

Review Article

Vairagya and adaptability as psychological buffers: yogic perspective on coping with grief and loss

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ABSTRACT

Grief is a profound and universal human experience, yet its expression and management are deeply shaped by cultural, psychological, and spiritual factors. Traditional models such as the Kübler-Ross stages and the dual process model have contributed to understanding bereavement, but they often lack the transpersonal dimension that many individuals rely on for healing. Yogic philosophy, particularly the principles of Vairagya (detachment) and adaptability (psychological flexibility), offers valuable complementary perspectives for coping with loss. Vairagya provides an inner anchor through balanced detachment, allowing individuals to acknowledge sorrow without becoming consumed by it, while adaptability supports adjustment to new realities and fosters resilience in the aftermath of change. Together, these concepts create a dual framework that promotes emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, and post-traumatic growth. Contemporary evidence indicates that yoga, mindfulness, and related practices enhance resilience, reduce rumination, and strengthen coping capacity, aligning closely with these philosophical ideals. Community-level applications, including yoga-based grief support programs and collective rituals, further highlight the potential for integrating these approaches into culturally sensitive mental health strategies. By synthesizing insights from psychology, yogic philosophy, and therapeutic practice, this paper underscores the transformative potential of Vairagya and adaptability in navigating grief, offering an integrated model that bridges ancient wisdom with modern clinical relevance.

Keywords: Grief, Psychological resilience, Vairagya, Adaptability, Community mental health

INTRODUCTION

Grief is a profound emotional response to loss, often experienced following the death of a loved one, but also triggered by changes such as divorce, illness, or displacement. While universal, grief manifests in culturally nuanced ways and varies significantly in duration and intensity among individuals.¹

Traditional psychological models such as the Kübler-Ross stages or the dual process model have contributed to our understanding of how individuals cope with bereavement. However, these models may lack a transpersonal or spiritual dimension that many individuals rely on during periods of suffering.²

Yogic psychology offers complementary insights, particularly through the principles of Vairagya (detachment) and adaptability (mental flexibility). These concepts serve not as escapism or avoidance, but as intentional tools for emotional balance and spiritual resilience. The Bhagavad Gita and Patanjali's Yoga Sutras outline frameworks where one engages life fully while maintaining equanimity, a potentially transformative approach to grief.³

This paper explores Vairagya and adaptability not merely as abstract ideals, but as psychological buffers that aid in navigating grief and emotional upheaval. Drawing on contemporary psychological literature, yogic texts, and emerging therapeutic practices, we present an integrated model for understanding and coping with grief in a way

that resonates with both inner discipline and emotional flexibility. This approach may hold particular value for culturally spiritual populations and for developing community-level interventions within public mental health frameworks.

The nature of grief

Grief is an inherently personal and complex experience that reflects the depth of an individual's emotional connection to what was lost. It may include sadness, anger, confusion, guilt, numbness, and even physical symptoms like fatigue or immune suppression. Traditional models such as Bowlby's attachment theory and the five-stage Kübler-Ross model conceptualize grief as a process of adjustment to a new reality without the presence of the lost attachment figure.²

However, contemporary psychology has moved toward more dynamic and non-linear approaches. The dual process model, for instance, suggests that adaptive coping involves oscillating between confronting the emotional pain of the loss (loss-oriented coping) and engaging in restorative life activities (restoration-oriented coping). This model supports the notion that grief is not about "letting go" of the person or object lost, but about relearning the world while holding the memory or meaning of the loss in new ways.⁴

Cultural perspectives on loss

Grief is profoundly shaped by cultural narratives, beliefs, and rituals. In collectivist societies like India, for example, grieving is often a social and spiritual event, where extended family and community rituals help mediate the mourning process.⁵ Practices such as shraddha, tarpana, or death anniversary observances serve both psychological and spiritual functions facilitating closure, expression, and continuity. Moreover, different cultures define what is an "acceptable" grieving process. In Western contexts, emotional expression may be viewed as cathartic, while in Eastern traditions, inner silence and self-control may be emphasized.⁶ Yoga philosophy, particularly through the idea of impermanence (anitya) and detachment (Vairagya), encourages acceptance of change as a natural part of existence, providing a framework that may differ from conventional therapeutic norms.⁵

Understanding grief through both psychological and cultural lenses ensures a more nuanced, respectful, and effective approach to supporting individuals in mourning. These insights lay the foundation for integrating yogic concepts into grief support, which will be explored in the following sections.

YOGIC PHILOSOPHY AND GRIEF

Yoga, as outlined in ancient Indian scriptures such as the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and the Bhagavad Gita, is not merely a physical discipline but a comprehensive

philosophy aimed at self-realization and liberation from suffering. The core components, Yama (ethical restraints), Niyama (personal observances), Asana (postures), Pranayama (breath regulation), Pratyahara (withdrawal of senses), Dharana (concentration), Dhyana (meditation), and Samadhi (absorption) collectively provide a roadmap for internal purification and emotional balance.⁵

In the context of grief, Dhyana (meditation) and Pratyahara (sensory withdrawal) play significant roles in helping individuals detach from external pain triggers and connect to an inner state of stillness. Yogic philosophy does not deny pain but encourages a deeper awareness and transcendence of it. This inward journey fosters equanimity and clarity, aiding in emotional processing without attachment or aversion.⁵

The concept of vairagya

Vairagya is one of the foundational virtues in yoga philosophy and refers to non-attachment to pleasure or pain, success or failure. In the Yoga Sutras (1.12–1.16), Patanjali pairs Vairagya with Abhyasa (consistent practice) as the twin means to attain a peaceful mind. Vairagya is not emotional numbness, but the capacity to engage with life without clinging a particularly transformative stance when facing the impermanence of loss.⁵

From a psychological perspective, Vairagya aligns with emotional regulation and cognitive reappraisal, where individuals learn to experience feelings without being overwhelmed by them.⁶ Rather than suppressing grief, the yogic view encourages awareness of emotional waves while standing firm in a space of internal steadiness.

Modern studies in mindfulness and yoga suggest that cultivating detachment can reduce rumination, anxiety, and depressive symptoms.⁷ Thus, Vairagya provides not only a philosophical anchor but a practical coping resource in times of sorrow.

PSYCHOLOGICAL BUFFERS IN COPING

Role of psychological resilience

Psychological resilience is defined as the ability to bounce back from adversity, trauma, or significant stress. In grief, resilience does not imply the absence of pain but reflects the ability to function and grow through hardship.⁸ Factors contributing to resilience include optimism, emotional regulation, self-efficacy, and social support.⁹ Importantly, resilience is not a static trait but a dynamic process that can be cultivated over time.

In recent years, resilience has been recognized not only as an individual trait but also as a product of environmental, relational, and cultural contexts. In spiritual or collectivist communities, resilience may manifest through shared rituals, belief systems, or practices such as prayer and

meditation.¹⁰ These practices, rooted in yogic traditions, foster self-awareness and self-regulation—key ingredients in psychological resilience.

Moreover, yoga-based interventions have shown to improve stress response, modulate cortisol levels, and enhance emotional stability, reinforcing the relevance of mind-body approaches in grief adaptation.¹¹

Adaptability as a coping mechanism

Adaptability refers to the capacity to adjust thoughts, behaviors, and emotions in response to changing life circumstances. It is closely related to psychological flexibility, which is central to acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), a modern psychotherapeutic model.¹² In the context of grief, adaptability enables individuals to reorient their identity, roles, and routines following loss.

From a yogic standpoint, adaptability is supported by Samatvam, a concept found in the Bhagavad Gita, advocating evenness of mind in gain and loss, joy and sorrow. When practiced, this attitude fosters a non-reactive awareness that reduces resistance to change.¹³ Adaptability thus becomes not only a psychological necessity but a spiritual discipline.

Yoga practices such as asana, pranayama, and meditation enhance neuroplasticity, improve heart rate variability, and promote cognitive flexibility, making them valuable tools for building adaptability. Together with Vairagya, adaptability offers a complementary pathway for navigating grief with awareness, balance, and openness to transformation.¹⁴

VAIRAGYA: THE ART OF DETACHMENT

Understanding detachment

In yogic philosophy, Vairagya is a cornerstone of emotional and spiritual mastery. It is defined in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras (1.15) as the conscious disinterest in sensory experiences and worldly attachments. Unlike suppression or denial, Vairagya is rooted in awareness and acceptance of impermanence (anitya) a realization that all phenomena are transient.³

Vairagya is not indifference or emotional coldness. Rather, it represents a balanced detachment that enables an individual to experience emotions fully, yet remain non-reactive and unattached to outcomes. In the context of grief, this quality allows one to mourn without becoming consumed by sorrow recognizing loss while maintaining inner stability.

Neuroscientific studies on meditation and detachment suggest that such practices reduce amygdala reactivity, enhance prefrontal regulation, and promote a state of equanimity.¹⁵ These physiological effects align with the

psychological resilience described in trauma recovery literature.

Practicing vairagya in daily life

The cultivation of Vairagya is not reserved for ascetics or renunciates. It can be applied in everyday life through conscious awareness, mindful disengagement, and purposeful living. Techniques such as self-inquiry (vichara), japa (mantra repetition), and pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses) help practitioners internalize this principle.¹⁶

In grief situations, practicing Vairagya may involve observing one's emotional responses without judgment, recognizing the impermanence of pain, and anchoring oneself in deeper values or spiritual beliefs. Clinical psychologists integrating yogic wisdom suggest that non-attachment practices can reduce rumination, anxiety, and dependency behaviors.¹⁷

Moreover, community yoga programs that include philosophical teachings—rather than just physical postures report enhanced emotional self-regulation in participants, indicating the potential for Vairagya as a therapeutic resource in bereavement support.¹⁸

ADAPTABILITY: EMBRACING CHANGE

The importance of flexibility

Adaptability is a core psychological capacity that enables individuals to adjust to changing circumstances, cope with uncertainty, and navigate emotional upheaval. In grief, this translates into the ability to accept a new reality without the person or situation that was lost, while gradually reintegrating meaning and purpose into one's life.¹⁹

Psychological flexibility the ability to shift perspective, reevaluate goals, and regulate emotion—is increasingly viewed as a key protective factor in mental health. Research in acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) emphasizes the need for openness, present-moment awareness, and values-based action as foundational to resilience.^{12,20}

In yogic thought, adaptability is not just a behavioral trait but a spiritual disposition rooted in the acceptance of impermanence (anitya) and non-attachment (vairagya). The Bhagavad Gita advocates for equanimity (samatvam) in the face of life's dualities joy and sorrow, gain and loss as a sign of wisdom and spiritual maturity.¹³

Techniques to enhance adaptability

Numerous practices drawn from both yoga and psychology help foster adaptability such as Asana (postures) which improve body awareness and nervous system regulation, pranayama (breath control) that helps modulate emotional reactivity and instills calmness, mindfulness meditation

that enhances attentional flexibility and acceptance, cognitive reframing which enables a shift in perspective about the loss, self-reflection (Svadhyaya) that encourages insight into one's thought patterns and behavioral tendencies.¹⁸

Adaptability can also be nurtured through interpersonal practices supportive communication, seeking help, and reframing grief as a shared human experience. Studies suggest that those who perceive loss as a challenge to grow rather than a threat were more likely to experience post-traumatic growth.¹¹

When yoga-based practices are integrated into grief interventions, participants often report increased mental clarity, emotional tolerance, and behavioral flexibility, demonstrating that adaptability can be taught and strengthened, even in the aftermath of significant personal loss.¹²

INTEGRATING VAIRAGYA AND ADAPTABILITY

Synergistic benefits

When integrated, Vairagya and adaptability provide a powerful dual framework for emotional and spiritual resilience in times of grief. While Vairagya encourages a shift from emotional entanglement to reflective detachment, adaptability empowers individuals to reconstruct meaning and adjust to new life circumstances. Together, they promote both emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility two vital components for coping with loss.^{9,19}

This synergy aligns with models of post-traumatic growth, where individuals not only recover from adversity but undergo profound transformation in values, relationships, and self-perception.¹¹ From a yogic standpoint, this transformation is referred to as Viveka-Khyati, or the dawning of discriminative wisdom, which arises from consistent practice (abhyasa) and non-attachment (vairagya).³

Moreover, neuropsychological research has shown that practices promoting non-reactivity (linked to Vairagya) and cognitive flexibility (linked to adaptability) are associated with changes in the prefrontal cortex, insula, and anterior cingulate cortex, regions involved in emotional regulation and decision-making.¹¹

Thus, when practiced in tandem, Vairagya and adaptability serve not just as coping mechanisms, but as gateways to psychological maturation and spiritual evolution.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS IN THERAPY

Incorporating yogic practices in therapy

The integration of yogic concepts such as Vairagya and adaptability into therapeutic settings presents a promising

avenue for enhancing grief recovery, particularly in culturally spiritual or Eastern contexts. Yoga is increasingly being adopted as a complementary therapy in clinical psychology, palliative care, and bereavement counselling due to its capacity to modulate stress physiology and improve emotional regulation.¹²

Therapeutic programs can incorporate mindful movement (asana) to restore body awareness and reduce somatic symptoms of grief, breathwork (pranayama) to regulate the autonomic nervous system and improve mood, philosophical reflections on detachment and impermanence, helping clients reframe loss not as abandonment, but as a phase of transition and transformation, guided meditation and Yoga Nidra, which have been shown to reduce insomnia, anxiety, and depressive symptoms in bereaved populations, and a trauma-informed yogic approach respects the emotional pacing of the individual while providing tools to cultivate inner stillness and acceptance principles at the core of both Vairagya and adaptability.

Mindfulness techniques for grief

Mindfulness the practice of present-moment, non-judgmental awareness is deeply embedded in yogic philosophy and has been validated in modern clinical settings. Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), have demonstrated efficacy in reducing symptoms of complicated grief, depression, and anxiety.²¹

From a yogic standpoint, mindfulness (smriti) is closely tied to Vairagya, as it encourages detachment from mental fluctuations (vrittis) and enhances the witness-consciousness (sakshi bhava). In grief contexts, mindfulness enables individuals to sit with difficult emotions without avoidance, reinterpret intrusive thoughts, and gradually transform pain into insight.²²

Therapists can support clients by teaching simple mindfulness exercises, such as body scan meditation, breath awareness techniques, compassion-focused visualization, gratitude journaling (linked to adaptability and meaning-making).

Integrating mindfulness and yogic philosophy within therapeutic frameworks offers a holistic model for grief recovery one that addresses mind, body, and spirit cohesively.

CHALLENGES IN COPING WITH GRIEF

Common psychological barriers

Grieving individuals often face internal and external obstacles that hinder healthy emotional processing. These include avoidance behaviors, such as emotional numbing or overworking, rumination, leading to prolonged distress

and depression, guilt and self-blame, particularly in cases of sudden or traumatic loss, and ambiguous loss, where closure is not possible (e.g., missing persons and miscarriages).

Research indicates that some individuals may experience complicated grief, a condition characterized by intense longing, intrusive thoughts, and impaired daily functioning that persists for six months or longer.²³ Psychological rigidity, lack of coping strategies, and cultural stigma surrounding emotional expression can intensify these experiences.⁶

In such contexts, the absence of meaning-making mechanisms may leave individuals stuck in narratives of helplessness or victimhood. Without intervention, grief can evolve into clinical depression, anxiety disorders, or somatization.¹

Overcoming resistance to change

One of the biggest hurdles in grief work is the resistance to adapt to new roles, identities, or social circumstances. This resistance may stem from fear of forgetting the deceased, cultural expectations, or fear of the unknown.

Yogic psychology offers tools for navigating this resistance. For instance, *svadhyaya* (self-study) invites reflective questioning of one's attachments and patterns, *sankalpa* (intention-setting) helps shift focus from suffering to growth, and *Vairagya* teaches the art of non-clinging not as abandonment, but as liberation.

Therapeutic support focused on normalizing change, validating spiritual perspectives, and teaching adaptive coping techniques can facilitate this transition. Interventions that foster both emotional expression and spiritual resilience show greater effectiveness in managing grief across diverse populations.²

By embracing the yogic view that loss is not the end but a gateway to transformation, individuals can reframe grief as a catalyst for self-evolution.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY AND SUPPORT

Building support networks

While grief is an intensely personal journey, social connection plays a critical role in buffering emotional distress. Support networks comprising family, friends, spiritual mentors, or organized groups serve as protective factors that mitigate loneliness, normalize emotional responses, and offer practical help during periods of vulnerability.²⁴

Cultural rituals in India and other collectivist societies, such as communal mourning (*shraddha*, *tarpana*, or *satsangs*), help externalize grief and promote interpersonal healing. These rituals function not only as memorials but

also as psychosocial interventions that reaffirm continuity, belonging, and spiritual closure.⁷

Yogic communities (*sangha*) offer structured environments where grieving individuals can engage in shared silence, group meditation, or philosophical discourse fostering interconnectedness and meaning-making. This aligns with the yogic understanding that healing is accelerated when the individual ego dissolves into collective consciousness.

The impact of shared grief

When grief is shared and acknowledged by others, it reduces the burden of internalized suffering. Collective grieving, such as in memorial ceremonies, bereavement support groups, or community yoga circles, allows individuals to co-regulate emotional distress and validate their experiences through empathy and narrative sharing.²⁵

In public health contexts, community-based yoga programs, grief circles, and wellness retreats can be developed as low-cost, scalable interventions. These approaches are especially effective in low-resource settings or among populations where access to mental health professionals is limited.

Evidence suggests that group mindfulness or yoga-based interventions reduce feelings of isolation, grief severity, and psychological distress, while enhancing belonging, hope, and meaning.^{18,12}

In short, grief is not merely a psychological problem but a relational and existential one, calling for community-level healing frameworks rooted in compassion, collective wisdom, and spiritual practice.

CONCLUSION

Grief, while inevitable and universal, need not become a chronic burden or a source of despair. When approached through the lens of yogic philosophy and modern psychology, grief can serve as a transformative process that deepens one's understanding of impermanence, emotional resilience, and spiritual growth.

This narrative review has explored the dual framework of *Vairagya* (detachment) and adaptability as key psychological buffers that help individuals navigate the complex emotional terrain of loss. Rooted in ancient wisdom, *Vairagya* teaches the art of non-clinging and inner steadiness, allowing individuals to experience sorrow without being overwhelmed. Adaptability, grounded in modern psychological flexibility, enables them to reconstruct their identity and routines in meaningful ways.

When integrated, these two concepts foster both emotional regulation and cognitive transformation cornerstones of post-traumatic growth. Their application within therapeutic settings through yoga, mindfulness, and

community-based interventions holds promise for holistic, scalable, and culturally sensitive grief care.

As the world continues to grapple with collective losses from pandemics to displacement public health systems must adopt interdisciplinary approaches that honour the emotional, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of grief. Integrating Vairagya and adaptability into community mental health strategies not only enriches clinical practice but reaffirms the human capacity to heal, adapt, and evolve through life's most painful transitions.

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