



## Unique Grief (En Español)

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*On the level of the human spirit, an equal, a companion, an understanding heart is one who can share a person's point of view. What this means we all know. Friends, companions, lovers are those who treat us in terms of our unlimited worth to ourselves. They are closest to us who best understand what life means to us, who feel for us as we feel for ourselves, who are bound to us in triumph and disaster, who break the spell of our loneliness.*

- Henry Alonzo Myers

You are experiencing grief, one of the most profound and prolonged emotional reactions experienced by human beings. When a friend, neighbor, lover, co-worker or an acquaintance doesn't die of natural causes, but is killed by the senseless preventable behavior of an impaired person, grief can be strong, so intense that it goes beyond what can be described in words. It is important to get to the core of your grief and try to make some sense of it. Only by allowing yourself to emotionally experience the pain of this death is it possible to eventually confront the loss and begin your healing journey.

Grief is more than a matter of the heart. Mourning is the outward expression of grief and can mean crying real tears, perhaps even sobbing from deep inside your being. It's any physical/behavioral expression of your pain. You will need to discover for yourself how best to mourn.

Mourning can be more difficult in a situation where someone you care about has been killed. Society decides who is a "legitimate" griever and who is not. Grieving for your spouse, child, sibling, any immediate family member is sanctioned by society as a legitimate relationship to grieve. Frequently, friendships are not considered by people in our society to be "legitimate" losses to grieve. This mind-set can prohibit the griever from seeking support available to "legitimate" grievers. Because support from others is such an important component of mourning, the lack of social support can make grieving more difficult.

Before focusing on the unique grief experiences of non-family members, it is important to understand grief and all its components in general.

### **Grief Information**

Many labels have been applied to the various components of grieving and mourning. Typical ones include: retreating, withdrawing, denying, working through, resolving, facing, confronting,

accommodating and adjusting. These components are fluid and overlapping and must not be thought of as distinct stages like innings in a baseball game. Don't try to label yourself or prescribe how you will feel tomorrow or next year. You may skip some of the components or experience several of them within the same day. That's okay.

### **Withdrawing from Reality**

Immediately after a death, especially if the death was sudden and violent, many people withdraw psychologically. Retreating is a healthy coping mechanism to manage pain and anxiety. Typical retreat strategies include shock, disbelief, numbness, confusion, disorientation, and denial. Withdrawing can be intentional, such as focusing on unimportant matters or burying yourself in activity. Keeping busy can temporarily protect you from the full emotional response, but it is a fragile defense.

Your feeling and thought processes can also automatically and unconsciously shut down until you are better able to face what has happened.

This sense of numbness protects you from the full emotional impact. It is a good thing at the time.

### **Working Through Grief**

Understanding four key components about grief will help you take some control of it. Acknowledging these facts will help you develop the stamina and patience you need to endure the burdens, stress and time of your grief. They are:

The way out of grief is through it.

The very worst kind of grief is yours.

Grief is hard work.

Effective grief work is not done alone.

Because grief work is so demanding, you may look for any way out of going through it. None of us wants to face grief. None of us wants to feel the loneliness and heartache it brings. You will not get over your loss-or under it- nor is there any way around it. You cannot wait it out. You have to go squarely through the middle of it.

Learn to acknowledge that your loss is worthy of grief. Whatever your experience is, you must endure your very real feelings of sadness and anger on your healing journey. You do not owe an apology to friends, family, coworkers or God for grieving the loss of anybody.

Acknowledging reality and enduring the wide range of emotions that accompany it are among the most difficult tasks of mourning. Acknowledging involves exploring what death means to you. It is an intense period of disorganization that can include:

- Sadness, confusion, anxiety;
- Horror and anguish;
- Powerlessness, loss of control, helplessness;
- Anger at God and injustice in the world;
- Anger toward oneself or the one who was killed;
- Guilt for not being able to prevent the crash;
- Physical symptoms such as insomnia or indigestion; and
- Irritability

Making your way through grief is often referred to as "doing grief work." Grieving is work. It is the most difficult work any of us will ever do.

Some tasks just can't be given to someone else. Nobody can do the work of acknowledging the death for you. Nobody else can do the very difficult task of saying good-bye and releasing that person and that relationship.

- One of the worst myths you will hear about grief goes like this:
- Grief is such a personal thing it should be kept to you.
- Nobody else can help; you have to handle your own grief.

Your grief should never be a private affair. You need to talk about your experiences and your feelings. There is tremendous support in being with others who have also experienced loss. The more social your grief work is, the better you will do with it. The more you talk about it publicly, write about it in letters and share in the grief with others, the more effectively you will adapt to your own loss.

### **Dimensions of Grief**

The death of someone we care about changes our lives forever. Movement from the "before" to the "after" is almost always a long painful journey. According to noted Thanatologist, Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D., if we are to heal we cannot avoid our grief. We must journey through it, sometimes meandering the side roads, sometimes plowing directly into its raw center.

He states that while on this journey, mourning, which is different from grief, is required. Grief is what you think and feel on the inside after someone you care about dies. Mourning is the outward expression of those thoughts and feelings. To mourn is to be an active participant in your grief journey. We all grieve when someone close to us dies, but if we are to heal, we must also mourn.

There are six "yield signs" or dimensions you are likely to encounter on your journey through grief- what Alan Wolfelt refers to the "reconciliation needs of mourning."

**NEED ONE:**

***Acknowledging the reality of the death.***

The first need of mourning involves gently confronting the reality that someone you care about will never physically come back into your life again. When the death is sudden, acknowledging the full reality of the loss may take months and years. To survive, you may try to push away the reality of the death. You may discover yourself replaying events surrounding the news of the death. This replay is a vital part of mourning. It's as if each time you talk it out, the event is little more real and a little more manageable.

**NEED TWO:**

***Embrace the pain.***

This need of mourning requires us to embrace the pain of our loss- something we naturally don't want to do. It's easier to avoid, repress, or deny the pain of grief than it is to confront it, yet it is in confronting our pain that we learn to mend ourselves.

You will probably discover that you will need to grieve intermittently while embracing your pain. You cannot, nor should you try to overload yourself with the hurt all at one time. It takes time.

Unfortunately, our culture tends to encourage the denial of pain. If you openly express your feelings of grief, misinformed friends and family may advise you to "carry on" or "keep your chin up." On the other hand, if you remain "strong" and "in control" you may be congratulated for "doing so well" with your grief. Actually, doing well with your grief, means truly experiencing the depth and intensity of your pain and anguish.

**NEED THREE:**

***Remembering the person who has died.***

This need of mourning involves allowing and encouraging you to pursue a relationship of memory.

Some people may try to take your memories away. Trying to be helpful they encourage you to take down all the photos or other reminders of the person who died. Remembering the past makes hoping for the future possible. Your future will become open to new experiences only to the extent that you embrace your past.

**NEED FOUR:*****Developing a new self-identity.***

Part of your identity comes from the relationships you have with other people. When someone with whom you have a relationship dies, your self-identity, or the way you see yourself, naturally changes.

You confront your changed identity every time you do something that used to be done by the person who died or partake in activities you both shared. Many people discover that as they work on this need, they ultimately discover some positive aspects of their changed self-identity.

**NEED FIVE:*****Searching for meaning.***

When someone you care about dies, you naturally question the meaning and purpose of life. This search for meaning can be even more difficult when the death was senseless and preventable as in drunk driving. You may discover yourself searching for meaning in your continued living as you ask "How?" and "Why?" questions.

The person who died was an important part of your life. This death means you mourn a loss not only of someone you physically spent time with but someone you also bonded and connected with on an emotional level.

Death also calls for you to confront your own spirituality. You may doubt your faith right now and have spiritual conflicts and questions racing through your head and heart. This is normal and part of your journey toward renewed living.

**NEED SIX:*****Receiving ongoing support from others.***

The quality and quantity of understanding support you get during your grief journey will have a major influence on your capacity to heal. You cannot- nor should you try- to do this alone. Because mourning is a process that occurs over time, this support should be available months and even years after the death of someone in your life.

Unfortunately, because our society places so much value on the ability to "carry on," many mourners are abandoned shortly after the funeral. Out of their own fear and uncertainty, well meaning, but misguided, friends and family may suggest that "It's over and done with," or "You must get on with your life." Unfortunately, these messages encourage you to deny or repress your grief rather than express it.

When a friend, neighbor, lover, co-worker, etc. dies, many people may be unaware of the extent of your loss or unsupportive of your need to mourn openly and without judgment.

To be truly helpful, the people in your support system must appreciate the impact this death has had on you even if they cannot fully understand what the loss means to you. They must recognize that in order to heal, you must be allowed- even encouraged- to mourn long after the burial.

### **Reconciling your Grief**

You may believe your grief journey's end will come when you resolve or recover from your grief. But your journey will never end. People do not "get over" grief. They learn to incorporate their grief into their lives.

Reconciliation is the term for what occurs as the mourner works to integrate the new reality of living without the physical presence of the person who has died.

In reconciliation, the pain of grief gives rise to a renewed sense of meaning and purpose. Your feelings of loss will not completely disappear, yet they will soften. The intense pangs of grief will become less frequent. Hope for a continued life will emerge, as you are able to make commitments to the future, realizing that the person who died will never be forgotten.

Each person is unique in how he or she works through the pain, but it is necessary to eventually confront it head-on. For more general information on the grieving process, please read MADD's brochure "Your Grief: You're Not Going Crazy".

### **Unique Components Of Unsanctioned Grief**

Relationships vary in intensity and importance throughout the life cycle. Some relationships remain stable over a lifetime and are extremely valued. As each ensuing year passes, the bond grows deeper.

Other relationships may be more short-lived or situation-specific but are still highly valued during the time they are shared. In fact, friends often become more important in some respects than familial relationships. It is reported friends and neighbors are three times more likely than the biological family to be identified by adults as sources of emotional bonding and support. The majority of the elderly who have friends, see them almost every day and interact with them more frequently than with family members.

The closer the relationship to the deceased person, the more deeply felt will be the loss. While research tells us that grief is a normal phenomenon, the intensity of the relationship between the

bereaved and the deceased is not always taken into account. It is assumed that "closeness of relationship" exists only among spouses and/or immediate family members. Often friends learn of the death, days, weeks or even months after the death has occurred.

We have terms or labels that signify most types of grievers. Wives and husbands become widows and widowers; children become orphans; brothers and sisters are said to experience sibling loss, however, there is no term to describe those who grieve friends, lovers, neighbors, co-workers and others we care about. Family titles give rise to identity and prescribe expectations for behavior. The friend who is grieving has no identity, no role recognition, and no outpouring of support from others.

When a funeral is planned and public, the structure of the workplace may prevent participation. Schools, especially colleges and universities, often do not recognize the death of a non-family member as a legitimate cause for absenteeism. Personnel policies in most places of employment rarely allow time off for someone to grieve for a non-family member, although some will grant time off for a few hours to attend a funeral. Even the airlines have a definition of acceptable grievers in terms of granting reduced airfares and other special services. Extended family members and friends are excluded.

*Clive and Steve became friends at age three when they became neighbors. Through the years, their friendship became extremely close. When they were young, they used to introduce themselves as brothers. This tradition continued by Clive's four-year-old daughter calling Steve "Uncle Steve".*

*This life-long friendship ended when Steve was killed in a crash. The only other loss Clive had ever experienced that affected him as deeply was when his mother died of an illness the previous year. He was not prepared for how different this situation was going to be from when his mother died.*

*Steve's parents acknowledged the relationship by allowing Clive to sit with the family during the funeral. Once the funeral was over, however, he felt forgotten. No one ever asked him how he was doing or offered to help him in any way. He was anxious about expressing his grief believing those close to him would not take his pain seriously. The reaction Clive expected from anyone he confided in was "Steve was not family, after all. Why are you carrying on like this?" Clive felt he had to bear his pain alone.*

### **Reactions of the Unrelated Companion**

The level of intimacy among friends is higher than in many other social relationships. The demand of friendship for mutual trust, openness, self-disclosure, concern for each other's interests, affection and warmth leads to intense identification that is so great, the sense of loss of self and the threat to self is very intense. There is both the fear that "it could have been me" and the relief that "it wasn't

me." The death of someone we care about confronts us with the possibility of our own death and makes many uncomfortable.

Sometimes a survivor feels hostility, remorse, guilt, or has regrets for past acts, unkindness, or feeling as though they could have somehow prevented the crash. For the survivor, not only is there a reliving of the relationship, the good times and bad but often over identification with the deceased. Changes in behavior and exaggeration of qualities and values that emulate those of the deceased may become important to the survivor.

*Fran and John had been best church friends since grade school. Fran was a very talented singer and a member of the church's choir. After her death caused by an impaired driver, John became obsessed with singing in the choir, thinking that he could keep her memory alive if he "took her place". John was not a talented singer, and therefore had to rehearse constantly. Because of his self-imposed endless rehearsing, he would frequently turn down invitations by friends to socialize, and eventually, his friends stopped asking.*

Since there is no socially acceptable way to validate these feelings, the survivor will often either sever other close relationships because s/he cannot handle another potential loss or s/he will try to rekindle ex-friendships. These grieverers are subject to the same anniversary grief reactions, frequent physical complaints, frequent visits to physicians, and destructive behavior, which may be directed to self or others, as family members may experience.

### **The Family's Reaction**

From the family's point of view, there are typically distinct reactions to friendships. Often because we are geographically, socially or emotionally detached from our families, they are unaware of our close relationships. While they may have heard of their names, they may not have met these significant people in our lives.

Families may perceive others as competition for their affections and time and hence may try to exclude them from participating in important decisions needing to be made. Examples of these decisions include planning a meaningful memorial service, making the necessary funeral arrangements or even selecting the burial clothing. Often the family "takes care of their own" at the time of a death. Those outside clear and immediate kinship can be easily forgotten. This includes friends, lovers, co-workers, neighbors, etc.

*Michael and Bonnie had been living together for almost a year. They had talked about marriage, but their busy professional lives always seemed to hinder their plans. When Michael died suddenly, Bonnie looked to her "in-laws" for support. When Bonnie became part of Michael's life, Michael's family embraced Bonnie as part of the family. But in the days that followed Michael's death, it was*

*as though strangers invaded their home. Michael's family claimed his body; they emptied out the home Bonnie and Michael had shared. Within days, Michael's family was gone with the furniture, the pictures, computer, clothes, lawn equipment-the house was stripped bare. Bonnie was "allowed" by Michael's family to attend the funeral but had no say in the service or interment.*

The family rarely realizes the manner in which they react to their loved one's relationships affects both the living relationship and the grief process. Most clergy believe their major task at a funeral is to attend to the living rather than the dead. But by custom the accepted definition of who is bereaved generally includes only spouses, parents, children and siblings. Consolation is often not given to the person emotionally closest to the deceased who is experiencing the greatest pain.

Unfortunately, society expects the family to be experiencing the greatest grief and the unsanctioned grief of friends, lovers, coworkers, acquaintances, etc. is rarely acknowledged. The public display of emotional responses such as crying and expressions of sadness is often discouraged and frequently misinterpreted. In fact, society views grief reactions displayed by others than family as an infringement upon the family's right to grieve and even considered an intrusion on the sanctity of the family bond.

### **Nontraditional Relationships**

The highest at-risk group is those relationships for which society has denied acceptable social means for grief work. Those in nontraditional relationships are frequently inhibited from behaviors that are therapeutic. Grief must be public to be shared and must be shared to be diminished.

Because certain relationships are not sanctioned or recognized by society, those involved in the relationship may experience feelings of guilt, shame and embarrassment. For instance, the general nature of the relationship may contribute to feelings of guilt. There may be a moral sense that the nontraditional relationship was wrong and the death was a punishment for that loss. This may be compounded by a strong sense of alienation from traditional sources of solace, such as religion. Grieving survivors may be reluctant to worship, hesitant to contact clergy, and disinclined to participate in religiously oriented support groups.

One characteristic somewhat particular to nontraditional relationships is that some of these relationships may be quite secret. The knowledge of the relationship can be limited to the involved parties, or known only within a small social network. The more open the relationship, the more opportunity there is to acknowledge grief and receive social support.

*Sandy and Jeff had been having an affair for more than five years. No one knew about the affair, and now that Jeff has been killed in an impaired driving crash, Sandy does not know where to turn. She certainly couldn't tell her husband or family what Jeff meant to her and even if she could*

*confide in someone she'd never risk hurting Jeff's wife or children. Sandy avoided the memorial service by masquerading an illness for fear that her grief reaction might raise suspicion.*

Even when the non-traditional relationship is known, the family of the deceased may not feel any responsibility toward the bereaved partner. In a traditional relationship, when a spouse dies, the surviving spouse undergoes a transition to the role of "widow" or "widower." That role, however vague, has a certain status that is recognized by the larger community. It carries legal and social rights. For example, bereaved spouses/adult siblings may be permitted time off from work, be excused from certain social responsibilities and be permitted a wider range of emotional expression.

In a nontraditional relationship, persons lose significant roles when their partner dies, but there is not a defined transitional role for them to assume. There is no formal recognition that they are "bereaved," little support or sympathy for emotional reactions, and seldom personnel policies that allow time off from work.

Grief in nontraditional relationships is but one aspect of grief as a whole. The loss of a significant other, in whatever role, is painful. But only when we recognize and understand the reality and unique nature of the pain can we begin to help ease it.

### **Closing Thoughts?**

Friends, lovers, neighbors, colleagues—any one who has had someone close to them die, all experience the same grief syndrome and symptoms as family members. Grief knows no bounds; it is not definable only in terms of marriage licenses or families of origin; but rather it is a deeply personal reaction to the senseless loss of life.

### ***Caring for yourself on your healing journey***

- Get in touch. Telephone. Ask others to spend time and share memories with you. Talk about your relationship with the deceased.
- Be yourself. Show and share your pain and grief in your own way and in your own words. Write a letter. If you take time to write of your loss you can express your thoughts and feelings in a fashion free from judgments.
- Grief work cannot be rushed. Be patient with yourself and others who do not understand your pain. Never apologize for grieving. Remind yourself as often as needed that the very worst kind of loss is always yours.
- Be prepared for grief spasms. The sudden flood of overwhelming sadness, fear, loneliness even emptiness. These spasms may occur when you hear a certain song, smell a familiar scent, drive by a favorite park, walk by their empty desk or when celebrating special days. You may become agitated or emotional a few weeks or days

in advance before a significant day. Realize this is common and allow yourself the emotional and physical expression.

- Be aware of needed progress through grief. If you feel unable to move through your grief you may want to seek professional consultation.

*Not a mother*

*or a father*

*Not a sister*

*or a brother*

*Not a husband or a wife*

*Yet*

*we shared life*

*and love*

*and laughter*

*and sorrow*

*And I am empty without you*

*- Lee Ann Knapp*