our collective resiliency. Let's ensure our children and youth have the necessary emotional, intellectual and behavioural resources to make healthy choices. It is their right to have this learning opportunity. It is our obligation as a responsible community to provide this and respond to this essential need.

To learn more about **Learning Through Loss** and to support our vision, please visit Victoria Foundation's Community Knowledge Center, <http://ckc.victoriafoundation.bc.ca/org/learning-through-loss>.

Shauna Janz, MA, is a passionate consultant, educator, and facilitator in the field of grief, loss and wellness. Her work is rooted in discovering the internal resources, wisdom and strength we all have to survive and grow through experiences of pain. She works with individuals, groups and organizations to facilitate understanding and healing through loss and to create supportive environments that honour grief and promote individual and collective well-being. She has been with **Learning Through Loss** for over 5 years, and she is a support group facilitator with BC Victims of Homicide.