

# Grief's Journey



Frequently when we call and ask one of our bereaved family members how he or she is getting along, we are told of a health problem. Because the physical aspect of grieving is so important, this bulletin is about the relationship between the emotions and the immune system.

The death of a person who is important to us is a tremendous shock to our whole system, including our immune system. In times of stress, we need special care and attention. Many of us find it difficult to take care of ourselves, even though we may be taking care of others. We hope this bulletin will encourage you to give some special attention to the most precious person who is placed in your keeping: yourself.

## Grief and Health: The Role of Emotions

Physical symptoms are common from the beginning of your grieving. Symptoms such as headaches, body and stomach aches, nervousness, skin problems, tingling or numbness, throat tightness and chest heaviness are common. You may also experience worsening of chronic medical conditions or development of new problems. These problems are related to the special vulnerability that comes with the loss of an important person in your life.

The emotional crises that follow loss have an impact on the body. Research has begun to demonstrate connections between our endocrine system, our nervous system, and our immune system, showing how our emotions, thoughts and physical resilience are profoundly interdependent. We are not divided into mind, heart, and body. We are a whole person.

## Emotional Release can be Good Medicine

For many bereaved people, expressing and sharing the intensely painful emotions of grief can give relief and allow periods of calm. Without this release, bereaved people are much more

vulnerable to long unrelieved periods of depression or anxiety, which can weaken the immune system. Releasing painful emotions may gradually free people to experience joy and love, emotions that can strengthen the immune system.

Statistics suggest that widowers are particularly susceptible to health problems and premature death during the first year of bereavement. Because of cultural messages about manliness, men may be reluctant to discuss or show emotions. They may not consider it manly to show their sorrow, fear, or frustration – to sob, tremble, or scream in the presence of others.

## Emotional Release can be Learned

Human beings are diverse in how we experience, acknowledge, and express emotions. Some do so very dramatically and in the presence of others. Some may do so quietly and in private. Of course, there is no obligation to scream, shake or sob, if that is not your nature.

On the other hand, if you have difficulty acknowledging and expressing painful emotions, you may have difficulty releasing them and eventually moving on. In that case, you may want to seek help from a friend or counselor. Probably, you have learned how not to acknowledge emotions. You can also learn how

to acknowledge them. This learning will help in the healing process of grief. Those who learn from their grief become richer and deeper people, more open to love and joy, as well as to sorrow.

*“When grievors can identify their issues, fears, and concerns, when they can be named and distinguished from one another, traced back to their original sources and dealt with individually, the mourner will be better able to cope and experience a sense of control.”*

– Therese A. Rando PhD.

## Taking Care of Ourselves

Immediately after a loss, you may feel devastated with grief. Just to get through each day’s necessary tasks may seem overwhelming. You may have no energy to spend on your own health. Yet grieving and adjusting to loss are hard work; you need your physical strength to struggle with the reality of loss in your lives.

## Taking Care of Self

Most people have a fairly good idea of how to take care of themselves. They know about good nutrition, about the health consequences of too much alcohol, smoking, caffeine or medication. They know that they need plenty of sleep and relaxation as well as laughter, and play. They know that they need to have a positive attitude towards themselves, to believe in their own value, and to have hope for the future.

## Why You Don’t Take Care of Yourself

You know how to take care of yourself, but you may not always be able to do it.

### There are many obstacles:

- You may not have the energy to care for yourself or to change habits that are familiar.
- You may find it hard to give yourself permission to care for yourself when the person you loved has died.
- You may feel guilty for not taking good care of yourself and that guilt may drain energy and make it hard to begin.

## Obstacles are Part of Grieving

The obstacles to taking care of yourself are important. Many of them are part of the grieving process. Becoming aware of the obstacles, accepting them, discussing them and gradually releasing them, are a part of healing. Healing does come at a different time for each individual. When healing begins, you may then be able to turn to yourself with love and offer yourself the care you need and deserve.

## Loss Can be Hazardous to Your Health

In 1984, the Institute of Medicine published the results of a major two-year study on the relationship between bereavement and health. The results showed that bereaved people are especially vulnerable to illness. The results also suggested that companionship and social support can help protect bereaved people’s health. People who are satisfied with the quantity and quality of their social support are less vulnerable to illness.

The results may be reassuring to those with close family and friends, or who are active in church, neighborhood or club activities. For a person who feels isolated, for example, a widow who lives alone without much access to the outside world, these results may be disturbing.

If you feel isolated, you may have difficulty reaching out for companionship for many reasons. Transportation may be a problem. You may feel that the person who died can never be replaced and that other friendships will disappoint and remind you of your loss.

Reaching out is difficult for almost anyone. Whether you telephone a stranger for information, or attend a church service or meeting for the first time, reaching out requires courage and energy. There is a risk of disappointment and failure, and you may not feel able to tolerate any more disappointment.



## Your Support System

You know that social support can protect your health and ease the emotional process of grieving. How can you find a way to make reaching out possible? Here are a few suggestions that can help you move in that direction when you are ready. Remember it only helps if you use it!

- Brainstorm about how you might meet people, without requiring that you actually DO anything about it.
- Pray (if you believe in prayer) for the courage and energy to reach out. Pray for guidance as to when and how to reach out.
- Be open to opportunities. Consider whether you already know someone you would like to know better. Give yourself permission to accept support and to accept friendship. Reinvestment is an important step in your grief recovery process.
- Consider attending a bereavement support group or calling a HopeWest counselor.
- Set achievable goals. If you feel ready, set yourself a goal. Make it as small and easy as you can. Make it depend only on you, so that you can succeed by doing your part, no matter how others respond to you.
- Keep the “Serenity Prayer” in mind and be gentle with yourself. You may not be ready to reach out yet. “Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”



## Parent's Corner

### Children and Emotions

If a group of grieving children were asked to list the feelings in the first hour after hearing about a death, the list might include shock, disbelief, anger, sadness, relief, devastation, fear, loneliness, weirdness and guilt. In short, they encounter

similar feelings as adults. However because of their immaturity, they understand and deal with their feelings in ways that may be different from adults.

Children may grieve intermittently. All the various feelings experienced in the first hour after hearing about a death may visit them throughout their mourning process. These feelings may appear mysteriously and often suddenly. It is important to help children know that intense feelings will neither destroy them nor last forever.



Younger children do not have a good understanding of their emotions and are often wary of feelings that leave them vulnerable. The softer feelings, such as sadness, loneliness, fear, and guilt, are often covered or protected by silliness or anger. Persistent avoidance of the more tender emotions may signal a need for professional help.

Children often use anger as a protection against vulnerability, but when they suffer a loss there are many times that anger is the primary, real and legitimate emotion. The child may be angry at God, at other survivors, or at others who haven't suffered such a loss. Their anger at the deceased may be hard to accept and even harder to share. Consequently they turn their anger inward, resulting in guilt or depression. They also may turn their anger on others, which may lead to fights at school.

Children may be angry with all the family changes which occur with a death; they may be angry with feeling different, with isolation, with pondering the “Why me?” question. Children may resent a parent having to go to work or moving to a new city or a new school.



Sadness in children may show itself in withdrawal, crying, lack of concentration in school, or a sense of emptiness. Some children perceive sadness as a non-visible scar that can't be shared. Fear and anxiety show themselves in many ways, including overeating or not eating, sleep disturbances, wanting to sleep with a parent or sibling, or nightmares.

If the deceased went through a long and painful dying process, had been mentally ill, or had been abusive, or if there was ambivalence in the relationship, children may normally feel relieved after the death. Yet, they may be ashamed of this feeling. Therefore it is important to help them understand that feeling relieved is normal.

When feelings are not dealt with in a safe, caring environment which honors the child's feelings, problems may develop. Some children push their feelings down to please those around them. These children may seem fine, may do well in school, and may not have any serious behavior problems. However their stress may cause physical ailments such as vomiting, diarrhea, or headaches, which a doctor cannot otherwise explain.

### Tips for Managing Intense Feelings

- Regular exercise helps keep feelings from building up.
- Children may need help to find a safe place and constructive ways to express their feelings. They will look to you to model constructive coping styles.
- When children are listened to they feel permission to ventilate anger. This helps them connect with the more tender feelings that invariably underlie their anger.
- Younger children often act as a barometer for the unexpressed feelings of the family. When adults recognize this, they can take more responsibility for the feelings in the home and relieve some of the pressure from the children.
- Meeting children's needs for attention, hugs, and other "soft" responses reduces their need to be angry to get attention.
- When the family is grieving, it's normal for the home to be chaotic at times. It's important for all family members to have a quiet, safe place to sort out and express some of their more vulnerable feelings.

- Regularly play games and do activities that your child chooses, with his rules, to help him feel validated. It will also help him to re-establish a sense of control.
- Help children write letters or poems, keep a journal, or draw to promote another way for them to express and manage their more intense feelings. It also provides a place for the more subtle feelings to be understood. Drawing, painting, clay, collage and other expressive arts help as well. In activities of this sort, privacy, freedom from judgment and emphasis on doing the activity instead of the final product are important.
- Reading books about death and grief with children helps them explore their feelings and decreases isolation. A list of current titles that could be appropriate for their age and circumstances are available from local librarians, school counselors or HopeWest.



### Complicated Grief and its Impact on our Health

Though there are many physical manifestations that come with our grief, we should never assume that they are always somatic symptoms. It is important to rule out organic reasons as a cause of our symptoms and see a physician to ensure that specific medical attention is provided when indicated.

The need for medical consultation is especially warranted with regard to medication. It is still not uncommon to find physicians who prescribe anti-anxiety agents or anti-depressants to reduce the symptoms of distress manifested in acute grief. Because this most often inhibits the individual's experience of mourning, it is not uncommon to find mourners who later on have only vague

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recollections of the funeral or ritual attended. And when they did come out of their drugged state, their anguish was met with more drugs and those critical opportunities to mourn were lost.

For many individuals this was a forerunner of complicated grief – or grief which is not loosened or released and that interferes with the person's needs or well-being. Some of the characteristics of complicated grief are: (1) that it is especially intense (2) that it lasts beyond the expected time (3) that there will be multiple manifestations of symptoms (4) that it interferes with our well-being (5) and that emotions can be unexpressed or overwhelming in expression.

Some of the factors which may cause grief to remain unexpressed may come from our own personality or ethnicity or the fear of being overwhelmed or out of control. We may sense that we cannot handle the pain related to allowing ourselves to be fully in touch with the depth of our pain. We may not have a sufficient support system – no one who can listen and be there for us in a non-judgmental way. Or we may lack sufficient ego strength or may not have developed sufficient coping patterns that have worked in the past.

Sometimes our mourning is delayed because of a concurrent crisis taking place around us – perhaps a health crisis of our own. Or we may have overwhelming responsibilities such as young children to raise and we must now be the breadwinner when we are ill prepared to do so. Though these may be appropriate reasons for a delay in grief, such a delay may be met with minimal support from others who now expect our

grief to have been resolved. When our grief does become complicated it is usually due to attempts to deny, repress or avoid the pain it causes or the full realization of all its implications. Or it may be our attempt to hold onto and avoid relinquishing the lost loved one. It is here that our work to establish a new and healthy relationship with our loved one will demand a willingness to do further grief work to loosen and change our relationship.

When we cannot control our emotions and our grief continues on in intensity, we may have a need to look at our grief in smaller pieces. Our overwhelming feelings may be caused by looking at the totality of the loss, not only of our loved one, but of all the associated losses which come with it. We may need to look at one issue at a time and be able to see some way in which to cope with it one piece at a time.

It may also be important to look at our relationship to our loved one – being specific about what it is that we don't want to deal with – and begin to confront both missing the things we like and those which we don't like. It is important that this is not simply an intellectual process, but one in which we can have an emotions catharsis along with a review of our past and present thoughts and beliefs which come together to give us a changed perspective our assumptive world. This may require repeated efforts on our part to, over time, to clarify, interpret and work through our issues and our fears of facing the future without our loved ones.

## *Grief's Journey*

Editor: Kay Cogswell, LCSW

### *Contributions by:*

Kay Cogswell, LCSW • River Malcom, MFCC • Dorris Kingsbury, MFCC • Barbara Smith, MFCC  
Scott Johnson, MA • Kathi Olsen, MA • Susan Parker-Overstreet

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**Hospice of North Coast • Hope Bereavement Center**

5441 Avenida Encinas, Ste. A, Carlsbad, CA 92008 • (760) 431-4100 • [www.hospicenorthcoast.org](http://www.hospicenorthcoast.org)

## HopeWest

### HopeWest Hospice Care Center

3090 North 12th Street, Unit B  
Grand Junction, Colorado 81506  
(970) 241-2212

### Miller Homestead

3090 North 12th Street, Unit A  
Grand Junction, Colorado 81506  
(970) 245-5377

### Mesa County

2754 Compass Drive, Suite 377  
Grand Junction, Colorado 81506  
(970) 241-2212

### Plateau Valley & DeBeque

PO Box 294  
Collbran, Colorado 81624  
(970) 487-3844

### Delta County

195 Stafford Lane • PO Box 24  
Delta, Colorado 81416  
(970) 874-6823

### Montrose/Ouray Counties

725 South 4th Street  
Montrose, Colorado 81401  
(970) 240-7734

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serious illness and grief – one family at a time.*