



Grief Work

By: [Fred Nelson MSW, RSW](#)

What is grief?

Grief is a multi-faceted human response to loss.

Grief work emphasizes that grief is a process that we engage in as active participants. Grief demands attention, refusing to go away automatically with the passage of time.

Your experience of grief will be unique. No one can tell you what the process will be or how long it will take. Grief takes as long as it takes.

Working through grief

Grief as a cut

Experiencing the death of someone significant to us can be compared to experiencing a cut. The more significant and complex the relationship, the more severe the cut will be.

In order to heal from the cut, and work through our grief, we need to heal from the inside out, layer by layer. This usually requires keeping the cut open and exposed. This process can be quite painful.

For some of us, we may try to lessen the pain by prematurely covering the cut. In grief, we may attempt to avoid the pain by keeping busy, minimizing our loss or avoiding reminders of the person who has died. This is human. However, this avoidance sometimes causes the cut to become infected and we need to reopen it. This can be painful – so too is grief!

We human beings are quite tough and we do heal. As a cut often leaves a scar, we can expect to be left with a scar after the death of someone close to us. The scar is symbolic of the fact that the death has permanently changed us in some way.

Grief as waves

Grief has been compared to waves that come and go. Some days the water is more turbulent or stormy, but on other days there is a sense of calm and a quiet lapping on the shore. Like the waves, grief has no endpoint. We can experience intense feelings of loss years after a death. Sometimes these feelings are triggered by a special date, event, or a significant time of the year, like the holiday season. Sometimes the trigger can be a song you hear on the radio or a smell or a passing thought.

While we don't get over our losses, we do learn to live with them. Our painful feelings don't steadily decline to zero, but rather we start to experience these painful feelings less often over time. At the same time, we are working at integrating our loss experience. We learn more about our thoughts and feelings associated with the person who died and we find a place for them within ourselves. This is a subtle process and just as we may not be able to say when we exactly "came out of the fog", we also can't pinpoint when we were able to reinvest our emotional energy into living more fully.

The many faces of grief

We experience grief from many different perspectives. As a result, working through grief can be a huge investment of energy.

Emotional

Emotionally, we experience a wide variety of feelings including sadness, loneliness, fear and despair, anger, guilt, and sometimes a sense of relief. Some of these feelings can be challenging as we are not accustomed to the intensity. On the other hand, we may feel that we should be more upset – “*Why am I not crying more?*” Feelings vary from person to person and there is no “right” or “wrong” way to feel. We feel what we feel.

Intellectual

Our thinking is affected by grief as well. We may feel like we are going crazy, have memory lapses, or have difficulty concentrating. We may feel less confident in our ability to think things through. This is one reason why people are often cautioned not to make major decisions until they get to the point where they feel like “the fog has lifted” or they have a sense of being more grounded.

Social

From a social perspective, we may have conflicting feelings. We may want to be alone, but we may also wish we were around people. It is a huge adjustment to be alone and come home to the screaming silence of an empty house. If you are experiencing the death of a spouse, there can be awkward feelings around re-connecting with couple friends and feeling like “the fifth wheel.” There is also often a sense of wanting to be able to do things independently, without always relying on family and friends.

Physical

We also experience grief physically. It is not uncommon to experience tightness in the chest or shortness of breath. There may be changes in our appetite or sleeping patterns. Maintaining good medical follow up is important, as some of the symptoms we have from the emotion-body connection are also signs of underlying medical problems. Grief also has been known to contribute to a sense of disorientation. People have reported dropping things or even falling. These experiences might be related to feeling just a little out of synch.

Spiritual

We experience grief in a spiritual sense as well. Our beliefs may be reinforced or questioned and in a broader sense we work at finding meaning and purpose in our lives. For some, the spiritual face of grief means sensing the presence of the person who has died and wanting to maintain some connection, possibly through dreams. It is not uncommon for people to interpret signs of this connection through occurrences in nature or unexplainable events.

What factors affect how we will grieve?

As there are many strands that are woven together to form the relationships in our lives, so too are there many factors that will affect how we will grieve. These are some of the factors:

- how we view life and death in general;
- how the death occurs;
- what influence we think we ourselves have in dealing with our circumstances;
- losses and coping skills we have used in the past;
- the existence of other stresses in our lives such as work pressures, financial strain or our

- the existence of other stresses in our lives such as work pressures, financial strain or our own health problems;
- access to a support network and how we use that support;
- the nature of the relationship with the person who has died.

This last point, the nature of the relationship with the person who has died, is a key variable. When there has been a difficult relationship with many ups and downs or mixed feelings, unresolved issues may affect how we will grieve. We may spend a great deal of energy questioning our role in the relationship or have regrets about what has happened. When people have lived with abuse or alcoholism, or when they have not been acknowledged or accepted, the grief can be complicated. If you find yourself in this situation, you may not only be grieving the loss of the person who has died and the mixed feelings associated with that person, but also the loss of the opportunity or hope that things would have changed or be resolved. It is like a double loss.

Sometimes the way the death occurs will affect grief. Sudden and unexpected death usually adds a layer of trauma. This kind of death may prevent us from doing or saying the things that are important. Both the regrets and the shock can be compounding factors. Death after a long protracted illness can also influence grief. You may find your energy is depleted, or that other aspects of your life have been put on hold, making the work of grieving more difficult.

How do we deal with our grief?

Your grief is unique to you. We have a tendency to compare ourselves with others, leading us to be hard on ourselves. We tend to think about what we should do or how we should act. We get these ideas from our own expectations of ourselves and from advice from others. These “shoulds” can use up a great deal of our already depleted energy. Your grief is yours alone and you will heal in your own way in your own time.

Your grief may bring forward many different emotions which ebb and flow over time. There is no predictable course for grief and often we gain more of a perspective as we look back on our experience. It can be helpful to talk about these feelings with people who are prepared to listen and who will not try to shut down or minimize your pain. Confronting this pain is an ongoing part of the process. Sometimes you will want to examine the thought or feeling more closely. Feelings like anger and guilt are good examples of the need for this kind of attention. Anger is quite common after death and besides expressing it, we often need to work at understanding where it comes from.

If you are trying to work through your anger, it may be helpful to do these things:

- Write things out. Writing can put you in touch with other emotional layers that you may not have realized were there.
- Take action. Action may come in the form of writing letters or engaging in projects which are aimed at improving the circumstances related to the source of your anger.
- Exercise. Physical exercise may help you to better cope with your anger.

Guilt is another common feeling in grief. Sometimes we can get stuck in our guilt. Thinking about what we could have done or should have done can take a lot of energy. If we take a hard look at our regrets, we can usually decide which ones we can let go. Sometimes it is necessary to work on forgiving either ourselves or others. This can be a very difficult process and you may want to ask for help from a professional.

Another big part of grief centers on our memories of the person who has died. Memories are two-edged: they can be incredibly painful, but also very comforting. Because memories help us maintain a connection with the person who has died, they generally help us through the grief process.

Finally, it's important when dealing with grief to recognize that you may need to be more accepting of your physical and emotional limitations. When we are grieving, we are wounded. Grief work can be exhausting, often because we are striving to maintain a balance between pushing ourselves and allowing ourselves to be where we are. Grief is an evolving phenomenon and we are a work in progress which requires treating ourselves with love and respect.

Hurrying grief

Sometimes well-meaning people around us want us to be the same as we were before the death. They want us to feel better and be free of pain. Unfortunately, grief cannot be hurried. In an attempt to help, they may say things like this:

"The person who died wouldn't want you to cry."

"Think positively."

"It's time to get over it."

If you are grieving, you likely need understanding, not encouragement to leave your grief behind. Sometimes the best we can do is to learn to live with our grief. Ultimately, we integrate grief as one of the life experiences that makes us who we are.

Kinds of grief

Anticipatory grief

Grief can occur before a death as well as after. People living with terminal illness often experience what's called anticipatory grief. This grief is generally related to loss of independence or changing roles within the family and the workplace. For families, anticipatory grief involves witnessing these changes and reacting to them. Family members may feel the loss of future plans as well as recognition that the family will never be the same.

This kind of "grief ahead of time" can be quite confusing and painful. We sometimes don't want to give in to our feelings of loss and want to try to maintain a positive outlook. However, the feelings are there and in a way anticipatory grief is an attempt to prepare us for what lies ahead.

Disenfranchised grief

Another kind of grief is called disenfranchised grief, which can occur in these circumstances:

- We are grieving losses that aren't always openly acknowledged or socially supported. For example, some people may feel unable to seek support or talk openly about death due to suicide.
- The loss is not recognized as significant. The loss of a friend or a distant relative may not be considered as significant as the loss of a parent, child or spouse. Yet, our grief is more related to our connection to the person than to the type of relationship.
- The loss itself is not recognized. A classic example is our grief over the loss of a pet. This can be a very intense emotional experience but we may not share these feelings because an animal has died and not a human being.
- The griever is not recognized as being capable of grieving. Examples include people with dementia or younger children. But, both groups are capable of experiencing grief and it is important to find ways to understand and provide opportunities for expression of this grief.

The recurring theme in all these examples of disenfranchised grief is a sense of isolation. A key to coping is to recognize that you're not crazy and these thoughts and feelings are very real and normal. Especially when we are dealing with social taboos around what we can be open about, we may feel intimidated or even ashamed. But, your grief is totally justified. If you can't find the recognition and support you need in your own circle of family and friends, it may be helpful to contact bereavement services in your area.

How do we know when we need help?

You may ask yourself: “*What are the signs that I need help?*” Again, because grief is unique to you, there are not necessarily standard signs that apply to everyone. Certainly, if you feel like you want to end your life or are taking part in unhealthy behaviours like drinking too much alcohol, it’s time to get help. Most often your feelings may be more subtle than that. You may feel persistent pain or feel stuck as you deal with issues like anger and guilt. While it can be quite difficult to reach out for support when you feel overwhelmed or vulnerable, it is important to allow yourself to get all the help you need. There is a tendency in our society to place a high value on being “strong” and independent. Seeking help when you are grieving is not a sign of weakness or dependence but rather quite the opposite. Asking for help is you being in touch with yourself and taking charge.

How do we help others who are grieving?

Probably the most important thing that we can do to be helpful to people who are grieving is to accept the person for who they are and where they are. Listen to people tell their stories, often over and over again. People want understanding, not pity. They want their wounds or hurts to be recognized. Also, people don’t want to be judged or told what they should do. As helpers and supporters, we need to recognize the fact that we can’t take away their pain. We can be with them by caring, understanding, and supporting them, not only in the first few days or weeks, but through the many months and years following the loss.

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