H. Norman Wright
Author of *Helping Those in Grief*

**Experiencing the Loss of a Family Member**

*Discover the Path to Hope and Healing*

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H. Norman Wright, Experiencing the Loss of a Family Member
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Introduction

If you are reading this book, you have probably experienced a loss in your life. It could be one of the worst in your life—the death of a family member. Losses abound in life, but we would rather avoid them, especially the loss of a loved one.

When a member of your immediate family dies, you experience a painful transition from your familiar world. You are plunged into a new life that you don’t like. This death can also end or threaten your plans for the future.

When you lose a family member, it’s not only an individual loss. Yes, your life will be impacted, but so will the entire family’s. What you knew as family is gone. All of you will have to discover how to function together in a new way. There is a shift in the balance of your family. Who is supposed to do what? Some roles are obvious and some are not.

Each member of your family will respond differently to the loss because of his or her own losses and relationship with the deceased. Everyone will struggle and make adjustments. What if someone wants to empty the house, but the others want it left intact with pictures up? What if someone wants the traditional holiday, but others want it changed? What if the inheritance doesn’t seem fair to everyone?

The loss of any family member throws the entire family into crisis. To understand the enormous stress that a death inflicts on the family as a whole—and on each of its members—it is helpful to consider your family’s functioning methods during routine times. To what degree do you believe your family was healthy? A healthy, unstressed family will operate under certain circumstances and systems. Each family member in the system is related by heredity and emotions to each of the others, and each member is crucial to the family’s organization and balanced functioning powers. Your family unit provides protection and sustenance to you and to each person within
the unit, and gives a sense of belonging and togetherness. Each of you has found his or her own identity within this unit but also has realized that each was a separate individual.

Any family death disrupts the delicate balance between the family togetherness and its members’ individuality. Whoever has died held a specific role of importance to the family structure. Eventually, the remaining family members will assume these responsibilities. The surviving parent will take on those obligations that require an adult’s experience. The children will fill in with those abilities that are in keeping with their ages and development. Until this occurs, though, the family’s normal patterns of interacting are short-circuited. Before new and successful family patterns can be established, each family member must make significant adjustments. This includes not only your role as a family member but also your relationship to every family member. This is not a step easily taken in the midst of suffering.

Before the construction of new family roles can begin, each person needs time and space to absorb the loss in his or her own way. All members must maintain the ability to disengage from the unit when necessary. But disengagement can be carried too far.

How do you see others grieving as well as changing their roles? What difficulties do you anticipate? What do you need from each other? What do all the other family members need from you?

Some deaths are considered natural and timely. They’re expected, especially at a certain age and with accompanying physical problems. But many others are not expected.

Death comes in many forms, bringing with it varying degrees of pain, sorrow and grief. When it comes, it disrupts your life story. It is a time when you are vulnerable in several areas.

You are vulnerable in your connections with those who die. Objects, things, places, events and other people are always there to remind you of your loss. Personal items, where your loved one lived, the places your loved one frequented, their special days and events—all are reminders that impact you.

You’re also vulnerable to the loss of stability. Your daily routines and life patterns have been disrupted. The more you were involved in
the everyday life of the deceased loved one, the greater your adjustment to the loss. You see yourself no longer as a complete person now that your loved one is gone. It's difficult to go on with life without, and you may feel incomplete in your present life story. It's difficult to see the future as you once did. Many say they feel fragmented. Perhaps you do as well.

You may have unfinished business—plans and dreams for the future; conversations you meant to have or needed to have; the cessation of what you expected to take place in the next five years; not being able to share yourself with the person, or not being able to say “Goodbye” or “I love you” or “Please forgive me” or “I forgive you.” If the death was a child, you’re denied the opportunity to nurture and teach and watch the child grow up.

You may experience the continuing effect of a painful relationship. It’s difficult to cope with loss when there were strong negative feelings complicating your grief. You may experience guilt or anger over your feelings toward the person. Perhaps you were ministered to or, just the opposite, traumatized by the deceased, or perhaps it was the other way around. Possibly you feel responsible for the death or for failing to meet the person’s needs.

You may experience “disenfranchised” grieving. The support of others at this time is vital, but for various reasons, others may not recognize or validate your grief. They may not see the loss as that significant and thus may not give the comfort and support you need, or they may make inappropriate comments. This can be devastating and can intensify your grief as well as your feelings of abandonment and alienation.

You may feel vulnerable because of the circumstances surrounding the death. Sudden, unexpected and traumatic death can overwhelm as well as delay acceptance of the reality of what has occurred. If you were the caregiver for months or years, your exhaustion can make it difficult to process grief.

You may experience limits in your coping ability. Even if you have good coping abilities, you may discover that what worked for you before doesn’t work at this time. The onslaught of intense and
overwhelming emotions creates a paralysis. Weak areas that were well hidden before will emerge, and unresolved issues and losses from the past will resurface. Personal and relational dysfunctions may intensify. To add to all of these issues is the problem of our culture’s inability to face death and the grieving process. Having to learn about the process of grief while experiencing its ravages is one of the most difficult tasks you will ever experience.

If you experienced a sudden death, there are a number of possibilities of what you may be feeling.

Your capacity to cope may be diminished as the shock overwhelms you at the same time additional stressors enter your life. In addition, your loss doesn’t make sense and can’t be understood or absorbed, and why questions abound. This event usually leaves you with a sense of unreality that may last a long time.

Your symptoms of acute grief, and physical and emotional shock, may persist for a prolonged period of time.

A sudden death fosters a stronger-than-normal sense of guilt expressed in “If only . . .” statements. You may repeat these scenarios again and again.

You may feel an extremely strong need to blame someone for what happened.

You may feel a profound loss of security and confidence in your world, which may affect all areas of your life and increase many kinds of anxiety.

Sudden death often involves medical and legal authorities, and this can intensify and prolong your grieving.

Death cuts across all experiences in your relationship with your loved one and tends to highlight what was happening at the time of death. This often causes you to accentuate these last-minute situations out of proportion to the rest of the relationship.

Sudden death could leave you with many regrets and a sense of unfinished business. There’s no chance to say goodbye, and no closure.

In the event of a sudden death, your need is to understand why it happened and ascribe not only the cause but also the blame. Sometimes God is the only available target, and it is not uncommon to
hear someone who has lost a loved one say, “I hate God.”

Because of the unexpected nature of the event, the death tends to be followed by a number of major secondary losses.

Your loved one may have been ill and dying over a prolonged period of time. If so, you probably experienced anticipatory grief. I experienced that in losing my wife, Joyce, who struggled with brain cancer for four years.

With a gradual death, each day can bring new losses. If you watched your loved one slowly change or became debilitated or lose control, your grief was for the current loss and also for the future that would never be. Anticipatory grief is both a mourning of what is occurring each day as well as what the future holds.

The word “anticipatory” means “to feel or realize beforehand; to look forward to or foresee and fulfill in advance.” One of the most difficult times of life is when what we anticipate is the inevitability of someone’s death. We tend to think of grief as after the fact rather than beforehand.

One wife said, “When all that remained was hope for my husband’s survival, and he continued to decline, I felt absolutely helpless. My arsenal was depleted. There was nothing to do but surrender and redefine hope to be much greater than whether he lived or died. In the end, the effort to forestall seemed to cause everyone involved suffering. At the same time, it was an integral part of the journey.”

Trepidation—“trepidatory” grief—would be a closer fit for the kind of grief people with a life-threatening illness and their loved ones go through up to the point where bad days outnumber the good ones.

In anticipatory grief, you may have had the opportunity to say and do things during the illness that helped the dying loved one and family members and friends.

In How We Grieve, author Thomas Attig describes the journey so well:

We lose the continuing presence of those we care about and love. This is by no means a simple thing. We also lose the security and the coherence in our lives that were rooted in our
expectation that those who died would continue to live. We lose any of the meaning and purpose in our lives that are rooted in our hopes and dreams for future life with the deceased by our sides. We do not lose any of the time lived with the deceased prior to the death. We lose none of what was given to us in our relationships. The meanings of the lives now ended are not canceled, as survivors, we can still incorporate the inspiration and influence of those who have died into our own lives.

No matter how vivid our memories, not seeing those we care about and love, not hearing, not touching or holding, not sharing laughter or tears, not conversing, not deciding together, not greeting or ending the day together, even not arguing in person render our memories painfully pale.¹

When a loved one dies, you focus on what you lose. You rarely focus on what you do not lose. You feel the loss of a loved one’s presence most acutely in your daily life. Every moment you’re aware of the absence.

You have also lost the presence of this person in the ongoing story of your life.

But you haven’t lost the years you lived with him or her; you have the past. You can continue to love and cherish the story of an earthly life that is now over. Your loved one’s death does not cancel his or her life or your history together. As you relive and retell the stories again and again, you will discover something new each time. Events in your life will remind you of the person and his or her continuing importance to you. Your life was shaped by who this person was; who he or she was can move you, strengthen your values and make a difference in your world.

The first chapter you will read, “The World of Grief,” is foundational to your understanding, no matter who you have lost. You may resist your grief, but I encourage you not to succumb to that desire. Embrace your grief and let it play out; it’s the means for you to move forward in your life.
You may ask, “How will I know when my grief is over?” It’s probably never really over, but you can see signs of progress. There are several other ways to see signs of healing. You can be confident that you have begun to heal when:

• You begin to look outside yourself at how others in your family are handling the loss.
• You no longer feel the need to escape from your emotions.
• You feel more comfortable about your grief and are willing to talk about it.
• You have a day without emotional stress.
• You can discuss, observe or experience memories (good and bad) without having feelings that overwhelm you.
• You see your socially conditioned behavior return, and it feels comfortable.
• You realize that no matter what happened, you did the best you or anyone else could have done under the circumstances.
• You begin to see glimpses of new or renewed meaning in your life again.
• You begin planning for the future again.

I would encourage you to do two things: Read the entire book, even though some chapters may not seem as though they apply to you. There are suggestions in each chapter that could help you. Read the recommended books listed at the end of the chapters to help you continue to grow in your understanding of grief.
I

The World of Grief

Grief. We don’t even like the word or the sound of it, yet it’s spoken of many times in the Scriptures:

I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy (John 16:20).

I weep with grief; my heart is heavy with sorrow; encourage and cheer me with your words (Ps. 119:28, TLB).

When a person moves into the world of grief, he or she enters a world of unpredictability, chaos and pain. Each person in grief will have his or her own unique experience of it, but there are many common threads attached to grief for all who mourn.

When in grief, the bottom falls out of your world; the solid footing you once had is gone. With each step you take, it feels more like a floorboard is tilting or you’re walking in soft, pliable mud. The stability of yesterday’s emotions gives way to feelings that are so raw and fragile that you think you’re losing your mind. Grief takes the color out of life. Everything looks black and white.

Mourning is another part of the experience. This is the process where grief is expressed. It’s a natural, God-given process of recovery. It’s His gift to us to help us get through the pain. Everyone experiences grief, but mourning is a choice. A person cannot make his grief better; he cannot make it go away, fix it or just get over it.

Many word pictures have been created to describe the experience of grief. Often, when grievers read these words, they say, “Yes, that’s exactly the way I feel. I thought I was the only one.” They discover
they’re not alone. What they are feeling is normal grief.
One grieving father said:

Grief is like a wave. It comes rolling in from a far-off place. I could no more push it back than if I were standing in the water at the beach. I could not fight the wave. It moved over me and under me and broke against me, but I could never stop it. It arrived at its destination. It worked around me. The harder I fought it, the more exhausted I became. So it is with grief. If I tried to fight it, it would vanquish me. If I pushed it down it would stick in my soul and emerge as something else; depression, bitterness, exhaustion. If I yielded to the waves and let it carry me, however, it would take me to a new place.¹

It’s a fact that all waves run out of energy. As they move closer to the shore, their power is spent and they slowly bubble up to the edge of the sand. So it is with a wave of grief. It takes you to the top of the wave, and then the wave breaks, and you struggle in the froth of emotion.

Waves of grief also bring memories. Grief will expose who you really are inside. The more you stand and fight and rail against the wave, the more exhausted you become. It’s an exercise in futility. But the more you accept it, hold out your arms to it and even embrace it, the more you will recover. You need to take a step that for many is difficult—you need to yield to your grief. You will need to let it do its work in your life, and mourn.

When you enter into grief, you’ve entered into the valley of shadows. There is nothing heroic or noble about grief. It’s painful. It’s work. It’s a lingering process. But it is necessary for all kinds of losses. It has been labeled everything from intense mental anguish to acute sorrow to deep remorse.

Emotions You Will Come to Know Well
The grief process is made up of a multitude of emotions that seem out of control and often appear in conflict with one another. With each
loss come bitterness, emptiness, apathy, love, anger, guilt, sadness, fear, self-pity and a feeling of helplessness.

Doug Manning, in his book *Don’t Take My Grief Away*, described it this way:

Right now your chest hurts—
   The numbness has worn off and real pain has replaced it.
You wonder if you will ever be well again.
A thousand questions flood your mind.
A thousand hurts pop up every day—

Every day you find a new thing to cause memories and bring tears.
You find it hard to sleep.
The awful loneliness seems to be there every moment of every day.
The finality of death leaves a hollow feeling all over your body.

Loneliness comes in only one size—Extra Large.²

Pain is a close companion to grief. The pain of grief can feel overwhelming. It’s like a visitor that has long overstayed his welcome. No one is immune to pain, but everyone resists its intrusion.

Denial—Your Initial Buffer
There are several ways we attempt to resist the pain. Some fight the pain through denial. They say, “No, it isn’t true,” or they attempt to live as though nothing has happened. When they hear about the death, their first response is often, “No, that’s not true. Tell me it isn’t so!” or “You’re mistaken.” They are trying to absorb the news, but it takes time to filter the shock. This is normal.

The author of *A Grace Disguised* said about denial, “Ultimately it diminishes the capacity of their souls to grow bigger in response to pain.”³
Denial serves as an emotional anesthesia and as a defense mechanism so that you will not be totally overwhelmed by the loss. Denial allows you to gradually comprehend the loss, which makes it more bearable.

The process of grief moves through several levels of denial. Each stage that brings home the reality of the loss is a bit deeper and more painful. In that first stage is acceptance of the loss in our heads, then in our feelings; and finally, we adjust life’s pattern to reflect the reality of what has occurred. If we stay in denial for too long, we pay a price. The energy required to keep denial operating drains us and, in time, we can become damaged emotionally, delaying our recovery.

Denial is a cushion. We use denial to block out the unthinkable, but it brings with it fear of the unknown since we are denying the reality of what happened. As denial lessens, the pain begins to settle in; as it does, fear of the unknown diminishes.

Mental Confusion and Disruption
Grieving is also a disorderly process. It can’t be controlled and it can’t be scheduled. Grief takes the shape of a spiral figure rather than a linear one. Grief is not a straight line moving forward only to return one to where he or she used to be. One may think he or she has left behind that intense pain only to revisit it again before relief is rediscovered. This cycle can repeat itself again and again.

Grief disrupts the mind and a person’s thinking ability. Confusion moves in and memory takes a vacation. If you suffer short-term memory loss after a death, it’s probably a result of the stress and anxiety you are experiencing. Your life has been paralyzed and shut down. The more quickly you accept what is occurring to you, the sooner it will pass.

You may even experience your last interaction with the person who died. Some people say the experience is so real that it’s as though they are actually talking with the deceased person again. These experiences will pass. They’re normal responses to loss.

You may find yourself easily distracted and perhaps disoriented even if you’re usually decisive. Now you may be afraid to make choices.
Many people find that their sense of time is distorted. Time passes too quickly or too slowly. Past and future collapse together. Even if a clock is sitting in front of them, time doesn’t register. Recently, a grieving mother said that she was in a time warp, frozen in time.

Grief is one of the most uncomfortable places to ever reside. It hurts, confuses, upsets and frightens anyone who is living with it.

Whenever there is loss, there will be grief. But some people do not grieve or mourn; they make a choice to repress all the feelings inside of them, so their grief accumulates. Saving it up won’t lessen grief’s pain; it will only intensify it. Silence covers a wound before the cleansing has occurred. The result is an emotional infection. Perhaps you, or a family member, have experienced the result of unexpressed grief.

Some people try to make others carry their burden. But grief can’t be shared. Everyone has to carry it alone, and carry it in his or her own way.4

Grief Has No Schedule

The grief process is slow and it needs to be this way, even though most people probably want to rush it along. It will take longer than anyone has patience for. Time seems to stand still, especially at night; but the slowness of grief’s passage is a necessary thing.

Everyone grieves and heals differently. Some people want to be connected to other people as much as possible; some prefer to be left alone. Some prefer to take care of their own problems, while others want assistance. One person may prefer activity, while another seeks just the opposite. And some may even attempt to fill their lives with what they don’t want.

It will take effort, but you may need to let others know what you need and the best way for them to help you. When grief is your close companion, you experience it in many ways. It permeates and changes your feelings, thoughts and attitudes.

Why does everyone have to go through this experience? What is its purpose?
• Through grief, you express your feelings about the loss.
• Through grief, you express your protest at the loss, as well as your desire to change what happened and have it not be true. This is a normal response.
• Through grief, you express the effects you have experienced from the devastating impact of the loss.
• Through grief, you may experience God in a new way that changes your life. As Job said, “My ears had heard of you before, but now my eyes have seen you” (Job 42:5, NCV).

During seasons of grief, the days may seem like night, and often with a blanket of fog covering everything. The psalmist reflected this when he said, “When my spirit was overwhelmed within me” (Ps. 142:3, KJV). These words literally mean, “The muffling of my spirit.” But as grief begins to thaw, you will find the sun breaking through your gloom. The psalmist said, “Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning” (Ps. 30:5).

Perhaps one of the best descriptions of grief comes from Joanne T. Jozefowski’s book *The Phoenix Phenomenon: Rising from the Ashes of Grief*. These characteristics or symptoms with such a fitting title seem to resonate with almost everyone I’ve shared them with; and all too often, I hear, “Yes. Every one of these symptoms describes what my life is like right now.”

The “crazy” feelings of grief are actually a sane response to grief:

• Distorted thinking patterns, crazy and/or irrational thoughts, fearful thoughts
• Feelings of despair and hopelessness
• Out-of-control or numbed emotions
• Changes in sensory perceptions (sight, taste, smell)
• Increased irritability
• A desire to talk a lot or not at all
• Memory lags and mental short circuits
• Inability to concentrate
• Obsessive focus on the loved one


- Losing track of time
- Increase or decrease of appetite and/or sexual desire
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Dreams in which the deceased seems to visit the griever
- Nightmares in which death themes are repeated
- Physical illness like the flu, headaches or other maladies
- Shattered beliefs about life, the world and even God

The passage of grief will take longer than you could ever imagine. It tends to intensify after three months, on special dates and on the one-year anniversary.⁶

**Why Is Everything Changing?**

Grief takes on many faces—disruption, a feeling of emptiness, confusion. It disrupts one’s entire life schedule. Grief doesn’t leave one particle of life untouched; it is all consuming. And there are physical changes. Food doesn’t taste the same; the fragrance of a favorite flower is not as intense. The frequency of tears clouds vision. Some experience a tightness of breath or rapid heart rate. Eating and sleeping patterns will be different. Some people sleep and sleep, while others wish that sleep would come. Sleep is either an easy escape or it’s elusive. Dreams or nightmares occur. This disruption will decrease in time, but recovery is not a smooth, straightforward path; it’s a forward-backward dance.

If your grief results from the death of a loved one, your life has now been divided into two segments—life before the death and life after. Grief can also bring out the best in you, as well as the worst.

Life was going in a well-established direction prior to the death of your loved one. Before the death, you could say who the person was as part of your identity. This has changed. You are not exactly who you were. The person who died was someone’s mother or aunt or spouse or brother. He or she continues to be that person in your heart and memory, but there’s a vacant place where he or she once stood. The loss of this person has subtracted part of who you were.
Am I Going Crazy?
You may also experience the “face in the crowd” syndrome. You think you have seen the one you lost, or heard his or her voice, or smelled his or her perfume or cologne. This can happen at home or in public places. You may wake up at night and swear you sensed the person’s presence in the room or heard him or her call your name. You think you’re going crazy and hesitate to share the experience with others for fear of what they will think. This experience is more common than most realize and can last for as long as 18 months.

It is not just the loss of a loved one that is so painful. It is also all the other losses that occur because he or she has died; the way the person lived, loved, slept, ate, worked and worshiped—all areas are affected. Often the death of the loved one brings up more than grief for what has been lost; it also brings up what the person never had and never will have.

There is a loss of the present as well as the future. This especially impacts relationships. You may feel awkward around others for whom the one they lost was also a loved one. A death can put distance in some relationships or draw together and connect others in a greater intimacy than before. Death can be a wedge or source of confusion. You may feel disconnected with others, alienated, and you may tend to withdraw, which reinforces those feelings. This can lead to a belief that “others just don’t understand,” which is often true.

How Do I Let Go?
Processing the grief involves saying goodbye to the old life. This occurs by acknowledging that the loved one is truly gone and won’t return. Many people struggle with holding on while trying to let go. The ongoing task is to develop a new way of relating to the one who has died.

One way to say goodbye to the one you loved is to share with him or her what you wanted to say and perhaps didn’t. Sometimes, you may wish you could communicate with your loved one again. What I recommend, and have done myself, is to write a letter to the person who has died and have it laminated, then read it aloud at the place of
interment and leave it there. Here is one of several letters I wrote to my wife, Joyce, a year after her death.

August 22, 2008

Dear Joyce,

It’s hard to believe it’s been almost a year since you left my side. In some ways it seems forever, but I know it won’t be forever, since I’ll see you again. What will that be like? What is heaven really like? You would know, and you looked forward to it so much. I have more questions about heaven now than before. As I write this, I’m sitting at my desk eating (what else?) a chocolate chip cookie, and I feel your presence here. It’s like you’re looking at me out of this picture when you sat with Shaelyn at the little table. Your eyes were bright and your pleasant smile was radiant. I’m so glad I have this picture as a reminder. There’s an empty place in my life, and I know it will always be there. Sometimes it expands and then shrinks, but it’s ever present.

You ministered so much to people when you were here, and in your homegoing you continue to impact lives. You are not and never will be forgotten. Sheryl misses you so much. I ache for her as well.

I’m so thankful for the 48 years we had together. I wish you were by my side today on our forty-ninth. God was so gracious in giving us such a special evening last year. You were so alert, and even hungry. We had the Petroleum Club to ourselves, and the staff was so attentive and gracious to us. You even wanted another one of those special desserts they prepared for you! I am so thankful for our memories.

I read some of the cards again today. One said, “Joyce Wright: Humble caregiver. Joy was a hero. She was a servant and was a joy to anyone who passed by her life. When I think about this lovely lady who now walks the streets of heaven, I think of her entry to her celestial home—meeting her Savior
who said, ‘Well done, my faithful servant.’” This was echoed by so many.

There are times when I’ve cried out, “Joyce, why did you have to leave!” I know why. I understand. But . . . God is using this experience to change and refine me and to minister to others in grief.

I wish I could hear you, see you and touch you again. It’s difficult to write now, since I wrote so much during the first few months. But I always want to write to you.

Perhaps one of my journal entries can sum up what’s in my heart.

Thank you for:

— who you were as a person
— influencing and enriching my life in such a positive way
— being such a model of graciousness
— your love and faithfulness to the Word of God
— what you gave to Matthew, Sheryl and Shaelyn
— loving me with a sacrificial love
— fulfilling my life in a way I never dreamed possible
— impacting thousands of people by who you were as much as by what you said, and this is continuing
— giving to me memories, which will last forever

“Thank you” will continue. And one day the difficult word “goodbye” will no longer be expressed. It, too, will be replaced by “Hello, Joyce.”

I love you forever,
Norm

Why Can’t I Feel Anything?
Grief brings behavioral changes. You may say, “I’m just not myself.” That’s true. You won’t be for some time. You may find yourself zoning out when others are talking; your mind drifts off because it’s difficult to stay focused and attentive. You feel detached from people and activ-
ities even though they’re an important part of your life. What is upsetting to many is how absentminded you are. You may cry for no apparent reason. It’s common to lose your sense of awareness of where you are, relating both to time and place.

Whether the death was expected or sudden, you may experience numbness. The more unexpected and traumatic the loss, the more intense the numbness will be. At first, your feelings are muted, like muting the sound on a TV. The initial shock of knowing that a loved one is dead puts most people into a paralyzing state of shock. This is a period in which no one experiencing it can describe things clearly, thanks to nature’s protective measures. Shock is a natural protection, as though someone gave you anesthesia. It insulates you from the intensity of the feelings of loss, but it also may prevent you from understanding the full experience of the loss.

Why Do I Feel Even Worse Now?
There will come a time when feelings can be described as a time of suffering and disorganization or even chaos. The trance is over. We talk about scenes rather than stages. And there are those who bypass some scenes. After the numbness wears off, the pain of separation comes. Sometimes those who grieve wish they could go back to the initial stage of numbness or shock. At least then the pain wasn’t so intense.

There is an intense longing for the return of the person who was lost—for the sight of them, the sound of them, their smell, and just knowing he or she could walk through the door again. One person described the loss of a loved one as “like having a tree that has been growing in one’s heart yanked out by its roots, leaving a gaping hole or wound.”7 And the why question begins to form. Perhaps that is where you are right now.

You may ask or even shout “Why?” countless times a day at this point. And you may wonder, Do I have the right to ask why? It’s not just a question; it’s a heart-wrenching cry of protest. It’s the reaction, “No, this shouldn’t be! It isn’t right!”

Job, in the Bible, asked that question 16 times. And there are others in Scripture. Listen to their cries.

H. Norman Wright. Experiencing the Loss of a Family Member
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Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? (Ps. 10:1).

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? (Ps. 13:1-2).

Ken Gire wrote, “Painful questions, all of them. Unanswered questions, many of them. And if we live long enough and honestly enough, one day we will ask them, too.”

It’s not unusual to struggle to pray. At times it’s as though the words stick in your mind and can’t get past your lips. The questions, concerns, pleas and requests are there, but they derail when you attempt to express them to God.

You Can Expect to Feel Clusters of Emotions

Emotions come in clusters and are a normal part of the grieving process. One of the clusters of feelings to emerge will be a sense of emptiness, loneliness and isolation, even when others are next to you in your grief. Invisible boundaries have been erected. In two or three months’ time, there will be even more loneliness and isolation as friends and family naturally pull away from you.

Fear and Anxiety

The second common cluster of feelings is fear and anxiety. And the fears accumulate. They may come and go or manifest as a constant sense of dread and are a common response whenever we face the unknown and the unfamiliar. These feelings range from the fear of being alone to fear of the future, fear of additional loss, and fear of desertion or abandonment.

Fear works as an alarm system that warns us of major changes in our understanding and assumptions regarding ourselves and others. Anxiety awakens an awareness of our inability to control events.
It’s common to feel that you should have been able to prevent or at least predict the occurrence of the loss. “What will I do?” is a phrase that expresses fear. The greater the emotional investment in the one who was lost, the more you will tend to feel like a ship adrift at sea.

One fear may be that if you stop wanting the person to return, it means you have stopped loving him or her. In addition, the worst agony of intense grief occurs when you realize that the return you want more than anything else is the one you can’t have.\(^\text{10}\)

Some have said, “You need to let go of the loved one completely.” But consider the thinking of the author of *The Heart of Grief*:

Grieving persons who want their loved ones back need to look for some other way to love them while they are apart. Desperate longing prevents their finding that different way of loving. Letting go of having them with us in the flesh is painful and necessary. But it is not the same as completely letting go. We still hold the gifts they gave us, the values and meanings we found in their lives. We can love them as we cherish their memories we found in their lives. We can love them as we treasure their legacies in our practical lives, and spirits. But there is nothing in all of this that implies that we must let go completely. There is no reason to let go of the good with the bad.\(^\text{11}\)

You may wake up and ask, “How can I face the day without him (without her)?” You are afraid of being on your own. You may feel anxious over dealing with the pain of the separation. You may feel upset over the realization that you are a different person now. You’re without someone. Many people in grief worry over how other family members will cope and survive. Since you’ve lost one person, what if you lose another family member or friend, especially if the current loss was sudden and unexpected?

Guilt, Shame and Regret
Another cluster of feelings, guilt, shame and regret, walk their way into the grief process. There are numerous sources for the guilt. The most
Immediate guilt comes from taking some responsibility for the loss; or perhaps guilt is connected to a discussion that you feel contributed to the loss in some way. Guilt is possibly the most difficult emotion to handle. It’s often tied to unrealistic expectations. Some who are in grief hold themselves responsible for events over which they had no control, such as thinking they could have done something differently or done something more to prevent the death. Guilt could also be leftover unfinished business, and it leads to regret that turns into guilt.

Some continue to live in the land of regret and let their lives become a continuous self-recriminating statement. And these regrets seem to grow: “I should have said . . . I should have done . . . I should have known . . .” Guilt may result from unresolved negative feelings over things done or not done.

Survivor Guilt and Anger
In the early phases of grief, it’s common to recall all that was negative in a relationship while failing to remember the positive. Another tendency may be for a person to dwell on all the bad or negative things he thinks he did in his relationship with the deceased person while also focusing on all the good things the deceased did. And then there is survivor guilt. The person in grief feels guilty because he or she is still alive.

Guilt is an unpredictable emotion, and that alone creates guilt. Some experience guilt because they are not recovering according to their expected timetable. This is where self-talk that uses the words “should” and “if only” come to mind. When a death was unexpected or came sooner than anticipated, the tendency can be to blame others first. From there it’s easy to transfer the blame to self: “If only I had . . .” Self-recrimination can be endless. And if suicide was the cause of death, this feeling can be overwhelming.

Anger, in general, is an emotion of displeasure, irritation and protest when feeling frustrated, hurt, afraid or helpless. Anger/hostility acts as a protective self-defense emotion that demands that the world be predictable and operate according to one’s expectations. Sometimes anger is expressed like a heat-seeking missile. It can erupt suddenly without warning.
Anger is a common response to hurt or pain. Anger in grief is often a protest, a desire to make someone pay, to declare the unfairness of the death. Anger can be an expression of pain in the past, the present or the future. When the pain is in the past, anger takes the form of resentment. It’s not uncommon to experience these feelings even toward the one who died. When direct expression is blocked, it leaks out and gets invested elsewhere. If it is invested against oneself, it can turn into depression.

Some people may find it especially difficult to admit being angry at God, perhaps when He has not responded in the way the person wanted, or because the person’s faith and beliefs didn’t seem to work. This kind of distress, when God does not respond in a desired way, can prolong the grief process.

Sadness, Depression and Despair

Finally, there is the sense of sadness, depression and despair. Depression makes each day look as though the dark clouds are here to stay. Apathy blankets the person like a shroud, and withdrawal becomes a lifestyle. When depression hits, an accurate perception leaves. Depression will alter relationships because the one in grief is oversensitive to what others say and do. Jeremiah the prophet displayed these feelings: “Desperate is my wound. My grief is great. My sickness is incurable, but I must bear it” (Jer. 10:19, TLB). The deeper the depression, the more paralyzing is a person’s sense of helplessness. Depression can also affect us spiritually and change the way we see God.

Some have said that grief is the blackout night of confusion because of all the many varieties of emotion associated with it. The range of feelings is like a smorgasbord—each day bringing a wide variety to choose from. And there will be daily variations of emotions that come and go. Just when you think a particular emotion is gone for good, it comes again and overlaps the others. Over time, these emotions come less frequently and less intensely. This is why the “Ball of Grief” illustration is so helpful to visualize.

It’s true that we can hold back and bottle up feelings, but not for long. If we don’t let those feelings out, they will find their own means of expression.
Is Feeling Relief Normal?
One of the secret feelings of grief is relief. Few would admit to this. It’s an “I shouldn’t be experiencing this” kind of feeling.

One of the struggles when in grief is wondering if it’s all right to feel and think what we are feeling and thinking. We know what we’re experiencing, but we wonder if it’s okay and hope that it is with those around us. To assist you in identifying your emotions, look at the “Ball of Grief” graphic each day to identify where you are, since feelings come and go.

Ball of Grief
When it comes to understanding grief, there are several factors to keep in mind that may ease some of the pressure you put on yourself.

First of all, even though grief is as normal as a cold, it’s not an illness that needs a prescription or surgery. Everyone grieves differently, and there isn’t one right way to grieve. Never compare your grief with another’s; your grief is uniquely your own.

Your grief schedule will be unique. It will take as long as it needs to take, and that, too, is normal. Again, don’t compare your grief timetable
with someone else’s, nor listen to the admonitions or advice of others in this regard, for they don’t know how long your grief will take.

The loss you are grieving is not your only loss. Each loss creates additional or secondary losses that you need to identify and confront. When you lose a family member, the losses often seem to continue to multiply, and you wonder, *Will the losses never end?*

With each new loss, you may experience a previous loss of a loved one even though you felt you had completed your grieving. Old grief can mingle with your current grief.12

When you are in grief, you want others to accept and understand where you are and not try to fix you, for you don’t need to be fixed. You’re not broken. When you’re sad, you want to know that it’s all right. Sorrow is not an enemy. Your grief keeps you close to the one you lost. If you have lost a close loved one, isn’t he or she worthy of sorrow? Your feelings will fluctuate; there will be a time for laughter, and this is appropriate. Nancy Guthrie wrote:

> Sometimes we are afraid to laugh lest people think our pain has passed or that our sorrow has been a sham. But just as tears give vent to the deep sorrow we feel, laughter reveals that while grief may have a grip on us, it hasn’t choked the life out of us. Laughter takes some of the sting out of hurt. It gives us perspective and relieves the pressure.13

Do you find yourself not wanting to interact with others? It’s all right to want to be alone; other people don’t have to understand. You may need to be alone with your grief. But it’s also all right to want to be with others, especially if you were involved as a caregiver for a period of time. You may need the comfort and support or just be in the presence of others. Other people can help by listening or sharing their own memories. It’s also perfectly all right not to talk about the deceased and to engage in discussions of anything you would like to talk about.

When you’re in grief, your vulnerability and greatest weakness may rise to the surface. You’re not your usual self; you can’t be and won’t be. Just assert this and lean upon others and the Lord. Your main source of joy, as well as strength, is in the Lord.
There will be days when you will surprise yourself by the strength and stability you feel. Just remember that this doesn’t mean that your grief is over. It’s just a break from your grief, which will return. So when someone asks how you’re doing, you have a wide variety of responses to give. These are your responses. This is you in grief, and you can be free to share this with others.¹⁴

Give Yourself Permission

A long recovery does not mean you did or didn’t love as much as you thought you did. You will react to grief and recover from grief just like you react to all other things in life. You have your own timetable. Recovery may take years. It may take much longer. There is no set timetable for grief recovery.

Not only do some people not give you the time to recover, but the problem also may be that you do not give yourself time to recover. You may be the greatest source of pressure. It may be you who feels that your faith is not strong if you are not well within a period of weeks. It may be you who tries to take your grief away.

You must give yourself permission to grieve. You are going to grieve whether or not you give yourself permission to do so. The difference is that if you do not give yourself permission, you will be in a state of war within yourself during the grieving process. If you do give yourself permission, you can relax and not fight against yourself or the grief process.

To fight against yourself adds tension and hurt to the grief. To fight against yourself takes away energy that is desperately needed for grief recovery. To fight against yourself can lead you to act well long before you are well. Acting well is not being well. By acting well, you will lengthen the grief process. You may even have a relapse later when acting well becomes too much to bear.

You give yourself permission to grieve by recognizing the need for grieving. Grieving is the natural way of working through the loss of a loved one. It is not weakness or absence of faith. It is as natural as crying when you hurt, sleeping when you are tired or sneezing when your nose itches. It is nature’s way of healing a broken heart.
When you are in grief, you are in one of the most painful experiences of your life. What you are facing will leave you feeling vulnerable, exhausted and weak. The best response for you at this time is to treat yourself as if you were in an intensive care unit. Your focus is on yourself and no one else. You need to care for yourself, and that is not selfish. Grieving is a time of convalescence.

Grief is not an enemy; it is a friend. It is the natural process of walking through hurt and growing because of the walk. Let it happen. Stand up tall to friends and to yourself and say, “Don’t take my grief away from me. I deserve it, and I am going to have it.”

This suggestion may sound strange, but it’s all right to practice saying no to others. Many people are going to try to fix you. But you don’t need to be fixed, since you’re not broken. Some are going to be impatient with your grieving journey. You are not grieving for anyone else to feel comfortable. It’s not for their benefit, but for yours. When you hear advice or suggestions or requests from others, just say that you need to think about it and you will let them know. It’s a polite way of saying no.

You don’t need to be concerned about hurting someone else at this time. The other individual may be grieving for the same one you lost, but the one you need to take care of right now is you. You probably don’t even have enough energy for that. If you’ve been the one that others have always leaned on, this will be a big adjustment for them, but a necessary one. You may need to receive the help of others rather than give help, but consider carefully the offers of others to help you. Sometimes you end up feeling drained rather than replenished.

To reduce pressure from others in having to explain what you are experiencing, you may want to print a card or letter to give out when others ask, and also post it on Facebook. Here is an example of one we used prior to my wife’s homegoing:

Greetings,

Joyce was not able to accompany me to this conference. The reason for this is on January 6, Joyce underwent a craniotomy, at Cedars Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles, because of a tumor on the left temporal lobe of her brain, which is the area...
for speech. It had originated within the brain itself and the risk for removal was too great. A biopsy was performed, and both the immediate as well as the complete analysis indicated stage-2 cancer called glioma.

The best treatment option, because of the tumor’s location, is chemotherapy. Since January, Joyce has had a series of five rounds using a pill form called Temodar. The side effects have been nausea and loss of energy. The chemo is taken at home and is a five-day process each month.

Last month, Joyce underwent another MRI, and on Thursday we had a consultation with the doctors at Cedar Sinai. They were both pleased and surprised with the progress since the tumor is continuing to shrink. Most of the research and clinical trials have been with stage-4 tumors using Temodar. Therefore, the medical staff didn’t know what to expect using this chemo with a stage-2 tumor.

In a sense it would appear that Joyce is part of an experiment and everyone is pleased with the progress. She continues to use Dilantin, a seizure medication, as a precaution. In either three or six months of continued chemo, it appears that radiation treatments might be used to completely eradicate this tumor.

We deeply appreciate all the words of encouragement and prayers from so many. This is a new journey that we did not expect, but we’re not traveling alone. God’s Word is even more real and precious at this time. Old verses have become new and fresh. We are walking day by day with a greater appreciation for each moment. And we’re so glad to be living close to Sheryl, Bill and Shaelyn.

Thank you for your support.
Norm Wright

“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear” (Ps. 46:1-2).
Sleep can be difficult when you’re grieving, but it is essential to your health. A continued lack of sleep will make it difficult to deal with your emotions. They may rage out of control. Here are several suggestions that have worked for many in this area of sleep. Some people want to dream about their loved one, while others do not. Most people like to remember their dreams. If that is you, you may want to keep a dream journal. As soon as you wake up, spend a few minutes writing down what you can remember. Do this before you get out of bed. Start with any fragment of the dream and then try to reconstruct it. Put a pad of paper and a pen by your bed and remind yourself before going to sleep that you will remember your dreams.

If you have repetitive nightmares, prior to going to sleep recall the details of the nightmare and change the ending to one that is positive. Write it out and read it out loud. This suggestion has helped many.

If you are struggling with falling asleep, or you wake up and have difficulty getting back to sleep, read the following Scriptures aloud, and make them a personal prayer by changing the pronouns to first person, just before you turn out the light:

> When you lie down you shall not be afraid; yes, you shall lie down, and your sleep shall be sweet. Be not afraid of sudden terror and panic, nor of the stormy blast or the storm and ruin of the wicked when it comes [for you will be guiltless], For the Lord shall be your confidence, firm and strong, and shall keep your foot from being caught [in a trap or some hidden danger] (Prov. 3:24-26, AMP).

> You will not be afraid when you go to bed, and you will sleep soundly through the night (Prov. 3:24, GNB).

> If I’m sleepless at midnight, I spend the hours in grateful reflection (Ps. 63:6, THE MESSAGE).

> When my anxious thoughts multiply within me, Your consolations delight my soul (Ps. 94:19, NASB).
I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety (Ps. 4:8).

Do not be afraid of the terrors of the night (Ps. 91:5, NLT).

In a dream, a vision of the night
When sound sleep falls on men,...
Then He opens the ears of men,
And seals their instruction (Job 33:15-16, NASB).

You might also find it helpful to read the following prayer aloud:

Dear God,

We give thanks for the darkness of the night where lies the world of dreams. Guide us closer to our dreams so that we may be nourished by them. Give us good dreams and memory of them so that we may carry their poetry and mystery into our daily lives.

Grant us deep and restful sleep that we may wake refreshed with strength enough to renew a world grown tired.

We give thanks for the inspiration of stars, the dignity of the moon and the lullabies of crickets and frogs.

Let us restore the night and reclaim it as a sanctuary of peace, where silence shall be music to our hearts and darkness shall throw light upon our souls. Good night. Sweet dreams.

Amen.16

Recommended Resources
