

Embracing the Uniqueness of your Grief



The wilderness of your grief is *your* wilderness – it is a creation of your unique self, the unique person who died, and the unique circumstances of your life. Your wilderness may be rockier or more level than others. Your path may be revealed in a straight line, or, more likely, it may be full of twists and turns.

In life we are all exposed and engaged in grieving, but our journey is never precisely the same as another's. Be mindful about comparing your grieving experiences with that of other people. It will be necessary for you to carve out your own mourning practices. You don't have to move through this alone, access your supports and loved ones, but it is a time to approach your grieving authentically and with your own intentions.

1. Your relationship with the Person who died.

Your relationship with the person who died is different than that person's relationship with anyone else. You may have been extremely close and shared a special bond. Or maybe it was your co-worker you shared your breaks with. Or maybe a student you also coached. Perhaps your relationship with the person who died included disagreement or struggle. Maybe you were more distanced from the person who died than those around you.

The stronger your attachment to the person who died, the more complex your grief journey will be. It only makes sense that the closer you felt to the person who died, the more torn apart you will feel after the death. Ambivalent relationships can also be particularly hard to integrate after death. You may feel a strong sense of "unfinished business" – things you wanted to say but never did, conflicts you wanted to resolve but couldn't or didn't.

Sometimes our relationship with the person who died isn't close, it may be a community tragedy, a traumatic incident or a celebrity death. It's still valid that this death impacts us on a personal level and necessitates we move through the grieving process. People have reported feeling guilty that they are emotionally upset, when others so much closer to the person who died have lost so much more. Grieving a loss isn't exclusive. You are entitled to your emotions and finding ways to express them. The act of caring in the midst of loss doesn't take away from others, in fact it connects us and honours the person who died.

2. The circumstances of the death.

How, why, and when the person died can have a definite impact on your journey into grief. For example, was the death sudden or anticipated? How old was the person who died? Do you feel the death was preventable? Was the death part of a tragedy?

A sudden, unexpected death obviously does not allow you any opportunity to prepare yourself for what was about to happen. But are you ever "ready" for that moment at all? After a death due to a terminal illness, friends and family members report they were still, in a sense, shocked by the death. However, they also report being thankful to share special time with them before they died and had opportunity to tell them how they felt.

The age of the person who died also affects your acceptance of the death. When a child dies, the order of the world is turned upside down. Your grief might also be heightened when a person dies in what was thought to be the "prime" of their life. We often find our grief easier when we feel the person had the chance to live a full life. When we believe the person's life was cut too short, our innate sense of injustice colours our grief.

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You might also be asking yourself the “if-only’s” and they are natural for you to explore. What you’re really feeling, at bottom, is a lack of control over what happened. And accepting that we have little control over the lives of those we love is a difficult thing indeed.

3. The ritual or funeral experience.

Funeral and their surrounding rituals can either help or hinder your personal grief experience. There is no single right way to have a funeral. However, we do know that creating a meaningful ritual for survivors can aid in the social, emotional, and spiritual healing after a death.

A grieving ritual, such as a funeral, a celebration of life, memorial service, is a time and a place to express your feelings about the death, thus legitimizing them. It brings you closer to others who can give you support, affirm that life goes on in the face of death and provides you with a context of meaning in keeping with your own beliefs. It can be about creating a momentum to help you convert your grief into mourning. It also helps you “know what to do” at a time when we don’t know what to do.

When we aren’t able to attend a funeral, you may find that it complicates your healing process. Be assured that it is never too late for you to plan and implement a ritual that will meet your needs. You might plan a tree planting ceremony in honor of the person who died, or hold your own ceremony in a place and way that is meaningful to your relationship with the person who died. A meaningful funeral is a really good beginning, not as you may have heard, “closure” or “the end.”

4. The people in your life.

Mourning requires the outside support of other human beings in order for you to heal. Without a stabilizing support system of at least one other person, the odds are that you will have difficulty in doing this work of mourning. Healing requires an environment of empathy, caring and gentle encouragement.

Find people who are compassionate and patient for you and your grief and can show up for you on an ongoing basis, long after the death has occurred. Ask yourself if you are willing and able to accept the support. If you are ashamed of your need to mourn, you may end up isolating from the very people who would walk with you in your journey through the wilderness of your grief.

5. Your unique personality.

What words would you use to describe yourself? What words would other people use to describe you? Are you serious? Silly? Friendly? Shy?

Whatever your unique personality, rest assured that it will be reflected in your grief. If you are quiet by nature, you may express your grief quietly. If you are outgoing by nature, you may be more expressive with your grief.

How you have responded to other losses or crisis in your life may be consistent with how you respond to this death. If you tend to remain distant or run away from crisis, you may do the same now. If, however, you always confront crisis head-on and openly expressed your thoughts and feelings, you may now follow that pattern of behaviour.

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Other aspects of your personality, such as your self-identity, values, and beliefs impact your response to death. Also, any long term mental health issues, such as depression or anxiety, will probably influence your grief causing you to be more activated.

6. The unique personality of the person who died.

Just as your own personality is reflected in your grief journey, so, too, is the unique personality of the person who died. What was the person who died like? What roles did they play in your life? Were they the funny one? Or were they the responsible one? Personality is the sum total of all characteristics that made the person who they were. There will be parts of the person you loved, and parts you liked the least. It's no wonder that there is complexity to what you miss when there are so many parts of the person you have lost all at once.

Whatever your feelings about the personality of the person who died, talk about your feelings openly. *The key is finding someone you can trust who will listen to you without sitting in judgment of you.*

7. Your gender.

Your gender may influence your own grieving, and also the ways in which others relate to you at this time. While gender expectations are not always rigid, men are often encouraged and expected to be "strong" and restrained. Typically, men have more difficulty in allowing themselves to move towards painful feelings. Sometimes, men resist accepting outside support. Women sometimes have a hard time expressing feelings of anger. Women may also find themselves trying to fix the emotions of others, rather than allowing themselves and others to make space for the waves of painful emotions.

We must be careful about generalizations as too much can be made of gender differences and not enough is made of the capacity to grieve and mourn. Willingness to mourn often transcends gender.

8. Your cultural background.

Your cultural background is an important part of how you experience and express grief. When we indicate culture we mean the values, rules (spoken and unspoken), and traditions that guide you and your family. Often these values, rules and traditions have been handed down for generations. Community, education, political beliefs are also aspects of your cultural identity. Basically, your culture is your way of being in the world.

9. Your religious or spiritual background.

Your personal belief system can have a tremendous impact on your journey into grief. You may find your spiritual beliefs being deepened, or you may find yourself questioning your beliefs as part of your mourning work. Mistakenly, people think that with faith and spirituality there is no need to mourn. Having faith does not mean you do not need to mourn, it means having the courage to allow yourself to do the painful work of mourning.

10. Other crises or stresses in your life right now.

What else is going on in your life right now? Although we think it shouldn't, the world does keep turning after a death. You may still have work and finances to manage, or others in your life who require care such as children or elderly parents. There may be other difficulties impacting you on a personal, family, community and global level that need your attention and energy.

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Take steps to de-stress your life for the time being, if at all possible. Now is the time to concentrate on mourning and healing in grief. If other demands are too intense right now, you may need to slow down your grief and work in pieces. This naturally delayed mourning is sometimes your only choice.

11. Your experiences with loss and death in the past.

One way to think of yourself is that you are the sum total of all that you have experienced in your life so far. Your consciousness is in large part a creation of what you do and what happens to you. Before this death, you may have experienced other significant losses in your life. Other, non-death losses in your past may also influence your grieving process, such as divorce, job loss, financial downturns and severed relationships. Sometimes this new death can activate our pain around these past losses and we are then mourning them simultaneously, one fresh and the others resurfaced. In some ways the more deaths we mourn, the more we understand our grieving process and the cycle of life. There will always be sadness and mourning, but we find ways to integrate death and loss into our living.

12. Your physical health.

How you feel physically has a significant effect on your grief. If you are tired and eating poorly, your coping skills will be diminished. If you are sick, your bodily symptoms may be as, if not more, pressing than your emotional and spiritual symptoms. Bear in mind that taking care of yourself physically is one of the best things you can do to lay the foundation for healthy mourning.

Whatever the uniqueness of our grieving process, taking care to truly embrace our internal experiences is key. Noticing that what we feel in this exact moment is not the same as our feeling in another moment. Nor are our feeling the same as the person grieving next to us. Let go of judgment of where you should be and embrace where you are in the process mourning now.

Excerpt from: Wolfelt, Alan, D. "Understanding Your Grief: Ten essential touchstones for finding hope and healing your heart."

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