

A WORKPLACE CARE USA WHITE PAPER | ORIGINAL REFLECTIVE FRAMEWORK

THE MERCY PRACTICE

A Compassionate Framework for When Grief Turns Against the Self

*For navigating guilt, regret, self-blame, relief, unfinished relationships,
and spiritual confusion following loss*

Mercy does not erase grief. It simply refuses to let shame have the final word.

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For grieving people, families, caregivers, chaplains, faith communities, support groups, and workplaces

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When sorrow becomes a courtroom, the self is usually on trial

Grief does not always arrive as sadness. It can come as guilt over a decision, regret about a final conversation, relief after exhausting caregiving, anger toward the person who died, spiritual confusion, or the relentless feeling that one should have done more. The loss hurts; then shame adds a second wound by turning a painful experience into a verdict about the whole person.

The MERCY Practice is Esther Agbenu Ochoga's original reflective framework for interrupting that movement. It is not a formula for completing grief, because grief is not a task to finish. It gives the mourner a place to return when accusation begins speaking faster than reflection can keep up.

THE PRACTICE Meet what is here. Examine the accusation. Restore the whole story. Connect with safe support. Yield the need for punishment.

Each movement asks for honesty, but none requires self-destruction. MERCY does not rewrite history, excuse genuine harm, or call every regret imaginary. It allows accuracy and compassion to remain in the same room. A person can own responsibility, seek repair, change behavior, and still refuse to treat contempt as evidence of seriousness.

Three commitments

- Description before interpretation. Name the feeling before shame decides what the feeling means.
- Specificity before identity judgment. Examine an event, decision, limit, or regret rather than sentencing the entire self.
- Accountability without punishment. Mercy can hold truth, consequence, learning, and repair without requiring ongoing cruelty.

SCOPE The MERCY Practice is an original reflective framework—not a validated clinical intervention, diagnostic instrument, crisis protocol, investigative process, or substitute for licensed mental-health care. Use it with consent, cultural humility, and attention to scope.

1 | THE SECOND WOUND

Grief becomes heavier when pain is asked to prove guilt

A mourner can experience genuine grief and still feel relief that suffering, uncertainty, conflict, or caregiving has ended. A daughter can love her mother and regret not answering one call. A spouse can wish a medical decision had been different while knowing that every available option carried loss. A person of faith can grieve and still feel anger, silence, or distance from God. Human grief regularly holds truths that appear to contradict each other.

The danger begins when complexity collapses into accusation: I failed them. I was not enough. Something is wrong with me. Research suggests that self-blame and regret should not be treated as interchangeable; self-blame can be especially connected to grief-specific difficulty, while unfinished business and regret are overlapping but distinct concerns (Stroebe et al., 2014; Holland et al., 2020). MERCY slows the collapse from experience into identity.

Four distinctions that protect honest grief

- Feeling is not confession. Anger, numbness, or relief may describe an experience without proving cruelty, failure, or lack of love.
- Regret is not the whole story. A specific wish that something had been different should not automatically become a verdict on a lifetime or relationship.
- Responsibility is not helplessness. What a person could control must be separated from what was hidden, constrained, medically uncertain, relationally complicated, or known only afterward.
- Compassion is not acquittal. It does not erase consequence; it asks whether accountability truly requires contempt.

A CENTRAL SHIFT Identity language asks, “What is wrong with me?” Experience language asks, “What happened, what did I do, what was I carrying, and what do I need now?”

Why the practice stays simple

Grief consumes attention, memory, energy, and emotional capacity. MERCY is deliberately light enough to be used on a difficult day. All five movements may be available; only one may be. Sometimes meeting what is here is the entire work of the day. The practice must never become another standard against which a mourner can fail.

RED-TEAM BOUNDARY Do not use mercy language to excuse abuse, avoid reporting duties, bypass legal or clinical accountability, pressure forgiveness, reconcile unsafe relationships, or silence a person who needs protection and repair.

2 | FIVE MOVEMENTS

Honesty without self-destruction

MERCY is a return path, not a progression score. Each movement answers a different way shame distorts grief: emotional rejection, vague accusation, selective memory, isolation, and punishment presented as loyalty.

MOVEMENT	PURPOSE	MERCY QUESTION
M MEET WHAT IS HERE	Begin with the experience you actually have—sadness, anger, numbness, relief, regret, confusion, or several at once.	What is here right now, before I judge it?
E EXAMINE THE ACCUSATION	Move from a sweeping charge to a specific event. Separate what was known and controllable from hindsight, fear, limitation, or helplessness.	What exactly happened, and what is genuinely mine to own?
R RESTORE THE WHOLE STORY	Return context and proportion to memory. Let the painful corner remain real without allowing it to impersonate the whole house.	What else belongs in this story?
C CONNECT WITH SAFE SUPPORT	Invite perspective without dismissal from one trustworthy person or qualified source of care. Truth does not have to be tidy before it can be received.	Who can hold one hard sentence without minimizing or moralizing?
Y YIELD THE NEED FOR PUNISHMENT	Release the belief that ongoing cruelty is loyalty, devotion, or proof that the loss mattered. Keep truth; relinquish the sentence.	What would remembrance and accountability look like without self-punishment?

USE IN ANY ORDER A person may need safe support before examining an accusation. Restoring the story may uncover a feeling that must be met again. Yielding punishment may be chosen repeatedly around anniversaries, memories, or unexpected joy.

THE TEST MERCY should increase accuracy, agency, proportion, connection, and care. If it creates pressure, concealment, premature forgiveness, or a demand to appear healed, the practice has been misused.

3 | WHAT MERCY CAN HOLD

The feelings people are often afraid to name

The practice is especially useful where grief contains emotional or relational complexity. It does not make every experience equivalent. It creates enough steadiness to ask a better question than, “What is wrong with me?”

Guilt and self-blame

Guilt may point toward a specific action, omission, or decision. Self-blame often expands that event into total responsibility. MERCY asks what was actually controllable, what was known then, what is known only now, and whether a behavior is being confused with identity. Where responsibility is real, the next movement may involve apology, restitution, changed behavior, or professional guidance—not a lifetime sentence.

Regret and unfinished relationships

Death can end the possibility of direct conversation while leaving love, conflict, questions, and unfulfilled wishes behind. Research identifies regret and unfinished business as related but distinct concerns (Holland et al., 2020). MERCY does not promise closure. It can help a mourner identify what remains unfinished, what can still be expressed symbolically or relationally, and what must be carried without pretending it has been resolved.

Relief after caregiving or prolonged suffering

Relief can coexist with love. It may reflect the end of pain, vigilance, conflict, exhaustion, uncertainty, or responsibility that exceeded human capacity. Naming relief does not convert it into a wish that the person had not mattered. The practice helps separate the end of suffering from a judgment about the relationship.

Spiritual confusion

Loss can disturb prayer, certainty, community, trust, and a person’s sense of the sacred. Bereavement research describes both spiritual support and spiritual struggle (Burke et al., 2014; Martins et al., 2024). MERCY makes room for lament, anger, silence, doubt, ritual, nature, nonreligious meaning, or the inability to find words. Spiritual honesty is not spiritual failure.

FORGIVENESS Forgiveness may become part of healing, but it is not an entry requirement, a deadline, or proof of moral maturity. It must never be used to return someone to danger, erase accountability, or deny the reality of harm.

A GENTLER TRUTH Human beings love imperfectly because there is no other way for human beings to love. Mercy allows love and regret to coexist without declaring every imperfection deserving of a lifetime sentence.

4 | THE MERCY CARD

A practice for the moment shame becomes loud

Choose one painful memory or accusation. Move slowly. Write only what feels safe. You may stop after any movement. This is reflection, not exposure, and no one is entitled to your answers.

M MEET Complete one sentence without explaining it: “Today I feel...” or “What is here is...”

E EXAMINE Write the accusation exactly. Then ask: What event does it point to? What did I know then? What was within my control?

R RESTORE Add what shame leaves out: care given, limits present, relationship history, ordinary love, fear, exhaustion, and what others also carried.

C CONNECT Name one safe person or qualified resource. Decide the smallest sentence you could share: “I keep blaming myself for...”

Y YIELD Ask: What does accountability require now? What punishment am I adding? What would faithful remembrance look like without cruelty?

From verdict language to experience language

IDENTITY VERDICT	EXPERIENCE LANGUAGE
I am a terrible daughter.	I regret that I was not there that weekend.
I am cold.	I feel numb, and I do not yet understand why.
I failed them.	There are things I wish I had handled differently, and there were limits I could not overcome.

KEEP IT REACHABLE Place the five movements in a journal, wallet, phone note, or care-resource card. The card is not a score. It is a place to return when shame is moving too quickly for reflection.

5 | APPLYING THE PRACTICE

Care without taking over another person’s grief

MERCY is most faithful when it gives the grieving person more voice, proportion, agency, and safe connection. The helper accompanies the reflection; the helper does not control its pace or conclusion.

SETTING	FAITHFUL USE	DO NOT
INDIVIDUAL OR FAMILY	Use one movement at a time. Let contradictory feelings remain. Distinguish what can still be repaired from what must be grieved.	Do not demand disclosure, forgiveness, reconciliation, or a coherent explanation.
CHAPLAIN, PASTOR, OR CAREGIVER	Listen before interpreting. Ask permission before prayer, scripture, ritual, advice, or reframing. Protect confidentiality and spiritual freedom.	Do not moralize relief, doubt, anger, or unfinished grief. Spiritual care is not spiritual control.
SUPPORT GROUP OR COMMUNITY	Establish consent, confidentiality, the right to pass, and clear pathways for individual follow-up. Use one prompt rather than all five.	Do not compare losses, reward dramatic disclosure, or let the group prosecute an absent person—or the mourner.
WORKPLACE	Offer practical support after bereavement, difficult cases, caregiving strain, layoffs, restructuring, or organizational loss. Leaders can normalize complex reactions and connect people with care.	Do not use MERCY to assess fitness, investigate incidents, replace debriefing, excuse harm, or keep unsafe systems unchanged.

What safe support sounds like

“I hear how much this has been turning against you. We can look at one part together.”
“Would it help to name what happened, or would quiet company be better right now?”
“There may be something to own here. We do not have to decide that your whole life or love is on trial.”

Research on traumatic grief support emphasizes the quality of the response, not simply the presence of other people (Cacciatore et al., 2021). Emerging bereavement studies also support careful attention to self-compassion, while not establishing MERCY itself as a treatment (Uneno et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2026).

REFERRAL BOUNDARY Seek qualified clinical or emergency care when there is suicidal intent, danger, severe or worsening impairment, trauma symptoms, substance-related risk, relentless guilt or shame, or distress beyond the helper’s competence. Diagnosis belongs to qualified professionals.

CONCLUSION | RESPONSIBLE USE | REFERENCES

Truth does not become more truthful when it is handled harshly

The MERCY Practice does not ask a grieving person to stop remembering, regretting, loving, questioning, or mourning. It asks something both smaller and more demanding: stop requiring your own destruction as proof that the love was real. Meet what is here. Examine the accusation. Restore the whole story. Connect with safe support. Yield the need for punishment. Grief may remain painful without remaining punitive.

RESPONSIBLE-USE STATEMENT This original reflective framework has not been validated as a clinical treatment or measurement instrument. Do not use it to diagnose, rank grief, force disclosure or forgiveness, determine innocence, avoid accountability, evaluate employee fitness, or replace appropriate professional care.

About the author

Esther Agbenu Ochoga, PhD, MDiv, is the creator of The MERCY Practice and founder of Workplace Care USA. An interfaith clinical chaplain, author, and organizational care practitioner, she developed MERCY from the places where grief, shame, regret, spiritual struggle, and human dignity meet. The framework was first introduced in her work on *The Shame in Grief* and is offered here as a distinct field-use model.

Suggested citation

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