SOUTH SPROG’S GRIEF GUIDE:

Finding Solace And Healing In The Wisdom Of Nature,
Ancestors And Body Care
Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the many individuals, organizations, and resources that contributed to this guide. We stand on the shoulders of all who came before us, and continue to learn from the many groups named throughout this guide and beyond.

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Who We Are And Why This Guide Exists

Hello! We are a group of young organizers and between us, we hold a multitude of cultures, personal backgrounds, histories, and experiences working for liberation in the South.

This guide is an offering to share some of the information we have learned in our respective organizing and movement work. While There are many additional resources to explore, we hope that you can use this helpful beginner’s guide to start a community garden here in South!

What Is This Guide About?

This guide is made to support people moving with and through grief. In March 2020, a group of organizers across the South came together through the Sierra Club Student Coalition recognizing that our folks and communities would need to deepen our ability to hold grief. This guide is a piece of that critical care work that will ensure we can do the grieving work necessary to continue to build worlds in which liberation and autonomy is ensured for every being on this planet.

Grief is an expansive topic that covers multiple types of losses and a near infinite range of emotions. As a result, settling on a definition of grief can be difficult work. Having words to describe grief, however, can be helpful so here are some definitions and quotes that begin to get at the root of what the grief experience can feel like.

A basic grief definition is that it’s “the normal and natural emotional reaction to loss or change of any kind. Of itself, grief is neither a pathological condition nor a personality disorder.”

It can also be thought of as “the conflicting feelings caused by the end of or change in a familiar pattern of behavior.” Grief can also be described within lived experience as “the feeling of reaching out for someone who’s always been there, only to discover when I need them one more time, they are no longer there.”
This last quote can be altered depending on the situation to be an object or idea instead of a person, or to someone who was never there or only there for you at one time. Martin Prechtel describes grief as praise saying:

“Grief expressed out loud for someone we have lost, or a country or home we have lost, is in itself the greatest praise we could ever give them. Grief is praise, because it is the natural way love honors what it misses.

Grief is praise of those we have lost. Our own souls who have loved and are now heartbroken would turn to stone and hate us if we did not show such praise when we lose whom we love. A nonfake grieving is how we praise the dead, by praising that which has left us feeling cold and left behind.

By the event of our uncontrolled grief, wail, and rap, we are also simultaneously praising with all our hearts the life we have been awarded to live, the life that gave us the health and opportunity of having lived fully enough to love deep enough to feel the loss we now grieve. To not grieve is a violence to the Divine and our own hearts and especially to the dead.

If we do not grieve what we miss, we are not praising what we love. We are not praising the life we have been given in order to love. If we do not praise whom we miss, we are ourselves in some way dead. So grief and praise make us alive.”

Martin Prechtel, The Smell of Rain on Dust: Grief and Praise

However you choose to name (or not name) your unique grief experience, this guide aims to provide support for moving through grief. Grief is a huge thing for one person to hold by themselves, so one generative way to be with grief is to rely on other people or things to hold the grief with you.

In this guide, we have selected nature, ancestors, and mind-body practices as supports for holding and moving through grief. Not every practice may work for you, but we hope you find some relief inside these pages.
Plant Medicine For Grief

Why plant medicine?
The wisdom within plants can support you in moving through grief. Indigenous peoples all across the world have been using plant medicine since time immemorial to keep their physical, mental and spiritual bodies healthy. Through this lens, plants are considered to have spirits that can help to restore imbalances within different aspects of our beings.

Because, plant medicine has been used for so long, humans and plants have evolved together, so the chemical compounds (and the spirit of the plant) are readily absorbed by our bodies for deep and powerful healing.

Plant medicine is considered to be less powerful than pharmaceuticals in some communities, especially Western white communities, but all pharmaceuticals derived their chemical compounds from medicinal plants (usually stolen from Indigenous people).

In this way, plant medicine provides the body with higher quality versions of the chemical compounds found in pharmaceuticals--because they are natural and not synthetic--without the side-effects that most Big Pharma medicine inflicts.

This is not to pit one form of medicine against another, but rather to assert the validity of plant medicine which has been systematically condemned and ridiculed by Western society as part of the colonization of Black and Indigenous people which necessitated the devaluing of Black and Indigenous ways of knowing and healing.
Plant Medicine For Grief

A Note On Sourcing You Herbs

Unless you are Indigenous to Turtle Rock (North America), we encourage you to abstain from wildcrafting—harvesting plants from communal land like parks and empty lots.

All of the so-called United States is currently occupied Indigenous land and is not for non-Indigenous folks to harvest freely from. We encourage you to focus your energy on buying and cultivating these herbs.

Many of the herbs listed here can also be easily found in your backyard or the backyard of someone you know. Mimosa trees, for example, are an invasive species and many people would love for you to take some blossoms or branches of their hands!

Herbs for Grief

These herbs support the heart chakra, to aid with stress, to lift one’s mood and support the immune system.

- Mimosa blooms and twigs (outer bark shaven off)- “herbal prozac”, mood lifter. Tea and tincture
- Tulsi: stress relief, immune support, energy. Tea
- Motherwort: heart chakra support. Tea, tinctures
- Lemon Balm- anxiety, stress, uplifting. Tea, tincture
- Hawthorne Berry- heartbroken, disconnected from emotions. Tincture
- Peach - acute grief, uncontrollable “hot” tears (“bringing peach tea with bad news”) tincture or tea
- Valerian - aids with restfulness when too emotionally exhausted to sleep
- Ashwagandha - mood and energy support. Small doses can help with fatigue and depressed states. Larger doses can actually help with sleep/cause drowsiness.
- Skullcap - tincture is good for circular/obsessive thoughts. Tea is good for restlessness and insomnia.

Teas

In herbal medicine, teas are prepared through infusion of decoction. Infusions are used for more delicate parts of the plant--leaves and petals--and involve pouring almost boiling water over the plant material and letting it steep for 15-30 minutes.

Decoctions are for hardier parts of plants--roots, bark, twigs--and are made by boiling the plant material in water for 20-30 minutes.
Herbs for Grief

Tinctures
Tinctures are a concentrated, long-lasting way to keep plant medicine. Plant material, either dry or fresh, are placed in a clean jar loosely filling the jar and covered completely with alcohol. This mixture is shaken every day for 4-6 weeks.

By this time the alcohol will have extracted all the healing compounds from the plant material. The liquid that you strain off is your tincture! This can be put in a tincture dropper bottle and you can use 1-2 dropperfuls when needed.

Baths
Baths combine aromatherapy and steam therapy while also supporting the nervous system and letting herbal medicine get absorbed through the skin:
Herbal Bath Blend for Grief:
2 parts linden
1 part rose
1 part lavender
½ part borage & sage
Add ¼ cup of herbs to a cotton muslin bag to infuse in the bath water. Or add 1/4 cup of herbs to a quart of just-boiled water and steep 15-20 mins. Strain and pour into bath water.
(Borrowed from https://www.herbanwellness.net/2018/01/15/herbal-support-for-grief-and-loss/)
Creating or deepening an ancestor practice can be another container to hold your grief. Ancestors are those who came before us, in our own personal lineage or beyond.

Creating a relationship with specific ancestors can take time and can lead to a profound experience of support from beyond this material world. For folks with ancestors who were oppressive—white, settlers, colonialists, inflicted harm on marginalized peoples—there is a need and a possibility for deep healing with your ancestral lineage.

This section of this guide, however, will focus on calling on positive ancestors—which for some white folks may be very far back within their lineage—to offer support and guidance through this personal moment of grief.

A reminder: these are your ancestors and your relationships! This guide will offer some guidelines for ways to begin to work with your ancestors, fundamentally, however, this knowledge is not meant to be learnt, but rather experienced.

All instructions laid out are merely guidance and should always come second to your intuition and gut feelings of how to cultivate ancestral relationships.

What is an altar?
Altars are a sacred space for ritual. They have varied uses, but ancestor altars are a powerful way to feel connected and supported by those beyond this reality.

How to set up an altar?
There is no right or wrong way to set up an altar. You can use a table and cover with a cloth and add items that are related to your intention. Photographs or items that remind you of the person can be added if available. You could also light a candle and add a glass of water to the altar as well as stones, crystals or flowers. Your intuition will guide you on what to add.

Interacting with altar space and ancestors
When communicating with a loved one show respect and gratitude. Call them by name, if you do not know any of your ancestors’ names ask for the positive ancestors within your lineage to come through to help, protect and guide you. Start by building up a relationship with them, you may need to do a few sessions before you can recognise the signs of communication in return, but they will come, be patient.

Some common signs of ancestral communications are repeated numbers, random songs being stuck in your head, and cravings for certain foods which may be an ask for an offering,
Offerings to your ancestors

The notion of giving offerings is a global concept found in many spiritual traditions, religions and cultures. In African communities offerings can take many forms including leaving a small portion of food for ancestors at meal times, pouring palm oil to the earth, adding flowers to an ancestral altar etc.

There are various ways to reflect this gesture, which is ultimately to show respect and acknowledge the energies you are trying to connect with. Your altar can be a powerful place to put your offerings of whatever you feel your own personal ancestors would appreciate.

What is libation?

A traditional form of prayer present in many Indigenous cultures, particularly across the African continent, libation is still practiced in many communities across the continent and in the diaspora. Libation is an offering of liquid poured out to the ancestors or deities.

The liquid used, usually water, wine or hard liquor, depends on your personal aim in invoking the ancestors; Water is for cooling and healing and creating or reconciling relationships; Liquor is fiery and is usually used to rouse, cement, ignite, protect and perform strong purification; Wine is mid-way between the two and is good for friendly relations, and creating comradery between man and spirit.

The selected liquid, most commonly water, is poured out in short bursts accompanied by a prayer. You can say the name of the ancestor(s) you would like to acknowledge while pouring the liquid and speaking your prayer.

Libation is a process for awakening the ancestors. Once the ancestor(s) are invoked, you may send them gratitude and ask for what you need. This can be done in your altar space, outside, in a group, alone, or wherever else you feel called to pour libation.
Breathing Through Grief

Many indigenous medicine systems throughout the world associate the Lungs with grief. For some people the experience of processing intense grief can feel like a shortness of breath, or even a choking sensation (as if about to cry). Gentle breath exercises can help the body process the complicated feelings it is experiencing and may also help with overwhelming feelings of anxiety, anger, or sadness.

Diaphragmatic Breathing

One of the most powerful breathing practices is called Diaphragmatic Breathing. In diaphragmatic breathing, the breath goes from the lungs into the belly, rather than breathing up into the upper ribs and armpits.

Breathing up into the collarbones, upper chest, and armpits (imagine an olympic swimmer puffing up with one last breath just before they dive), is a common way of breathing called Thoracic Breathing. It can cause anxiety because the lungs have to force the ribs to stretch open to fit in more air.

Diaphragmatic Breathing, on the other hand, allows the lungs to expand downward, into a muscle called the diaphragm. The diaphragm separates the cardiovascular organs from the digestive organs. By relaxing the diaphragm and “breathing into the belly,” a diaphragmatic breath gives the lungs more space to expand and gently massages the digestive system.

This breath can be very powerful in supporting the body through difficult emotions, especially ones that may be showing up in the stomach and digestive system.
Diaphragmatic Breathing

• To practice Diaphragmatic Breathing:
• Soften the muscles face, neck, and abdomen.
• Inhale gently
• While inhaling, imagine that the air is filling up the belly and lower ribs. (It can help to rest a hand or two just two inches below the belly button and imagine that the air is being directed towards the hand/s).
• Keep the face, neck, and abdomen muscles soft.
• Exhale by imagining the belly gently deflating. Notice if any muscles in the hips or groin try to “tense up” and see if they can soften as well.
• Gently allow the belly to deflate, imagining the belly button floating down towards the backbone and up towards the heart.
• Once the exhale is complete, allow the muscles of the body to soften again.
• Inhale gently again, filling up the belly and lower ribs. See if the side ribs and back ribs can also fill up gently.
• Once the inhale is complete, allow any muscles that may be tensing up to soften.
• Exhale by gently allowing the ribs to shrink towards the backbone and imagine the belly button floating down and in towards the spine, and up towards the heart.
• Repeat this breath as many times as you’d like. Effects may be felt in as few as 1 or 2 minutes. This breath can be done anytime, as often as you like, for as long as feels good.
The same parts of the nervous system impacted by trauma are involved with responding to and experiencing grief. A very general definition of trauma is nervous system energy (hard emotions, physical pain, unimaginable situations) that overwhelms the system.

In general, this nervous system energy gets diverted into other parts of the body. When this happens, the body often tries to protect by “shutting down” the area where that energy is diverted.

Depending on the trauma this could mean any number of things: from sudden body pain, to stiffness in the joints, to sudden loss of interest in certain foods, activities, or experiences, to memory loss, and much more. The point is that the whole body and nervous system are just trying to help cope with the overload, but the diverted energy can stay stored; some might say it gets stuck.

This stuck energy might only resurface by accident if it is “triggered” by some later event. It can also remain beneath conscious awareness and lead to injuries, illness, and/or difficulty in relationships with other people.

Grief can be so overwhelming that it does the same thing, it floods the body with so much information that it can’t all be handled in one place.

But as time goes on, and the body returns to normal, it’s important to re-integrate all of the pieces, including the stuck ones. Integration and re-integration, when done at a gentle pace, when the body is ready, are essential parts of finding empowerment and healing through grief.

Alternate Nostril Breathing is a yogic breathing technique that uses inhales and exhales through alternating nostrils to stimulate the right and left hemispheres of the brain, as well as to pendulate back and forth between the Sympathetic and Parasympathetic Nervous Systems.
Alternate Nostril Breathing

- Find a relaxed posture that still allows your right hand to reach your face.
- Soften the muscles face, neck, and abdomen.
- Gently close the right nostril with the right hand thumb.
- Inhale gently through the left nostril.
- Allow the face to soften.
- Close the left nostril with the side of the right hand ring finger.
- Exhale gently through the right nostril.
- Keep the face, neck, and abdomen soft. The ring finger stays on the left nostril.
- Inhale through the right nostril.
- Keeping the muscles of the body soft, release the ring finger and close the right nostril with the thumb again.
- Exhale through the left nostril.
- This is one cycle. Instructions below include timing for each part of the breath.
- Keep the thumb closing the right nostril and inhale again through the left nostril, counting to 4.
- At the top of the inhale, count to 4 as the ring finger closes the left nostril and the thumb releases the right nostril.
- Exhale through the right nostril, counting to 4.
- Count to 4 at the bottom of the exhale, allowing the face, neck, and abdomen to soften. Ring finger stays closing the left nostril.
- Inhale through the right nostril, counting to 4.
- At the top of the inhale, count to 4 as the thumb closes the right nostril and the ring finger releases the left nostril.
- Exhale through the left nostril, counting to 4.
- At the bottom of the exhale, count to 4, softening the muscles in the body.
- This completes another cycle. This breath pattern can be practiced for 3-8 cycles to feel its effects. This pattern can be done for longer periods of time to help with integrating after periods of intense stress.
- If possible, incorporate diaphragmatic breathing into the inhale and exhale.
Supportive Postures / Breathing Meditation

Sitting, laying, or resting in a supportive posture while focusing on diaphragmatic breath is a gentle but powerful way to support the nervous system in times of grief. These postures can be supported using household objects like couch cushions, folded blankets, or even really big books.

To start out, try picking a pose that seems easy or interesting. Once you get into the pose and set a timer for 7 minutes. Try to hold diaphragmatic breath for the whole 7 minutes.*

For a more restorative session, pick a posture from each section and do them one at a time, breathing diaphragmatically for 7 minutes each.* These postures can be done anytime, night or day.

Yin Yoga Flow for grief

Yin Yoga is a very gentle, supportive form of yoga in which poses are held for upwards of five minutes. This is a robust healing originating from the ancient Taoist health practices, philosophy, and spiritual traditions of China. If this flow speaks to you, we encourage you to dig deeper into the tradition with a trained teacher if accessible to you.

Yin yoga is a very relaxing and restorative form of yoga. There is no need to push your body: every position should feel comfortable to hold for a couple minutes. If it does not, add more supports (pillows, yoga blocks, a stack of books, etc) or skip over that pose.

Yin Yoga Flow

- Child’s Pose w twist
- Puppy pose
- Lying chest opener
- Supported fish pose
- Lying spinal twist
Dynamic meditation

Not all meditation is still and quiet! While discussing healing from racial trauma in her book Farming while Black, Leah Penniman states that “while sitting meditation is a unique and powerful tool, our indigenous African traditions often engage in dynamic meditation, including drumming, long-distance running, chanting, single, candle gazing, and stone carving or balancing.”

So while it can be powerful to be still and focus on the breath, getting your body moving can be just as valid a way to cultivate mindfulness and to move emotions through the body.

These dynamic forms of mediation are different from other activities because of focused attention on a singular point in the present moment. “While drumming our entire focus may be on the sensation between the palm and the goat skin. While carving the stone, our entire focus may be on the cadence of our breath.

While chanting, our entire focus may be on the echo of our song back to us from the mountains. When the mind wanders, we gently bring it back to the singular focus.” Particularly when moving with emotions associated with grief, incorporating dynamic mediation can be a powerful way to ground in the present moment while simultaneously moving energy around and out of your body.

We suggest choosing an activity that you like to do and that feels good in your body, setting an intention of being fully present to the embodied experience of the activity, and then continuing to bring your attention back to your experience of the activity when it wanders off.

Qigong Body Tapping

Qigong (pronounced “chee-gung”) means “working with the qi” and is an ancient system of energy medicine consisting of slow, gentle movements and meditation. The aim of Qigong body tapping is to awaken dormant lying energy (qi) within your body.

This system relies on tapping focused around key acupressure points on the body as well as meridian lines to move energy within and out of your body. We encourage you to more deeply explore this healing modality with a trained teacher if it speaks to you. This particular qigong routine will focus on the lung meridian which is connected with grief.

Start with feet hip distance apart. Feel free to be barefoot and perhaps stand on ground if available to you. Begin by crossing hands at your thumbs and place them at the power center below your belly button. Take a couple deep breaths connecting to this energetic center in your belly and noticing how your physical and emotional bodies feel.

Next, bend your knees and allow your arms to cross in front of you. Inhale deeply through your nose straightening your legs allowing your arms to extend to your sides at shoulder height.

Exhale through your mouth and return to the starting position bending your knees slightly and allowing your upper body to float downwards and your arms to cross in front of your legs. Do 3-9 of these breaths like this, perhaps feeling a ball of energy growing in front of you.
**Qigong Body Tapping**

Inhale the same way then exhale through your mouth, bend your knees and bring the arms in towards the shoulders bending at the elbow. Inhale straighten your knees and extend arms out to the side. Exhale and float down like before. Inhale and almost like you are scooping up all the energy you’ve just cultivated cross your arms and bring them to rest on your chest.

Now, begin to massage your lung meridian points. Just underneath your clavicle find the soft tissue and begin to massage or tap this area for 10-30 seconds. Then drop down one rib (or about an inch) to another lung point and massage or tap there. Next, place your palms over those points you just rubbed or tapped. If available to you today, take a few deep breaths with deep reverence and honor of your grief, despair, trauma.

Begin to move your hands away from your chest like you are pulling out some of the stagnant energy you just rubbed and tapped. Turn your palms away from you and bring your hands above your head. You might feel a release at this point or a transformation of the energy into powerful, pure energetic strength.

Let your arms draw a rainbow around you as they come down to your sides. Let your hands cross at the thumbs and end the same way you began by breathing into your energetic center below your belly button. Notice how your body feels now, notice any shifts in your energy field and emotional body.

**Resource Links**

**Online resources**

COVID grief network: https://www.covidgriefnetwork.org/

Tracc4movements: Great care centered resource, tailored care practices at no cost: https://www.tracc4movements.com/covid-19-community-care

Mutual Aid Mourning and Healing Project: no cost sessions with death midwives, therapists and other healers https://transformativespaces.org/2020/04/13/the-mutual-aid-mourning-and-healing-project/

**Podcasts:**

Irresistible Podcast: Episode 44P- Sacred shower or bath

For the wild:

Episode 191- Lama Rod Owens on Liberatory Rage

Deeply Rooted series especially Episode 188- Honoring our Ancestors and the Earth with Leah Penniman

Life after loss: A space for Black community to process feelings related to grief/loss. Bi-weekly Sunday @1PM