

Beyond Resolution: Daoist Principles and the Coexistence with Grief

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Abstract

Grief is a global intense human experience that encompasses emotional, psychological, and existential perspectives. Contemporary western psychological models of grief including stage-based, task-oriented, and continuing bonds frameworks share an implicit metaphysics of resolution: grief is construed as a disorder of the self to be processed, resolved, or transcended. This conceptual paper offers a targeted philosophical framework derived from Daoist philosophy that integrates psychological understandings of bereavement adjustment with three fundamental principles: Wu Wei (non-forcing), acceptance of impermanence, and Yin-Yang balance. Rather than treating grief as a condition requiring resolution, Daoist philosophy reconceptualizes it as a natural dimension of human existence to be engaged with rather than overcome. The paper argues that these three principles offer a coherent, internally consistent philosophical foundation capable of complementing existing grief theories and informing therapeutic approaches. Drawing on classical Daoist texts, including the Tao Te Ching and the Zhuangzi, the framework proposes that grief adjustment may be better understood not as elimination of suffering but as the cultivation of harmonious coexistence with loss. Implications are considered for cross-cultural grief theory, clinically informed Daoist studies, and the broader challenge of resolution-bias in bereavement research.

Keywords: Daoism, grief, bereavement, Wu Wei, impermanence, Yin-Yang, psychological adjustment, cross-cultural psychology

Introduction

Loss is an inescapable feature of human life. Grief is one of the most significant difficulties people face, whether as a result of the death of a loved one, the breakdown of relationships, or the alteration of life circumstances. Even though psychological research on bereavement has advanced significantly from Bowlby's attachment theory to Stroebe and Schut's Dual Process Model, a large portion of this research has emerged within a Western philosophical framework that emphasizes healing, resolution, and the ultimate "moving on" from loss (Bowlby, 1973; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). The clinical value of such frameworks is indisputable. However, people's understanding of their own suffering may be unintentionally limited by their implicit attitude toward grieving as a problem that has to be fixed. In addition to the actual experience of loss, bereaved individuals may also feel as though they are grieving improperly if their grief persists, their suffering does not end quickly, or they are unable to "move forward" (Hilliker & Baugher, 2025).

Daoist philosophy provides a radically different perspective (Hansen, 2025). Fundamentally, Daoism, which was influenced by ancient Chinese writings like the Tao Te Ching and the Zhuangzi, sees suffering as an essential component of life's natural flow rather than something that needs to be fixed (Z. Wang & Wu, 2026). Rather than opposing or eliminating them, it portrays impermanence, loss, and change as elements of life itself that call for peaceful adaptation, involvement, and acceptance (Damyanova, 2026). This research aims to create a focused conceptual framework that integrates

psychological understandings of grief adjustment with three particular Daoist principles: Wu Wei, acceptance of impermanence, and Yin–Yang balance. This paper purposefully restricts its scope to three principles in order to give each one the thorough analysis and clarity it deserves without being constrictive. The approach presented here presents Daoist philosophy as a valuable philosophical resource that can enhance grief theory and practice rather than taking the place of current psychology models.

Daoist Philosophy

One of the fundamental philosophical traditions of Chinese civilization is Daoism. The idea of the Dao, or "the Way," which denotes the underlying, natural order controlling everything, lies at its core (Zhang, 2025). The Dao is the dynamic, self-sustaining process that governs all of reality rather than a deity or moral code. According to Daoist thought, people suffer most not because of loss itself, but because they resist it, clinging to what has passed and struggling against what is beyond their control (Ma & Wang, 2025). The main cause of increased misery is thought to be this resistance rather than actual loss. According to Daoist philosophy, a sage is someone who has mastered the art of moving with the Dao rather than against it (Lei, 2025)

Grief is directly related to this intellectual perspective. Two prominent instances of inevitable natural change are death and loss. The psychological experience of grief is shaped by how people respond to these changes, whether through harmonious participation, acceptance, or resistance. This paper examines three principles that provide an organized framework for understanding grief adjustment from a Daoist perspective.

Daoist Principles and Their Relevance to Grief

Wu Wei: The Principle of Non-Forcing

One of the most important ideas in Daoist philosophy is Wu Wei, which is frequently translated as "non-action" or "non-forcing" (Pimplapure et al., 2026). It refers to action that comes naturally, without needless effort or resistance, rather than apathy or withdrawal. The sage acts without striving, and accomplishes without effort, according to the Tao Te Ching (P. Liu, 2026). Wu Wei outlines a way of interacting with situations that is in line with how they naturally develop rather than forcing artificial control over them.

Wu Wei directly challenges the societal influences that sometimes accompany mourning when applied to grieving (Qian et al., 2026). People who are grieving are frequently urged, either overtly or covertly, to get well fast, resume their productive lives, and "move on" within socially acceptable timelines. These demands have the potential to drive grief to move at a rate that is fundamentally at contrast with personal and natural adjustment processes.

According to the Wu Wei concept, grief develops at its own pace, just like all natural processes (Damyanova, 2026). A type of resistance that may exacerbate pain rather than alleviate it is the attempt to hasten, repress, or end grief abruptly. According to Bonanno (2004), the most adaptive grief trajectories are those that exhibit a flexible oscillation between grief involvement and repair rather than a fast removal of distress. This notion is consistent with findings in current grief research. Wu Wei thus reframes grief adjustment as developing a non-resistant connection with suffering rather than as conquering it. Passive resignation is not implied by this. Instead, a readiness to follow the natural contours of experience rather than imposing prior expectations upon them, as Slingerland (2003) points out in his research of Wu Wei across Chinese philosophical traditions.

Acceptance of Impermanence: The Transience of All Things

A fundamental aspect of Daoist philosophy is impermanence (Sernelj, 2025). Nothing in existence is static; the Dao itself is defined by constant change. According to the Tao Te Ching, returning to the root is understood as stillness, which in turn is viewed as a return to one's destiny (Lin, 2006). Everything arises, develops, and returns; this cycle is seen as the Dao's natural manifestation rather

than as grief (Berkson, 2019; Quan, 2025).

The story of Zhuangzi's reaction to his wife's passing is the most dramatic example of this idea. When his friend Huizi discovered him singing instead of crying, Zhuangzi explained that, despite his initial grief, he eventually realized that his wife had returned to the natural cycle from which she had come, realizing that she had begun in a formless state, undergone change through birth, and now undergone another transformation through death (Wai Wai, 2021). This narrative does not prescribe emotional suppression. Instead, it serves as an example of a philosophical perspective that places personal loss within the greater natural order, allowing the bereaved to experience grief without being overcome by resistance to the unchangeable.

From a psychological standpoint, this Daoist approach aligns with studies on bereavement-related meaning-making. According to Neimeyer (2001), the capacity to reconstruct meaning after loss has a significant impact on grief adjustment. It refers to incorporating the sense of loss into a logical comprehension of one's life and the environment. One such meaningful context is provided by Daoist acceptance of impermanence, which places the loss within a broader perspective of reality where change and transience are normal rather than abnormal (Miller, 2024).

Crucially, in a Daoist worldview, acknowledging impermanence does not necessitate repressing emotional suffering (N. Liu, 2024). The Zhuangzi story illustrates that grief and acceptance can coexist. While allowing the basic emotional experience of mourning to flow naturally, acknowledging impermanence may lessen secondary suffering, which is the resistance and protest against loss (Weller, 2025).

Yin–Yang Balance: The Coexistence of Opposites

The concept of Yin–Yang describes the dynamic interdependence of apparently opposing forces within existence. Instead of being seen as complete opposites, yin and yang are seen as complimentary aspects of a single, cohesive whole, each of which depends on the other for meaning and contains the seed of the other (Fang, 2012). The Tao Te Ching suggests that when people recognize beauty as beauty, the concept of ugliness simultaneously emerges, and when people identify something as good, the notion of not-good also comes into existence (Tse, 2008).

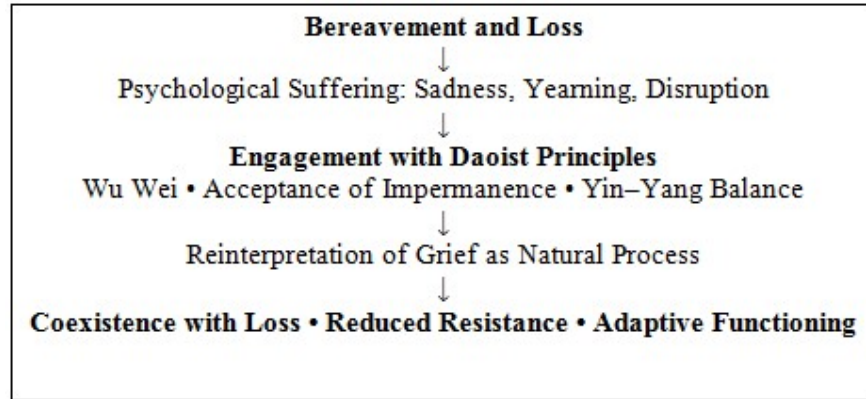
In the context of grief, Yin–Yang balance offers a philosophical alternative to the implicit assumption that healing requires the elimination of pain. Grief recovery is often portrayed in today's psychological society as a journey from suffering to happiness (Bottaccioli & Bottaccioli, 2024). This dichotomy is contested by the Yin–Yang concept, which proposes that joy and sorrow, absence and presence, despair and optimism, may coexist as aspects of a single multifaceted experience.

This knowledge has important ramifications for how grieving people assess their own progress. It is not necessary to view this complexity as a failure to grieve or heal when a person feels both intense sadness at the loss of a loved one and gratified for their existence. According to a Yin–Yang perspective, this kind of coexistence is the normal texture of grief rather than a contradiction. A parallel observation is supported by research on posttraumatic growth. According to Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004), people who suffer a major loss may express both suffering and significant personal growth at the same time. These findings are similar to the Daoist view of sorrow and meaning as coexisting rather than mutually exclusive. Thus, the Yin–Yang principle provides conceptual support for comprehending why grief endures as a dynamic, multilayered experience rather than resolving into clear states.

Additionally, Yin–Yang balance promotes a relational perspective of grief: the value of what was lost is inextricably linked to the pain of loss. Love and suffering are manifestations of the same relationship rather than opposites. By assisting bereaved people in seeing their suffering as a testament to important relationships rather than as a pathology, this reframing may help them adjust to mourning.

A Focused Conceptual Framework

By combining these three ideas, the conceptual framework put out here views grief adjustment as a process that involves both emotional control and philosophical reorientation. The framework can be depicted as a recursive, sequential process:



Step 1: Bereavement and Loss

The term "bereavement" is typically used to describe the objective fact of loss, most frequently the death of a significant person, but it can also refer to other types of significant loss, such as the breakdown of a relationship, a decrease in one's health, or a disturbance of one's identity or social function (Stroebe et al., 2008). The grieving literature consistently distinguishes between grief as the internal, subjective reaction it produces and loss as an external experience (Nargis et al., 2024, 2026). Theoretically, this distinction is important because it enables researchers to treat the loss itself as a relatively fixed antecedent condition while acknowledging that individual differences exist in the psychological, emotional, and behavioral reactions to the same event based on attachment style, coping mechanisms, and cultural context (Bowlby, 1969; Stroebe et al., 2001). Therefore, grieving is positioned as the necessary but insufficient cause of subsequent suffering when it is defined as the initial prerequisite in a process model, the event that starts the psychological process without determining its direction or outcome.

Step 2: Psychological Suffering

Following a loss, a bereaved individual typically experiences a time of severe psychological suffering characterized by a range of behavioral, cognitive, and affective issues (Stroebe et al., 2007). When combined, these three elements of sadness, yearning and disruption make up the first, pre-interpretive suffering that defines acute grief. Theoretically, this stage comes before any coping or meaning-making process; it depicts the phenomenon as experienced before frameworks like cognitive reappraisal, continuing bonds theory, or, as this model suggests, Daoist philosophical reinterpretation is used to change its meaning and trajectory. A variety of emotional and mental reactions are triggered by the loss.

The primary affective reaction to loss is sadness. Grief models uniformly identify sadness as the major emotional characteristic of bereavement, and sadness is the fundamental affective reaction to loss (Bonanno et al., 2008; Weiss, 2008). In the literature, it is typically differentiated from clinical depression, as grief-related sadness tends to manifest in waves or "pangs" linked to reminders of the deceased, rather than as a constant and unrelenting mood state (Zisook & Shear, 2009).

Yearning is a recurring, persistent and frequently stressful desire to be re-connect with what was lost (a characteristic of grief study that is thoroughly well-documented and distinct from generalized melancholy). In contrast, yearning has been identified as a conceptually and empirically distinct aspect of grief, separate from generalized sadness or depressive affect (Duffy & Wild, 2023). Yearning, which is characterized as a persistent and often intrusive desire to reunite with the lost individual or

situation, has been recognized in factor-analytic investigations of grief symptomatology as a fundamental aspect of both normal and complicated grief presentations (Maciejewski et al., 2007). The research on prolonged grief disorder identifies yearning, along with the preoccupation with the deceased, as a key diagnostic criterion, highlighting its importance to the grief experience beyond just sadness (Prigerson et al., 2009).

Disruption refers to presumed worldviews, daily habits, self-concepts, and aspirations that were organized around the deceased individual or circumstance. Disruption pertains to the destabilization of the bereaved individual's assumptive world, which includes the cognitive schemas, routines, and future plans that were structured around the presence of the lost person or circumstance (Janoff-Bulman, 2004). This is in accordance with the shattered assumptions framework, which suggests that loss weakens fundamental beliefs about safety, predictability, and meaning in the world, necessitating that those who are bereaved rebuild a coherent worldview in its wake (Janoff-Bulman & McPherson Frantz, 1997). In the same way, the dual process model developed by Stroebe and Schut recognizes "restoration-oriented stressors" such as interruptions to daily routines, roles, and identity as a parallel and interacting source of distress that coexists with the more emotion-focused, "loss-oriented" pain of missing the deceased (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). This phase signifies the direct, unfiltered experience of grief prior to the application of any interpretive or coping frameworks.

Step 3: Engagement with Daoist Principles

The model presents a philosophical/therapeutic perspective that allows the sufferer (or the therapeutic process) to start reinterpreting the experience. At this stage, the Daoist framework invites the sufferer to relate to grief differently, with less resistance and more accommodation, rather than treating pain as a problem to be solved or an obstacle to be overcome. This reframing is guided by three interlocking principles.

Wu Wei

Wu Wei is often incorrectly translated as passivity; however, its true essence aligns more with the idea of acting in harmony with the natural order rather than opposing it (Slingerland, 2007). Within the context of grief, this does not imply inaction; rather, it involves letting go of the draining, frequently automatic attempt to manage, stifle, hasten, or "correct" the grieving process (Cholbi, 2022). A lot of individuals experience grief and struggle against it at the same time: they criticize themselves for either excessive or insufficient crying, rush back to normalcy before the right time, or try to suppress feelings they believe are inappropriate. Wu Wei proposes to relax that hold allowing grief to flow in its own tempo, like water navigating around rock (Wang, 2012). Therapy aims to reduce the compulsion to act, shifting the question from "How do I make this stop?" to "How do I move with what is already happening?" rather than to do nothing.

Acceptance of Impermanence

While much of Western grief work tends to regard loss as an anomaly, a disruption of a supposed stability that must be fixed or settled, the Daoist perspective places loss within a universal pattern. All that comes into being will vanish; relationships, bodies, seasons, and even the self are perceived as processes rather than static entities (Tseng, 2026). This is not intended to convey a sense of cold detachment ("nothing really mattered anyway"), but rather to provide a reframing that can alleviate the isolating feeling of being singled out by this loss. Grief is not seen as a departure from the way life is meant to function, but rather as a direct confrontation with the reality of how life functions (Attig, 2004). Paradoxically, this recognition can reduce the sufferer's sense of injustice or exceptional victimhood, while also deepening appreciation for what was present before it changed.

Yin–Yang Balance

The third principle deals with the internal structure of the emotional experience itself. Joy and sorrow, presence and absence, attachment and loss are viewed not as opposites where one is "healthy" and the other is "pathological," but as mutually constitutive (Lykke, 2021). Without the possibility of deep grief, deep love could not exist; in a sense, sorrow is love's shadow. Instead of viewing sorrow as a departure from a state of well-being that requires fixing, the Yin–Yang balance considers both sorrow and well-being as essential components of a unified whole (Ng et al., 2008). This can help combat the prevalent secondary suffering that individuals face mourning the fact that they are mourning or perceiving sadness as a failure state to evade.

Collectively, these three principles reduce the meta-level struggle (the battle against the battle), normalize loss as an aspect of a shared human and even cosmological condition, and reestablish sorrow as a legitimate, even necessary, counterpart to love rather than its antithesis.

Step 4: Reinterpretation of Grief as Natural Process

This is the cognitive/emotional pivot point of the model. Once the person has considered the principles outlined above, their perspective on grief shifts from seeing it as something pathological, wrong, or to be eradicated, to seeing it as a natural, expected, and even meaningful aspect of the human experience much like seasonal change or the yin-yang cycle. This leads to a transformation of the interpretive frame through which grief is perceived, assessed, and engaged with.

From Pathology to Process

A significant portion of the experienced burden of contemporary grief stems not from the actual loss but from a secondary evaluation of the grieving process, the perception that extended sadness, intrusive longing, or challenges in "moving on" indicate dysfunction (Ciupak & Smith, 2025). This aligns with what psychological literature refers to as meta-emotional distress: suffering caused by one's evaluative stance toward one's own emotional state, rather than by the emotional state itself. The model effectively dismantles the pathology frame at its root by reframing grief as an expected aspect of human experience rather than a deviation that requires correction. Grief ceases to be interpreted as a malfunction and begins to be seen as a foreseeable result of having been connected to something transient which, according to Step 3, describes the nature of everything.

The Naturalistic Analogy

The comparison to seasonal change is doing specific conceptual work here, not merely serving as poetic decoration. Seasons are cyclical and non-linear in how they are experienced (winter does not "resolve" into spring through a single decisive action), and importantly they are not subject to moral evaluation. No one views winter as a climate system failure. The model's analogy of grief to a cyclical process implicitly rejects linear-stage models of grief, which, even when not intended as prescriptions, are often perceived by those suffering as implying a "correct" timeline (Parker, 1999). Instead, it supports a fluctuating, recursive model in which sorrow may ebb and flow without the return indicating regression or failure.

Reframing as Mechanism, Not Endpoint

This is not a change in behavior or an emotional resolution; rather, it is a change in cognitive appraisal that modifies the relationship between the individual and their affective state. In this respect, this step operates similarly to cognitive reappraisal mechanisms outlined in emotion-regulation studies (such as Gross's process model of emotion regulation), where the interpretation of an emotional stimulus is changed, thereby affecting its subsequent emotional and behavioral outcomes. The key difference is that the reappraisal is based on philosophical foundations rather than clinical ones. It relies on a coherent metaphysical system (Daoist cosmology) instead of a cognitive technique taken out of context.

Step 5: Outcome — Coexistence with Loss, Reduced Resistance, Adaptive Functioning

The terminal state of the model, comprising three related outcomes:

- Coexistence with loss means grief is not "resolved" or eradicated but rather woven into the fabric of daily life (reflecting the continuing-bonds theory in grief literature)
- Reduced resistance means a reduction in the internal conflict regarding the reality or emotional experience of loss (this is conceptually similar to acceptance-based methods such as ACT)
- Adaptive functioning refers to the restored ability to participate in daily life, maintain relationships, and engage in meaning-making, even though the loss is still present

Limitations and Future Directions

This conceptual framework has several limitations that should be acknowledged. This paper is philosophical and theoretical in nature, and it does not provide empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of Daoist-informed approaches to grief. Future empirical studies, both qualitative investigations into bereaved individuals' connections to Daoist principles and quantitative analyses of the effects of Daoist-informed therapeutic interventions would greatly enhance the practical utility of the framework. Moreover, Daoist philosophy encompasses a wealth of ideas and a variety of strands, with this paper focusing on classical philosophical Daoism as found in the Tao Te Ching and Zhuangzi. Further resources can be found in religious Daoist traditions and later developments in Daoist thought, but these are beyond the scope of this paper. Further resources can be found in religious Daoist traditions and later developments in Daoist thought, but these are beyond the scope of this paper. Although philosophical insights may go beyond particular cultural backgrounds, examining how people from various cultural traditions interact with Daoist concepts in grief contexts would greatly enhance the literature.

Conclusion

Grief is one of the most intense and lasting aspects of human experience. Although modern psychology has provided vital understandings of bereavement, the underlying focus of many Western studies of grief on recovery, symptom alleviation, and advancement may not completely reflect the intricacies of how individuals genuinely cope with loss. A complementary perspective is provided by Daoist philosophy. Daoism reconceptualizes grief not as a problem needing resolution but as a natural aspect of existence that requires engagement, acceptance, and harmonious coexistence, through the principles of Wu Wei, acceptance of impermanence, and Yin–Yang balance. The three principles establish a philosophical framework that is focused, coherent, and mutually reinforcing, with significant implications for grief theory and psychological practice. Enhanced interdisciplinary conversation between Daoist philosophy and modern psychology could deepen insights into human suffering and adaptation, not by supplanting current models, but by broadening the philosophical context in which grief can be comprehended, supported, and experienced.

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