>> Tammy Besser: Hello, I'm Tammy Besser. I'm a white woman with short white gray hair, blue eyes, purple glasses, and I'm wearing a blue shirt. Welcome to Rituals and Remembrance, part of the Seasons of Grief Series. Today we're talking about rituals and remembrance. Both rituals and remembrance can be important aspects of a healthy grief journey. Rituals and remembrance help us with the task of grief, and the tasks of grief – there are four of them – are to accept the reality of the loss: funerals, memorial services, celebrations of life are very helpful with this. The second task is to process the pain of grief. That's feeling the loss, crying, hugging others, sitting with the sadness, talking about the person. This happens both alone and with others. The third task is to adjust to a world without the deceased, or what has been lost for non-death grief. What will family holidays be like? I always celebrated my birthday with them, what am I going to do? Each Sunday night we always had a phone call or FaceTime. What are Sunday nights going to be? And the fourth task is finding a way or ways to remember the deceased, while embarking on the rest of one's life. What might I keep or create to remember their place in my life and the love that I felt, how they laughed, what they loved, and who they were? At the same time the tasks of grief are happening, and we're not necessarily always conscious of this, life also goes on. So grief isn't occurring 24 hours a day 7 days a week. We go back and forth between feeling the loss and going on with life, while figuring out what life will be, how it'll be reshaped, how it will be different without the person who died. The tasks of grief and the back and forth between feeling the grief and tending to life goes on sometimes for months, but most often for years. And as time passes – and time's important with grief. Grief isn't quick nor does it follow any specific timeline. The sadness may decrease in frequency and intensity but it continues. We want to be aware of possible grief landmines. They're the big ones: the anniversaries of a death, the person's birthday, celebrations we already had with them – those are the most notable. But it could happen at any time. It could be you smell the perfume that they always wore on somebody else, you hear their name but it's somebody else being called by that name, you see an ad for their favorite food, and all of a sudden it just comes flooding back. The feelings seem to come without warning to the rest of us, but they make sense to the person. We want to be aware and supportive in these times. And they might be times for rituals or revisiting remembrance. So I'm starting to veer into Shelly and Diane's territory. So I'm going to pass it on to Shelly who's going to talk more about rituals.

>> Shelly Christensen: I'm Shelly Christensen. I'm the Senior Director of Faith and Spirituality at Disability Belongs™. I am a white woman. I have dark brown hair. And I’m wearing brown glasses and a purple top.

Spiritual and cultural rituals can offer comfort and connection during times of grief. We explore how faith practices can support disabled individuals and their loved ones, and how we can ensure access and inclusion throughout the bereavement process, which is often triggered by grief.

It’s important to recognize that grief can stem from loss, and each person's experience of it may vary, including those with disabilities. Grief is a deeply personal journey, and our role is to provide support without attempting to control how individuals navigate their process. Integrating rituals related to specific faith traditions can offer individuals a way to manage their emotions and find comfort during difficult times.

Loss is not solely felt when someone passes away; it can also arise from significant life changes, such as a close friend moving away, the death of a pet, or receiving a life-altering medical diagnosis. It is essential to recognize and acknowledge the various ways grief can manifest, and to do so with compassion.

When supporting individuals with disabilities, it’s important to respect their grief and remember that they may struggle to express their feelings at this time because of the experience just like anyone else. There is no timeline to experiencing grief. As we adapt to loss, how we experience grief may change over time.

You can inquire about a person’s specific religious beliefs, whether they celebrate holidays, and, if so, how those celebrations are observed. Additionally, you can ask if they would appreciate any support during those times or if they would like company. It’s important to allow individuals to express their needs and preferences, so you can understand the best way to support them.

When dealing with a death, access to certain events, such as a viewing or funeral, may be limited. Consider taking the initiative to help others participate in these events. Ask them what they need. For example, they might require transportation to the event or assistance during the occasion with specific tasks. Additionally, you could inquire on their behalf about creating a quiet space if requested or arrange for captioning or American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters if needed, so they can fully participate.

After a loss, discuss traditions they wish to uphold or rituals you can assist with, such as a dinner or a religious observance. Sometimes creating different rituals in remembrance of a loss may be helpful.

Recognize the importance of participating in rituals. People denied access to their rituals and traditions are at higher risk for delayed or complicated grief. Examples of rituals include attending and participating in funerals, wakes, or celebrations of life.

>> Diane Sturmer: Hello my name is Diane and I am a white woman with a Irish sweater on and brown glasses, and kind of brown hair that's got a little bit of gray mixed in. Today I'm going to be talking about remembering. And over a lifetime, remembering will always be part of the grief journey. As time – passes, one benchmark of mourning is being able to think about the person who died with less pain. The initial swell of pain in mourning will pass at some point, but the impact that the person has made on each of us will never be replaced. Grief is hard. It's uncomfortable. And as Shelly and Tammy have both said, it has an unknown timeline. We have to take care of ourselves and those around us – and this will help ease the pain. So the initial swell of the deep pain that we feel when we first lose someone will pass. But it is important for us to remember the tears, the laughter, and the simple joys that that person – that made that person so special to us. Sometimes simple steps like – if you have a waterway near where you live, a pond or an ocean or a lake, oftentimes we – I've seen people bring stones or collect stones near that waterway. And one young man I knew threw about 20 of these stones in just out of anger. He was mad. He didn't want to lose his friend. And then all of the sudden he took – it was really neat. He just sighed and then he took the stones and threw them and then he began to share memories of his friend, and then he was able to think about some of those good memories. But he had to go through that journey, and it was at his pace and his way, and it was so important. Another thing that has been a way to remember, and I've learned a lot even these last weeks. Oftentimes we make what we call homes in heaven for people of the Christian faith. And we draw a home that's usually drawn by one of their friends, and fill it in with things that are important about the person. It could be a saying that they said, like if they said, "oh gee willikers," that might be written in there, or it might be flowers, because they love flowers. When my friend Yava passed away recently, she – she's a beautiful woman and she practices the Jewish faith. And I actually talked to my friends that are on recording with us and said, "I'm not really feeling like it's right to do home in heaven – what do you think?" And we talked about it, and we decided that it was important for her to have a heart so that we could keep her memories in our heart. So for my friend Yava we created what was called Yava's heart. And one of the individuals that was a housemaid of hers drew a heart, and another person just scribbled beautiful colors all over. And then a third one decided she was going to put hearts all around the heart. And then people started to add things. And we usually leave it for a month at the home where the person lives. And Yava's heart has got – has turned into a beautiful artistic rendering now. Some of the people on the overnight – her team members and staff members – have added their beautiful drawings and words, and then their friends have come by and said "I need to draw another thing," and put it in there. So it was really neat. I remember one fella said "I don't want a house in heaven – I love Disney. I want a castle." So we made him a castle. So it's just been really beautiful to see as time goes on how you can remember people by truly listening to what is their heartbeat, what have they loved in life, so that we can really remember that when they have passed. Another thing we talked about a little bit as a group, the three of us, is the creating of – remembrance spaces And I have an example. I have a beautiful daughter-in-law that – her husband, her first husband died of ALS. And she's a DYI girl all the way through. And she decided she wanted to create a pathway out to a fire pit so that anybody who came to her house who had a wheelchair could get – out to that fireplace. She went to the thrift stores, got ceramics, plates and things. She broke them and then she made them into cats, into hiking boots, into things that reminded her – as she was a new widow. And she made this pathway out to the fire pit so that all friends could come out and remember her husband. There's so many beautiful ways to do that. My twin brother passed away, and every year I would bring a basket to AIDS Rochester, because that was one of the components of why his life was shortened. He – I would just bring the basket to the waiting room and leave it there for the people that were there. But to me what was the most important thing was that I was able to say his name, to say this – I'm doing this for my twin brother David, and these are for you, because – he would want you guys while you're waiting to have a little bit of joy and encouragement. And when I said that word David it just meant so much, and it's been so important for me to be – when I'm with people to remind them that it's okay to say that person's name. And it's been a way of really remembering. The person that you are working with, who's – on the grief journey, they become the teacher and we become the student. And we have to really listen with our hearts to know what's important to them. A friend of mine shared that she – she had lost a staff person that had later on become a fireman. And he was in a three-wheel accident up in the Adirondack Mountains. And she was really sad because the staff person was really important. In fact a few months before he died, she had brought cookies to his fire department just because she missed him and she hadn't seen him for a few years. Well afterwards, it wasn't right away, it was a couple of months later. She said "Do you think we can make some cookies for his family and for – his buddies at the fire department?" And I said "Of course we can. We can do that." And we were able to connect, and she is creating some baskets right now to bring to those two places that are important to her. But it didn't happen in the first week or two. It was probably two or three months later. All of us – all of us have different processing timelines, the way we're made, we're all unique – and it's so important to keep that in mind that we all process things at different times. And so when things come out about grief, it's going to be very different for every person we work with. We've already talked about some of those holidays. One of the ones in the Jewish faith that I think is so beautiful that I learned about this time was the unveiling of the headstone. And when we – when we celebrated or we – I don't know if the word celebrated – but when we remembered Yava, her brother said, if you have a stone today you can place it on her mother's grave. And we left it on her mother's headstone. But when her headstone is unveiled, we're going to move it over to her headstone. So that was something that was really special that I was so glad I learned before so that it could be a nice way to remember her. Each person's faith and heart will guide their unique journey. There is a beauty and a time to heal that comes when we listen to each other.