



Manchester Psychoanalytic Development Trust Conference 2026

Life and Death: Loss and Mourning Across the Life Cycle

Saturday 11 July 2026

Abstracts

The First Absence: How an Infant's Early Loss Resonates Across a Life

Pauline Lee

This paper explores how an infant experiences a parent's absence and how these early moments begin to take shape within the emerging self. Using clinical vignettes, it follows the emotional worlds of both infant and parent as they move through ruptures in connections and moments when attunement falters. These early losses, sometimes subtle, sometimes more immediate, leave impressions that help form the child's sense of reality, separations, and longings. The paper traces how these early encounters with loss evolve over time and how their echoes may be felt in adulthood. These may include how the individual seeks closeness, manages separation, and carries the embodied memory of what was once missing.

The Irrepressible Brightness of Spring: Life, loss and loneliness in a Looked After Adolescent Boy

Becky Hall

In the seasonal shifts of the life cycle, the developmental task of late adolescence leans towards the autumnal. This period, and its equivalent states, when further efforts are made to separate from earlier identifications and relationships, is characterised by more introjective processes and depressive concerns than the early teenage years. The mourning of childhood brings a further re-working of Oedipal conflicts, the potential for self-awareness and what Margot Waddell (2003) elegantly details as the developing capacity for internal intimacy. Despite the deepening autumn palette of feeling, this time has its own urgency: the last but one chance at working things out before they truly come to an end.

Central to this work is the terror and anguish of loneliness, which for some feels insurmountable. Earlier negotiations of love and loss are vital, the scaffolding of a family hugely helpful and the risk of breakdown a reality. For children in care this time of life is critical. The cold prospect of adult life can harden the dread of internal loneliness and separate the child from the required inner sources of creative help. This paper describes work with a late adolescent boy in care, who has sought to evade autumnal pains by burying himself in an inner situation of wintry solitude. Desolation and yet to be imagined sadness threaten the life of the treatment, but a bright moment of spontaneity that bursts from the therapist caught off guard and is met by her patient provides a dazzling source of hope for change.

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Psychic Reality and the Problem of Mourning

Sharon Numa

Loss is an inevitable part of human life, whether we think of loss of an object, loss of cherished ideals, loss of place, of homeland, loss of youth; yet we so frequently rail against it, because it produces mental pain, pain that can be intense and feel unbearable. Grief, fear and even disintegration may threaten the collapse of the patient's familiar world.

Both the early loss of the breast and the loss that is part of oedipal defeat confront us with the need to surrender infantile omnipotence and to face a painful reality. Stable configurations are formed which influence and structure the development of our internal worlds as we struggle to either accept loss or to deny and evade it. Freud's seminal paper on Mourning and Melancholia (1917) vividly outlines the pain of losing the loved object and the different responses to it, introducing the idea of identification with the lost object in pathological states of melancholia. Melanie Klein built on this by showing how in depression it is not only the external but also the internal object that is felt to be lost, because the loss of the object leaves a gap in the sense of self. Mourning must struggle with the impact of object loss on the internal world and on our sense of identity, and we know that many obstacles are erected to avoid the associated psychic pain; from fleeting defensive strategies to deeper more pathological and organised defenses. I will try to illustrate some of the problems associated with the failure to mourn using clinical illustrations which outline different defenses against loss and mourning (the manic defense of idealisation on the one hand and the melancholic 'solution' on the other). The unconscious phantasies and beliefs about the possibility of reparation not only of the lost object but of the damaged object play a significant role in the capacity to mourn.

The Idea of Progress and the Inability to Mourn

Paul Hoggett

In 'The Inability to Mourn' (1967) the analysts Alexander and Marguerite Mischelich wondered whether postwar reconstruction in Germany was fuelled by a manic social defence which enabled its citizens to scotomise their recent Nazi history. In this presentation Paul Hoggett will ask whether the inability to mourn might also provide a key to understanding some of the pathologies of Western civilisation including its restless economic development, and exploitation of nature and other peoples.

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