

# Grief Primer

Compiled by J. Block, 2011

Give sorrow words.  
The grief that does not speak  
Whispers the o'erfraught heart,  
and bids it break.      ~ *William Shakespeare*

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# Definitions of Grief

from *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 3rd Edition

## Grief:

Grief: n., Deep mental anguish, as from bereavement; an annoyance or frustration, trouble or difficulty.

To grieve, grieving: v., To be sorrowful, to experience or express grief. Synonyms: lament, mourn, sorrow.

The central meaning shared by these verbs is 'to feel, show, or express grief, sadness or regret'.

## Mourning:

To mourn, mourning: v., To feel or express grief or sorrow; to show grief for a death by conventional signs, as by wearing black; to feel or express deep regret; to grieve over the dead

Mourning: n., The actions or expression of one who has suffered a bereavement, conventional outward signs of grief for the dead, such as a black armband; the period when a death is mourned.

## Bereavement:

Bereaved: adj., Suffering the loss of a loved one.

Bereave: tr. v.: To leave desolate or alone, especially by death

# Types of Grief

Anticipatory Grief: The grief that occurs prior to the potential death or loss. Dynamics can be similar to those seen in post-death grief.

Expected Grief: Loss is expected and people have an opportunity to prepare for it and make efforts at closure.

Unexpected or Acute Grief: Loss is unexpected, perhaps sudden. Assault is felt. There is trauma, shock, and/or horror. Without having had time to prepare for it, denial must protect people longer.

Shadow or Anniversary Grief: Grief reactions prompted by holiday, anniversary of death, or other dates/times/days. Often catches the griever unaware.

Grief over Secondary Losses: Grief over losses/changes resulting from the primary death/loss, such as financial loss, moves, loss of identity, loss of freedom/increase in responsibilities.

Complicated Grief: Non-linear grief with complicating factors such as lack of support/isolation trauma, multiple losses, loss of a long-term relationship, loss of an infant/child, etc. The griever may not heal in a healthy manner without professional intervention.

Disenfranchised Grief: A form of complicated grief occurring when the loss is not or cannot be recognized, validated, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported.

# Realistic Expectations During the Grief Process

Adapted from 'How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies' by Therese A. Rando, Ph.D.

Grief will take longer than most people think.

Grief takes more energy than we ever imagine.

Grief shows itself in all spheres of our lives – emotional, social, physical, and spiritual.

Grief is not only for the actual person lost, but also for the hopes, dreams, unfulfilled expectations and unmet needs.

Grief involves many changes and develops continually.

New losses bring up grief from the past, often creating an array of confusing feelings at once.

Sometimes grief makes one feel “crazy”, confused, or disoriented.

Grief spasms (acute upsurges of grief occurring suddenly with no warning) are common.

In the future, some events can stimulate grief, especially the “firsts” (holidays, celebrations, travel, appointments, etc.).

Society has unrealistic expectations about grief and the mourning process, so well-meaning people may respond inappropriately.

Family members cannot always provide the support one expects, and their grief process may be very different.

Sometimes people have enough social support to help them through loss. But more often, they need to reach out for support, let others know what they need, and actively build a network that facilitates personal growth and transformation.

# Common Grief Reactions

## PHYSICAL

Fatigue  
Lack of energy  
Sympathy pains  
Hollowness  
Gut Sensations  
Tightness in chest  
Shortness of breath  
Dry mouth  
Increased noise sensitivity  
Pain  
Sleep disturbance  
Restless  
Tension  
Exhaustion

## EMOTIONAL

Sadness  
Loneliness  
Anger  
Guilt  
Anxiety  
Shock  
Yearning/Longing  
Relief  
Numbness  
Depression  
“Grief Attacks”  
Fear  
Helplessness  
“Crazy”/Out of Control

## MENTAL

Disbelief  
Distracted  
Absent-minded  
Forgetful  
Low motivation  
Dreams of deceased  
Poor concentration  
Preoccupation  
Images of deceased  
Lack of focus  
Confusion  
Memories  
Denial  
Disorientation

## SOCIAL

Social withdrawal  
Diminished desire to  
Carrying special objects  
Being single  
Feeling of need to “take  
care of others”

## BEHAVIORS

Searching  
Crying/Tears  
Changes in daily routine  
Going to grave site  
Keeping an altar  
Keeping belongings intact  
Looking at photos  
Talking to the deceased

## SPIRITUAL

Questions about God  
Why would God allow this  
Where are they now?  
How are they?  
When will I die?  
Will I see them again  
when I die?  
What will happen to me  
when I die?  
Sensing the presence of  
the deceased

# The Mourner's Bill of Rights

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Though you should reach out to others as you do the work of mourning, you should not feel obligated to accept the unhelpful responses you may receive from some people. You are the one who is grieving, and as such, you have certain "rights" no one should try to take away from you.

The following list is intended both to empower you to heal and to decide how others can and cannot help. This is not to discourage you from reaching out to others for help, but rather to assist you in distinguishing useful responses from hurtful ones.

## *1. You have the right to experience your own unique grief.*

No one else will grieve in exactly the same way you do. So, when you turn to others for help, don't allow them to tell what you should or should not be feeling.

## *2. You have the right to talk about your grief.*

Talking about your grief will help you heal. Seek out others who will allow you to talk as much as you want, as often as you want, about your grief. If at times you don't feel like talking, you have the right to be silent.

## *3. You have the right to feel a multitude of emotions.*

Confusion, disorientation, fear, guilt and relief are just a few of the emotions you might feel as part of your grief journey. Others may try to tell you that feeling angry, for example, is wrong. Don't take these judgmental responses to heart. Instead, find listeners who will accept your feelings without condition.

## *4. You have the right to be tolerant of your physical and emotional limits.*

Your feelings of loss and sadness will probably leave you feeling fatigued. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. Get daily rest. Eat balanced meals. And don't allow others to push you into doing things you don't feel ready to do.

## *5. You have the right to experience "griefbursts."*

Sometimes, out of nowhere, a powerful surge of grief may overcome you. This can be frightening, but is normal and natural. Find someone who understands and will let you talk it out.

## *6. You have the right to make use of ritual.*

The funeral ritual does more than acknowledge the death of someone loved. It helps provide you with the support of caring people. More importantly, the funeral is a way for you to mourn. If others tell you the funeral or other healing rituals such as these are silly or unnecessary, don't listen.

## *7. You have the right to embrace your spirituality.*

If faith is a part of your life, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you. Allow yourself to be around people who understand and support your religious beliefs. If you feel angry at God, find someone to talk with who won't be critical of your feelings of hurt and abandonment.

## *8. You have the right to search for meaning.*

You may find yourself asking, "Why did he or she die? Why this way? Why now?" Some of your questions may have answers, but some may not. And watch out for the clichéd responses some people may give you. Comments like, "It was God's will" or "Think of what you have to be thankful for" are not helpful and you do not have to accept them.

*9. You have the right to treasure your memories.*

Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after the death of someone loved. You will always remember. Instead of ignoring your memories, find others with whom you can share them.

*10. You have the right to move toward your grief and heal.*

Reconciling your grief will not happen quickly. Remember, grief is a process, not an event. Be patient and tolerant with yourself and avoid people who are impatient and intolerant with you. Neither you nor those around you must forget that the death of someone loved changes your life forever.

# A Soulful Philosophy of Grief Care:

## The Art of Supporting and Standing with the Bereaved

Adapted from the writings of Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D

1. Supporting and standing with the bereaved is about being present to another person's pain; it is not about taking away or fixing the pain.
2. Supporting and standing with the bereaved is about going into the wilderness of the soul with another human being; it is not thinking you are responsible for finding the way out.
3. Supporting and standing with the bereaved is about honoring the human spirit; it is not about focusing on the intellect.
4. Supporting and standing with the bereaved is about listening with the heart; it is not about analyzing with the head.
5. Supporting and standing with the bereaved is about bearing witness to the struggles of another; it is not about judging or directing these struggles.
6. Supporting and standing with the bereaved is about walking alongside; it is not about leading or being led.
7. Supporting and standing with the bereaved is about discovering the gifts of sacred silence; it does not mean filling up every moment with words.
8. Supporting and standing with the bereaved is about being still; it is not about frantic movement forward.
9. Supporting and standing with the bereaved is about respecting disorder and confusion; it is not about imposing order and logic.
10. Supporting and standing with the bereaved is about learning from others; it is not about teaching them.
11. Supporting and standing with the bereaved is about curiosity; it is not about expertise.
12. Supporting and standing with the bereaved is about acknowledging spiritual mystery; it is not about finding solutions or answers to this mystery.

## Possible Goals for the Grief Process

- To understand the grief process from other people's point of view
- To learn to care for myself better
- To be able to recall memories of my loved one and feel good about the past
- To connect with others grieving as well
- To release my bottled up pain and emotions
- To learn techniques to accept and let go of the emotions surrounding this death
- To be in a safe place where I can explore my feelings and express them
- To revisit whatever is unresolved about this death and loss
- To inventory other unaddressed grief and loss issues in my life
- To face the issues I have about my own death
- To receive support in getting through this time in my life
- To be a better listener and friend to others in grief
- To feel less isolated
- To resolve my feelings of anger toward the person who died
- To find ways to fill the void left by my loved one's death
- To get ideas for dealing with people (i.e. family) who do not want to talk about it
- To work through my anger and bitterness
- To feel like having fun again
- To be ready to do new, interesting things with my life
- To feel less sad and depressed
- To see what other people have done to grieve in a healthy way
- To learn how to use the memories of my loved one to benefit my life
- To find a purpose in my life without my loved one
- To not feel so guilty anymore
- To keep my loved one's memory alive
- To make decisions that are based on my loss
- To make friends with people who can understand my loss
- To develop peace of mind in relation to my loss
- To be in a place where I can cry as much as I need to
- To learn how to relax instead of staying busy every minute of the day to keep from feeling
- Other:



# Coping with Grief

These ideas may serve you in acknowledging, integrating, and accepting the truth of your loss.

## 1. Specific Suggestions

from *'How to go on living when someone you love dies'* by Therese Rando

Give yourself permission to feel your loss and to grieve over it.

- Feel and deal with all of your emotions and thoughts about the death
- Make a conscious decision to integrate your loss.

Accept social support and tell others what you need.

- Do not isolate yourself.
- Accept the help and support of others.
- Be assertive tell others what you need and go after what you want.

Be realistic in your expectations of yourself as a griever.

- Make sure you have accurate information about your grief in general and a proper perspective on what is realistic.
- Make sure you have accurate information about this death in particular and what problems it presents to a griever.
- Expect to have some negative feelings and volatile reactions.
- Recognize that your grief will be unique.
- It doesn't make any difference what others think.
- There is no one correct way to grieve, so you must first find the best way for yourself.
- Keep in mind that the death of your loved one will affect your family as well as yourself.
- Maintain a realistic perspective on what you can expect from others in your grief.
- Do not feel that you must accept the statements of others who seek to comfort you by telling you that you should feel better because you have other loved ones who are still alive.
- Do not think that you need to fit this loss into your religious or philosophical framework immediately.
- Do not let others needs determine your grief experience.
- Do not let anyone minimize your loss, but do not give up realistic hope either.
- Recognize that, despite your being unable to feel that it's true, your pain will transform at some point if you continue to do your grief work.

Give some form of expression to all your feelings.

- Identify, accept, and express ALL of your various feelings over the loss and its consequences.
- You repeatedly must allow yourself to cry and cry, talk and talk, review and review without the interruption of anyone else's sanity.
- Differentiate clearly among your various feelings of grief so that each one can be fully processed and your grief can be better managed.
- Look for those who can listen to you non-judgmentally and with permissiveness and acceptance.
- If you appear to be resisting the grief process, ask yourself why, then try to change it.

## 2. Ways to Care for Yourself while Mourning

from Carole Lindroos, M.A., Boulder, CO

- Be kind to yourself

- Drink plenty of water and herbal teas; avoid caffeinated drinks
- Take timeouts and breathe deeply and fully 2-3 times; then resume your activity
- Spend some time in nature
- Exercise; walk for 10 minutes or hike vigorously, whatever feels right for you
- Listen to soothing music (or music that helps you express and move anger through you)
- Use relaxation techniques such as visualization; there are many guided relaxation tapes that can help induce sleep
- Walk barefoot inside or outside to bring you back to feeling grounded (this is helpful when you feel spacey, unable to concentrate, or overwhelmed with emotion)
- Reach out to people; if there is no one you feel you want to call on, then find someone, join a group, or consider therapy; ask people to call you or check in on you rather than expecting you to make the contact
- Physical contact and comfort is important; ask for hugs, get a massage, take a hot bubble bath, exercise regularly
- Ask for help and accept offers of help; when people offer assistance tell them if you do not know what you need and ask them to suggest something concrete
- Be aware of the negative effects of alcohol, drugs, and caffeine on your well-being choose wisely
- Try to maintain a consistent bedtime routine and keep a regular sleep schedule

### 3. Activities for being with your grief

- Plant a memory garden
- Create memory books, scrapbooks
- Write poetry alone or with others
- Blow bubbles to send prayers to your loved one and others
- Art – watercolor, pastels, markers, play dough, clay
- Light candles
- Create a collage about the life of your loved one with photos and mementos
- Listen to music
- Create an Healing Altar
- Keep photos and mementos around
- Creative writing, feeling journaling
- Write letters to loved one
- Remember to play

# Special Days and Anniversaries

From Hospice of Boulder County

Over the first year following a death, you will have to go through the "firsts" – the first birthday, holiday season, anniversary, and many other special days without your loved one. All of these days are important times when grief may feel worse. Often, because of the complexity of being in a grief process, we haven't been taught to watch for triggers and we are unprepared for the onslaught of feelings or "strange" behaviors. Frequently we are restless, emotional, sad, or forgetful but don't know why it is happening. Sometimes we don't even remember that the special day is coming soon.

It's helpful to prepare for each special day and to know that you may be surprised at your responses: whether it's the first year after their death or the twentieth. One woman described her "grief spasms" as "the same feelings of sadness and devastation I had a week after he died, but now they don't last as long or knock me off my feet like they did at the beginning."

Pay attention to when those particular days or periods might occur over the course of a year, and calendar them or ask someone to remind you so you don't get caught off-guard. Pay special attention to your own needs around the date and give yourself special care. Acknowledging that a particularly painful date is coming may mean no more than just that – acknowledging it and being kind to yourself. Or, you may want to do something special. Following are some suggestions that other bereaved people have given us.

- Spending the day with family or friends.
- Taking the day to be alone.
- Remembering stories about the life of your loved one.
- Taking the day off work.
- Preparing a special meal and inviting someone special over.
- Writing something about your loved one and sending it to people who loved him/her.
- Lighting a candle.
- Looking at photo albums.
- Saying a prayer.
- Creating art that expresses your feelings.
- Creating a memorial garden.
- Taking a trip out of town.
- Making a donation to your loved one's favorite charity or group.
- Visiting a favorite place you shared.
- Going somewhere completely new.
- Buying flowers for yourself or for the gravesite.
- Having a party (yes, party) for the deceased with people who loved him/her.
- Planting a shrub or tree.
- Spending the day helping someone else

# Loss & The Family

By: Kathleen R. Gilbert, Ph.D.

When a crisis like a death occurs, the family is thrown into disorder. The family is disrupted and, in order to continue to function, must somehow regain some sort of stability while shifting the various responsibilities among the remaining family members.

Certain factors can confound the ability of family members to be available to each other. For example, the deaths that resulted from the terrorist attacks were violent and mutilating; most were out-of-sequence in the life cycle; they were ambiguous because few bodies were recovered; and the initiating agent was human-made and intentional.

In addition to contributing factors related to the death, other factors can complicate the grief resolution process within the family. These include:

- the relationship of family members with the deceased and any unresolved issues remaining after the death;
- the relationship between bereaved family members and the legacies of their past;
- the personal resources of the individual family members;
- resonating grief, that is, the tendency of one's expression of grief to "set off" other family members;
- competition in grieving;
- gender-based differences in grieving styles, and the expectation that everyone will grieve in an emotive and social way; and
- developmental difference in grief style, coupled with a lack of knowledge about what grief typically resembles at different developmental stages.

Although family members may feel a sense of common purpose at the outset as they each struggle with their own loss, they find it increasingly difficult to "hang together" as they work through their grief. The interaction of these differences and related conflicts may come together to place tremendous strain on the family.

Given the fact that an identical experience of loss is highly unlikely, if not impossible, how then can grief be resolved in the family? And how can the family remain intact after a traumatic death? Families must complete three essential tasks if they are to resolve their grief. First, they must recognize the loss and acknowledge the grief felt by all family members. Secondly, they must reorganize after the loss so that essential functions can be carried out. Lastly family members must reinvest in this new family, by working together to redefine what "family" now means.

In my work, I have found families use a number of "tools" to achieve these tasks:

- **Open and honest communication.** If grief is to be a collective experience, members must be able to communicate clearly with each other. Although it is difficult, family members must especially engage in the simple but difficult act of listening to each other. The process may be slow, though, as each family member has limited resources after a loss.

- Shared rituals. These facilitate the family healing process and can include funerals and religious rites, but should also include personal family rituals like shared dinners.
- Shared sense of purpose. This may consist of such things as family members spending time together or working together to achieve goals.
- Acceptance of differences. Rather than striving for a single view of the loss, or promoting a single style of grieving, family members need to recognize similarities in their grieving and to reframe differences as strengths.
- Sensitivity to each other's needs. Each member of the family experiences the loss in a unique way. When necessary, family members should be encouraged to seek out outside help through support groups or individual therapy.
- A positive view. Striving to see the best in oneself and other family members can help to buffer stress and make family members more receptive to each other's overtures.

*Excerpted from an article in Family Focus On... Death and Dying, Issue FF12, a publication of the National Council on Family Relations.*

*For more information on Differential Grief, contact Dr. Gilbert at [gilbertk@indiana.edu](mailto:gilbertk@indiana.edu) or visit <http://griefnet.org/library/families.html>.*

## Books About Grief

*The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion

The author honestly describes her confusion, grief, and derangement as a mourner.

*Healing After Loss, Meditations For Working Through Grief* by M.W. Hickman

Full of thoughtful reflections, wise words and healing affirmations.

*The Mourning Handbook* by Helen Fitzgerald

Written and organized in an accessible style punctuated by real stories of loss.

*The Courage to Grieve* by Judy Tatelbaum

Provides the specific help for facing grief fully and growing from the experience.

*Journeying East: Conversations on Aging and Dying* by Victoria Jean Dimidjian

Buddhist spiritual leaders share wisdom from their challenges of later life.

*Learning to Say Goodbye: When a Parent Dies* by Eda Le Shan

This book shows how death is perceived when one is “protected” by others.

*Part of Me Died Too: Stories of Creative Survival Among Bereaved Children and Teenagers* by Virginia Lynn Fry

Presents ten graceful studies of children and teenagers in mourning.

*Words to Comfort, Words to Heal* Compiled by Juliet Maybey

An anthology for celebrating lives that have passed and offering consolation to those left behind.

*When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* by Pema Chodron

Buddhist advice for coping with the grim realities of life, including fear, despair, rage and loss.

*The Soul in Grief: Life, Death & Transformation* by Robert Romanyshyn

The author beckons the reader to do the psychological work grief demands for self-healing.

*Companioning the Bereaved: A Soulful Guide for Caregivers* by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

This book advocates a model of “companioning” the bereaved by being totally present.

*Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner, Fourth Edition* by J. William Worden, PhD

The gold standard of grief therapy handbooks drawn from extensive research and clinical work.

# Poems About Grief

*Funeral Blues* ~ by W.H. Auden

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,  
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,  
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum  
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead  
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,  
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,  
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,  
My working week and my Sunday rest,  
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;  
I thought that love would last forever; I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;  
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;  
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood,  
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

*Talking to Grief* ~ by Denise Levertov

Ah, Grief, I should not treat you  
like a homeless dog  
who comes to the back door for a crust, for a meatless bone.  
I should trust you.

I should coax you  
into the house and give you your own corner,  
a worn mat to lie on, your own water dish.

You think I don't know you've been living under my porch?  
You long for your real place to be readied before winter comes.  
You need your name, your collar and tag.  
You need the right to warn off intruders,  
to consider my house your own  
and me your person  
and yourself  
my own dog.

*In Blackwater Woods* ~ by Mary Oliver

Look, the trees  
are turning  
their own bodies  
into pillars  
of light

are giving off the rich  
fragrance of cinnamon  
and fulfillment,

the long tapers  
of cattails are bursting  
and floating away over  
the blue shoulders

of the ponds  
and every pond,  
no matter what its  
name is, is

nameless now.  
Every year  
everything  
I have learned

in my lifetime  
leads back to this: the fires  
and the black river of loss  
whose other side

is salvation  
whose meaning  
none of us will ever know.  
To live in this world

you must be able to  
do three things:  
to love that which is mortal;  
to hold it

against your bones knowing  
your life depends upon it;  
and, when the time comes, to let it go,  
to let it go.