

The grief no one names

Loss, identity and late neurodivergent diagnosis

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Late neurodivergent diagnosis can bring **a grief with no death in it: a disenfranchised, non-finite loss.**

Why this is grief

Late diagnosis can bring real grief, though no one has died. It is grief for lost time and choices, for years of masking, and for a life built around an explanation that no longer fits.

For the person, the diagnosis rewrites the story of who they were. It does not yet settle who they are, or who they are becoming.

"I'm a normal autistic person, not an abnormal neurotypical."

Tan, 2018

What kind of loss this is

Disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2002). A loss not recognised as something to grieve.

Ambiguous, non-finite loss (Boss, 1999). A loss with no ending or closure.

Late diagnosis can involve both, particularly where years of masking have shaped identity and life narrative.

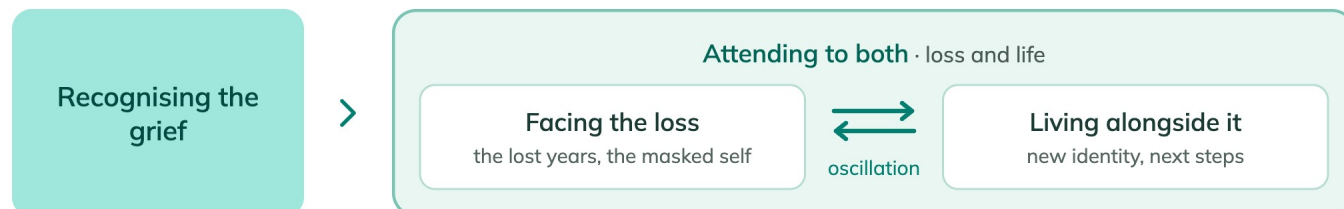
"To you I'm no different, but to me I'm completely different."

Leedham et al., 2020

Known in some communities, less visible in services

Late-identified neurodivergent adults may reach bereavement or mental health services carrying losses that no one has treated as grief. The language of disenfranchised and non-finite loss offers a way to notice what might otherwise be mistaken for something more familiar. Emerging work is beginning to connect diagnosis and grief, including in ADHD (Carr-Fanning et al., 2025).

Grief moves back and forth; it does not follow stages (dual process model, Stroebe & Schut, 1999)



What else might be present?

Considerations worth holding alongside the usual formulation.

Low mood, being treated.
Has grief been explored?

Support tools declined.
Might they need more time first?

A care plan that isn't working.
Does it fit who they are now?

A diagnosis, freshly given.
Was there room for the loss?

A practice model bringing established grief theory into neurodiversity-affirming counselling, assessment, and formulation.

When grief is recognised, there is more room to support both the loss and the life that follows.

Might you ask whether loss is part of their story?

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References

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