

## **GRIEF, ILLINOIS**

A game for 2-20 mature players about **Anger, Guilt, and Compassion** by Ron Blechner.

**Suggested time:** 1-2 hours (depending on number of players) + debrief time (15 - 30 minutes).

**Content Warning:** 3 to 5 teardrops out of 5, depending on player preference. Players will be required to choose tragedies that befall their characters and deal with them in realistic depictions. Acting out in anger.

**Game Description:** **GRIEF, ILLINOIS** is a serious-tone game about a town where everyone knows each other, tragedies strike, and players collectively deal with the **Anger, Guilt, and Compassion** that comes with them. Players will create basic characters, form relationships between characters, deal with the **Anger** and **Guilt** that come from tragic events, get older, and do it all again. The game is played in four rounds, with ten years passing between each round. Rounds consist of three parts: preparation done in groups, roleplaying, and the end of round. There will be time at the end to debrief, to allow players to discuss the game, especially if they are having bleedover feelings from their characters.

### **Required materials**

- This instruction book
- A **Facilitator** (GM), recommended not to be one of the players
- Name tags and writing implements (preferably markers and paper name tags with sticker backs)
- Printed out copies of the **Appendix A: Actions** page, 1 page per 6 players.
- Three different types of tokens, preferably different colored, a dozen or so should fit in a player's hand comfortably. (colored wooden cubes, glass stones, beads, coins, 5 of each type per player)  
Suggested colors below (avoid grey or green for colorblind players).
  - Red: This represents **Anger**.
  - Blue or Black: This represents **Guilt**.
  - White or Yellow or Transparent: This represents **Compassion**.Different sized or shaped tokens is recommended if any players have visual disabilities.
- "X" cards (see **Appendix B: Safety Mechanics** for description)

### **Introductions and Safety Mechanics**

The Facilitator should gather all players into a large circle. Read the following:

"Welcome to **GRIEF, ILLINOIS**. My name is <YOUR NAME GOES HERE>, and I will be your Facilitator for the game. Please see me if you have any questions or concerns!"

Facilitator should read the **Game Description** from earlier. --- *Pause* ---

"Our first safety mechanic is the Open Door mechanic. This game has an open door, which means anyone can leave at any time, without needing to state a reason. Because this game will explore serious subject matter, if you are looking for a lighthearted game, this may not be the right game for you; you may want to consider finding another activity at this time." --- *Pause*. ---

"Going around the circle, starting with me, we will all say our real name, pronouns, and the level or range of darkness we are comfortable with, on a scale of 1 to 5 teardrops. If you have any particular subjects you would prefer not to explore, please also state that."

Facilitator starts, as stated, with their name, pronouns, teardrops, and (optionally) topic(s) to avoid.

Wait until everyone has done so.

Facilitator asks players about topics that did not come up in the circle, such as topics like death of a player's character, suicide, incarceration, self-harm, drug use, etc. *Err on the side of player comfort!!!*

Facilitator reviews additional safety mechanics (see Appendix B: Safety mechanics)

Facilitator creates an easily accessible pile (or piles) of tokens called the Token Reserve. It may be something like three different dishes that contain all of the tokens, sorted by type/color.

Each player takes 1 **Compassion** token from the reserve.

Begin Round 1, Stage 1.

### There are 3 Stages to each Round

#### 1. Group Preparation

In each round, split up into groups of no more than 5 players, as evenly distributed as possible. For games of 5 or fewer players, you'll be sticking with the same group each round; for groups greater than 5 players, please mix players into different groups each round. Have Reserve tokens in reach.

If this is Round 1, take a couple minutes to create characters. You should all be members of one family. Each player writes their character name, starting age, and pronouns on their nametag. Each group should have a minimum of 2 children each aged 4-9. Players should avoid ages over 55, as you will age. Each player should share with their group one or two personality traits or interests their character has.

Each round, each player creates a new relationships with another player. To do so, one at a time, each player chooses another player in your group, and they agree on a relationship. The relationship types should be age-appropriate. For round 1, choose familial relationships like siblings, parents, cousins, etc. For rounds 2-4, it might be friend, coworker, mentor, clergy, rival, drug dealer, lover, spouse, ex-lover, etc. For rounds 2-4, if you choose someone who you already have a relationship with from a previous round, add an aspect to that relationship, or describe how the relationship has changed over time. Friends become roommates or coworkers or vice versa, lovers break-up or marry, etc.

After each player has initiated an add / change to a relationship, each group should choose a tragedy that has affected everyone in the group (1 new tragedy per round). Be careful to choose tragedies that are aligned with the teardrop level of the game as agreed by all players. Examples might be: death of a grandparent, a serious car accident, loss of a business, closing of the town's biggest employer, close friend going into drug rehab, bad divorce, getting into serious debt, rift in the family, etc.

Once a group agrees on a tragedy, each player takes tokens from the reserve to represent how their character reacted to the tragedy. On Round 1, each players takes 1 **Guilt** or 1 **Anger** token (try and mix). On each of round 2 through 4, each player will roll the number of die corresponding to which round it is, and take tokens according to the chart below. Life is unfair, and tragedies affect people differently.

	Difficulty Level of Game, R = Anger Token (red), B = Guilty Token(blue/black)			
Dice result	Beginner	Easy (suggested)	Medium	Hard
1	RR	RR	RBB	RRB
2	RB	RB	RR	RR
3	R	BB	RB	RB
4	R	R	R	BB
5	B	B	B	R
6	none	none	none	none

For example, in round 3, each player rolls 3 die. If a player rolled a 2, 3, and 6, and were playing on Easy difficulty, that player would take (**RB + BB + none**) = 1 **Anger (R)** token and 3 **Guilt (B)** tokens.

After each player rolls and takes the appropriate tokens, they should briefly describe how their character reacted to the tragedy, in one or two sentences, according to the **Anger** and **Guilt** they took.

## 2. Roleplay

In the Roleplay part of each round, players should move around the room, mingle with other players, and collectively deal with their **Anger** and **Guilt** through the actions described below. Generally speaking, all players want to try and get rid of their **Anger** and **Guilt** tokens, and keep at least one **Compassion** token. While players are free to use the “Show Tokens” action, generally they should keep their tokens all in one closed hand. In this way, players are symbolically carrying around the burden their emotions with them.

### **Actions (during roleplay part of each round, only)**

Each action should be roleplayed in 30 - 60 seconds. You may roleplay in addition to the listed actions, but *only the listed actions* may transfer, use, gain, or discard tokens!

You may take as many actions as you like during the round, as long as you have the required tokens.

### **Show Tokens**

*Effect:* Initiator shows tokens to another nearby player or players.

*Roleplay:* Describe what your character is feeling to one or more nearby players.

### **Show Compassion**

*Required:* Initiator must have an *unused* **Compassion** token.

*Roleplay:* Initiator offers **Compassion**, or another player asks for **Compassion**. If the **Compassion** is offered and accepted, act out the words or acts of **Compassion** between the characters. If the **Compassion** is rejected, act out that rejection. You may NOT do **Show Compassion** action on yourself!

*Effect:* Initiator *uses* a **Compassion** token. Chosen player discards a **Guilt** token to the token reserve. Chosen player may reject the act, in which case both players ignore effects.

*What is “using” a token?* Only a **Compassion** token may be “used”. Every round they start unused. When used, remove it from the pile of tokens in your hand. You can place it in a pocket or in a bag - as long as you have it available at the end of the round and it's not shown with your other tokens.

### **Emotional Labor**

*Required:* Initiator must have an *unused* **Compassion** token & chosen player must have an **Anger** token.

*Roleplay:* Initiator offers emotional labor, or chosen asks for it. If emotional labor is offered and accepted, initiator offers support, encouragement, and patience; chosen player vents their character's frustrations, insecurities, and/or other negative feelings. (Emotional Labor takes a toll on the performer.)

*Effect:* Initiator trades one of their *unused* **Compassion** tokens for one of a chosen player's **Anger** tokens. Chosen player may reject the action, in which case both players ignore effects.

### **Improve Self**

*This action may only be taken by each player on themselves once per round!*

*Roleplay:* Contemplate a single thing your character wants to and/or needs to improve about themselves. Focus on letting go of some of that **Anger**.

*Effect:* Discard an **Anger** token to the token reserve. Take a **Guilt** token from the token reserve.

### **Act in Anger**

*Required:* Initiator must have 3 **Anger** tokens. If initiator has 5 or more **Anger** tokens, they **must** do the **Act in Anger** action as soon as possible. A chosen player cannot refuse this action.

*Roleplay:* Initiator expresses their character's **Anger**, through words and/or actions.

*Effect:* Initiator discards 3 **Anger** tokens to the token reserve, then takes 1 **Guilt** token from the pool. Chosen player takes 1 **Anger** token from the pool, and also takes either an **Anger** or **Guilt** token.

### **Transfer Guilt**

Required: Initiator must have 3 **Guilt** tokens. If initiator has 5 or more **Guilt** tokens, they **must** do the **Transfer Guilt** action as soon as possible. A chosen player cannot refuse this action.

Roleplay: Initiator expresses their character's assigning blame to the chosen player, through words and/or actions. This could be deserved (it really was the chosen player's fault) or false (the chosen player isn't really at fault, but is being assigned responsibility). Either way, the chosen player should assume their character has taken some of the **Guilt**.

*Effect:* Initiator discards 3 **Guilt** tokens to the token reserve, then takes 1 **Anger** token from the pool. Chosen player takes 1 **Guilt** token from the pool, and also takes either an **Anger** or **Guilt** token.

Note: Both actions "**Act in Anger**" and "**Transfer Guilt**" let the chosen player choose one of the negative tokens. This represents that different people may react differently to **Anger** or blame.

Multiple actions of the same type may be performed. For example, **Show Compassion** could use 2 **Compassion** tokens of the initiator, and thus allow the chosen to discard 2 **Guilt** tokens to the token reserve. Adjust the scope and/or intensity of roleplay to the more significant action.

### **3. End of Round**

Facilitator should establish a clear "end of roleplay" signal, like saying aloud, "End of roleplay stage!"

Round length: Facilitator should decide whether each stage is timed (10 - 15 minutes suggested per roleplay phase) or to judge it themselves. If they judge it themselves, they should wait until most or all players seem like they are wrapping up roleplay, and then announce end of round.

Once the end of round is announced, all actions stop, even if in progress. No more token trading can be done for this round. Additionally, the following happens at the end of each round:

1. Each character ages 10 years.
2. Players keep their tokens. All *used* **Compassion** tokens become *unused*. (And, for example, if a player has put the **Compassion** token in their pocket, they may take it and place it with their other tokens in their hand now.)
3. Any character that has any **Compassion** tokens gains 1 **Compassion** token from the token reserve. In this manner, characters who have **Compassion** see it grow over the decade. (Each player may only gain 1 **Compassion** token per round in this way.)
4. Any player that has any **Guilt** tokens gains 1 **Anger** token. In this manner, **Guilt** festers, and creates bitterness. (Each player may only gain 1 **Anger** token per round in this way.)
5. **Any player that has 5 or more Anger tokens, or 5 or more Guilt tokens leaves the town.** They may choose the way they leave, but it is recommended strongly to NOT choose death or incarceration unless players agreed to a dark, 5 teardrops game. This player must distribute their **Guilt** and **Anger** tokens to other players. The player may stay in the game space, but is no longer in the game. (*GM NOTE:* This sounds harsh, but realistically this should be difficult to happen, and only in the final round of play. Remember **Act in Anger** and **Transfer Guilt** actions!)
6. Facilitator announces the beginning of the next round once players have all done the above.

### **Game End**

The game ends when 4 rounds have completed all 3 stages. The Facilitator should announce to everyone that the game is over. The facilitator shall debrief players (see Appendix B: Safety Mechanics)

### **Why Illinois?**

Middle America, with urban, suburban, and rural areas, farms and cities, and hope for healing.

***Pillow Rules*** (optional - as inspired by 2018's Golden Cobra Challenge)

The same roleplay should occur, and bring one or more pillows to enhance play:

**Show Compassion** - both players can sit on, lay their heads on, or both hold the same pillow.

**Emotional labor** - initiator must perform a balancing act with the pillow, such as on one's head. They should hand the pillow to the chosen player as roleplay for this action winds down.

**Improve Self** - hold a pillow up to your face and yell into it.

**Act in Anger** - initiator may ask the chosen if they are okay being LIGHTLY hit with a pillow on the arm or torso. If both agree, carefully boff the chosen with the pillow. If not, initiator can lightly boff the floor with the pillow, or pantomime hitting with a pillow. Seriously, don't hurt anyone!

**Transfer Guilt** - initiator may either sit on a pillow at the chosen player's feet, or ask the chosen player to sit on a pillow at the initiator's feet.

***Mobility limitation:*** For any of the pillow rules, you can be creative with using the pillow to enhance your roleplay or act as a proxy representation of **Anger**, **Guilt**, or **Compassion**. Players are forbidden from forcing another player to do anything with their body. Period.

**Appendix A key:**

**Y** = Yellow (or white) **Compassion** token

**B** = Blue or black **Guilt** token

**R** = Red **Anger** token

**Appendix A: Actions - Print Out this sheet and cut up for handy reference cards for each player.**

Action	Initiator	Chosen		Action	Initiator	Chosen
Show Tokens	Show tokens	(see tokens)		Show Tokens	Show tokens	(see tokens)
Show Compassion	USE Y	- B		Show Compassion	USE Y	- B
Emotional Labor	Give Y to Chosen	Give R to Initiator		Emotional Labor	Give Y to Chosen	Give R to Initiator
Improve Self	- R, + B	N/A		Improve Self	- R, + B	N/A
Act in Anger (if 5+ R, must do)	- 3R, + B	+ R, +(B or R)		Act in Anger (if 5+ R, must do)	- 3R, + B	+ R, +(B or R)
Transfer Guilt (if 5+ B, must do)	- 3B, + R	+ B, +(B or R)		Transfer Guilt (if 5+ B, must do)	- 3B, + R	+ B, +(B or R)

Action	Initiator	Chosen		Action	Initiator	Chosen
Show Tokens	Show tokens	(see tokens)		Show Tokens	Show tokens	(see tokens)
Show Compassion	USE Y	- B		Show Compassion	USE Y	- B
Emotional Labor	Give Y to Chosen	Give R to Initiator		Emotional Labor	Give Y to Chosen	Give R to Initiator
Improve Self	- R, + B	N/A		Improve Self	- R, + B	N/A
Act in Anger (if 5+ R, must do)	- 3R, + B	+ R, +(B or R)		Act in Anger (if 5+ R, must do)	- 3R, + B	+ R, +(B or R)
Transfer Guilt (if 5+ B, must do)	- 3B, + R	+ B, +(B or R)		Transfer Guilt (if 5+ B, must do)	- 3B, + R	+ B, +(B or R)

Action	Initiator	Chosen		Action	Initiator	Chosen
Show Tokens	Show tokens	(see tokens)		Show Tokens	Show tokens	(see tokens)
Show Compassion	USE Y	- B		Show Compassion	USE Y	- B
Emotional Labor	Give Y to Chosen	Give R to Initiator		Emotional Labor	Give Y to Chosen	Give R to Initiator
Improve Self	- R, + B	N/A		Improve Self	- R, + B	N/A
Act in Anger (if 5+ R, must do)	- 3R, + B	+ R, +(B or R)		Act in Anger (if 5+ R, must do)	- 3R, + B	+ R, +(B or R)
Transfer Guilt (if 5+ B, must do)	- 3B, + R	+ B, +(B or R)		Transfer Guilt (if 5+ B, must do)	- 3B, + R	+ B, +(B or R)

## APPENDIX B: Safety Mechanics

It's important that player safety is held above all else! Do not touch another player until after you ask permission and they say it's okay! If you're unsure if a player is okay after an action, use the check-in technique, pause play, and do player care as needed.

**Raised Voices** - all players should agree to the level at which voices should be permitted to be raised. Realistically, no one should ever need to raise their voice very much to roleplay **Anger**. Be mindful if you are playing this with bystanders who aren't in your game nearby, through a wall in an apartment or convention divider, etc. Realize that yelling, even merely raised voices, can cause harm in some people, and there's no shame whatsoever in asking for volume be kept to regular conversation level. Even if players agree that yelling is permitted, anyone can ask anytime during the game to bring the volume down, or keep volume at regular conversation level.

**Cut** - Cut is a tool to immediately stop play. It can be used for both physical or emotional safety reasons. Simply say the word "cut" and make an x with your arms over your head. If you see someone making the cut gesture, follow their lead. The game will stop and we will address the concern.

**Slower** - This is used to adjust the intensity of a scene or individual when it's getting intense. When it's getting too intense, you can say "slower" and put your hands up with your palms out. When someone uses slower in a scene you are in take a step back and continue to play at a decreased intensity.

**Harder** - This is the opposite of slower. One player may signal to another player the desire to increase the intensity of a scene. A hand signal to accompany this can be one or two hands, palms up, motioning with an upwards motion and/or fingers curling in a "come here / bring it" signal. This is entirely optional, and the other player(s) can say "no thanks" or shake their head to opt-out.

**OK Check-in** - This is used to check if another player seems like they are upset or not having fun. Make eye contact with someone and make the OK sign. When someone checks in with you, you can have three responses:

- 1) Thumbs up, meaning "Yes, I am OK";
- 2) Thumbs down, meaning "No, I am not OK";
- 3) So-so sign, meaning "I'm not sure," or "I'm both OK and not OK."

The player who initially checked in should then respond accordingly. If the subject of the check-in gave a thumbs up, meaning "Yes, I am okay" then play can proceed! If the subject gave a thumbs down, meaning "No, I am not okay" or so-so gesture, meaning "I'm not sure" then play should stop and the player who initiated the check-in should say "What can I do to help?"

**"X" Cards** - these are cards with only a big "X" written on them, whose purpose is to quickly avoid triggering topics. They can be index cards but could just be paper. Every player should have access to them. If a player reveals an "X" Card, the most recently stated topic is erased from memory and play continues without it. The "X" Cards should be used when a player feels so uncomfortable with a particular topic, where it is typically beyond a **Check-In**. For example, a player may talk about child abuse, or make a racial joke in character, and another player might use the "X" Card to signal that this subject is OFF-TOPIC and should not be included in play. There is no limit to the number of times an "X" Card can be used. However, if a player has used a card more than once, it's probably best to do a **Check-in** with them.

**Game Debrief** - After the game ends, all players should gather into one big circle in the room and sit. They should all have an opportunity to say one or two things about their experience. This is an important part of a game, especially when games and their subject matter can be intense, troubling, and/or dark. Players can often feel “bleed” over between their character and their real self. This is normal. At least 15 - 30 minutes should be allocated for debrief, leaning towards longer for darker games. Some suggested debrief topics:

- Each player can say one thing that they want to leave behind of their character, and one thing that they want to take with them.
- Each player can give compliments to other players’ play and/or abiding by safety mechanics.
- Each player can say something they wish had gone differently.
- Players might ask specific questions to find out what happened in plot that they weren’t involved.

Remind players that even after the game, they may have lingering feelings, and encourage players to pair up so that they can continue to talk about their experience later that day, or even days or weeks later.

***THANKS!***

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