

Yad b'Yad:

Holding the Hand of Mourners in Comfort

Book 2



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The Grieving Process: Introduction

The purpose of this second of four booklets is to offer you support, comfort, and guidance as you continue to cope with the loss of your loved one. This booklet focuses on the grieving process itself.

Grieving is a process and it cannot be rushed. It is not linear, and each day can be different. There is neither a right nor wrong way to grieve. It is exhausting and stressful. Each loss is unique, and thus, one cannot compare the processes. Some mourn through tears, some through telling the story, and some through prayer and ritual. Some mourn in silence and some with words.

Grief is intense. Initially it is a combination of trauma and separation. It can appear as a “painful protest,” a struggle to accept, or a yearning and longing for the lost loved one. Sometimes there are strong thoughts to reminisce or even a wish “to be with” a loved one. This is all normal. Each person has his/her own path, as well as a timeline of experiencing the grief process.

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.

---C. S. LEWIS, in "A Grief Observed"

Normal Grieving

Grief can manifest itself in emotional, physical and cognitive changes. First, emotions can be intense and varied. They can be a mixture of sadness, remorse, guilt, anger, fear, and even relief. Emotional symptoms vary from individual to individual. It is common to feel flat, apathetic, uninterested, disconnected and irritable.

Second, it is not uncommon to experience physical/bodily responses, including change in appetite, digestive symptoms, dry mouth, sleep disturbances, fatigue/exhaustion, restlessness, and uncontrollable sighing. Similar to fear, grief is a stress reaction. The immune and hormonal systems are vulnerable. It is stressful to support a loved one through treatment and the dying process. It is also stressful to experience the shock of a sudden death. I would advise a visit to your doctor if your symptoms seem exaggerated. An angry thyroid gland might go on strike from its connection to the stress hormone, cortisol. Lab tests are a good idea. It is a particularly important time to take care of your physical health.

Third, grieving has been known to cause cognitive symptoms. Difficulty with attention, focus, and memory are common. For many, a typical response begins with an “emotional fog.”

Brother Toby, from The Starcross Monastic Community, offers the following concept: Words can be powerful. For some, “sadness” seems too weak. For some, “grief”

*LOSING A SPOUSE IS ONE LOSS, UNIQUE
AMONG MANY LOSSES*

“The numbing agony after losing your spouse is so overwhelming. It is so devastating. I still feel shredded. It is my wish that reading this [author’s small, tender book; see Bibliography] will be of benefit to other women and men who have gone through the long, dark pathway of loss. My purpose and hope is that there will be points of identification that will click and be of comfort. Each of us has our own story.”

---KATEY GEYER WINANT; One
Washcloth One Towel, 2011

seems too dark. “Loss” connotes something that might well be found. What we may truly want to say is that we want to feel his or her hand just once more.

For the last 20 years I have worked with grieving patients. My training was steeped in concepts of “bereavement,” “grief,” and “mourning” of losses. However, until I lost my own husband, the descriptive words blended and overlapped but did not always resonate. Definitions may serve to help distinguish these “normal” responses after a loss of a loved one. *Bereavement* is the reaction to death. *Grief* is the emotional and/or psychological reaction to loss, but not limited to death. *Mourning* is the social expression of bereavement or grief that is formalized by culture, custom, and/or religion.

Complicated Grief

Grief is painful. Everyone who grieves can use a helping hand and a listening ear. But how do you know if you would benefit from extra help from an expert in loss and bereavement issues? What clues might indicate you could use professional care?

Below are two lists to help you decide if you are among the 10% of those experiencing “complicated/prolonged grief” or “clinical depression.” Any grieving person might experience these briefly. However, if you sense your symptoms are exaggerated, it may benefit you to seek professional help, if only to reassure yourself that you’re on the right path.

“Weep not in excess for the dead, neither bemoan him too much.”

---JEREMIAH 22:10

The Hospice Foundation of America offers ten questions about various aspects of grief.

1. Are you *always* irritable, annoyed, intolerant or angry these days?
2. Do you experience *ongoing* sense of numbness or of being isolated from your own self or from others? Do you usually feel that you have no one to talk to about what's happened?
3. Since your loved one died are you *highly* anxious *most* of the time about your own death or the death of someone you love? Is it beginning to interfere with your relationships, your ability to concentrate, or live as you would like to live?
4. Do you feel that you are *always* and *continually* preoccupied with your loved one, his or her death or certain aspects of it even though it's been several months since his or her death?
5. Do you *usually* feel restless or in "high gear"? Do you feel the need to be constantly busy...beyond what's normal for you?
6. Are you afraid of becoming close to new people for fear of losing again?
7. Do you find yourself acting in ways that might prove harmful to you over time: drinking more than you used to; using more prescription or non-prescription drugs; engaging in sexual activity that is unsafe or unwise; driving in an unsafe or reckless manner (beyond what's normal for you) or entertaining serious thoughts about suicide?

Emptiness has a loud sound. It is an incessant drone, like whispers we can't make out or the sound of water draining out of the tub. I want to thrash around and get away from it. But it follows me. Everywhere, it follows me. And when there are sounds of life around me, they grate against my wounds, amplifying my own inner emptiness – the aloneness I did not choose.

There is only one thing to do. Be still. The silence will eventually become a friend. And within it, maybe we can hear what we've never heard before.

---STEPHANIE ERICSSON, in *Companion Through The Darkness*

8. Are you taking on too much responsibility for surviving family members or close friends? What's too much responsibility? That varies greatly and depends on the situation, but if you're feeling heavily burdened by it, angry or like the situation is "suffocating" you, it might be time to speak with someone.
9. Do your grief reactions continue, *over time*, to be limited in some way? Are you experiencing only a few of the reactions or emotions that usually come with grief? Are you unable to express your thoughts or feelings about your loved one and his or her death in words or in actions? Do you remember only certain aspects of your loved one or of your relationship together – for example, only the good parts as opposed to a more complete and balanced view of him or her.
10. Is there some aspect of what you're experiencing that makes you wonder about whether you're normal or going crazy? Do you feel stuck in your grief in some way, unable to move forward, even though it has been quite some time since your loved one's death?

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The capacity to be consoled is a consequential distinction between grief and depression.

Kay Jamison, MD

Dr. Reynolds offers an additional list of Complicated Grief symptoms:

1. Preoccupation with the person who died
2. Memories of the person who died are upsetting
3. The death is unacceptable
4. Longing for the person who died
5. Drawn to places and things associated with the person who died
6. Anger about the death
7. Disbelief
8. Feeling stunned or dazed
9. Difficulty trusting others
10. Difficulty caring about others
11. Avoidance of reminders of the person who died
12. Pain in the same area of the body
13. Feeling that life is empty
14. Hearing the voice of the person who died
15. Seeing the person who died
16. Feeling it is unfair to live when the other person has died
17. Bitter about the death
18. Envious of others
19. Lonely

A Prayer When a Loved One Dies After a Long and Painful Illness

I miss you. I am lonely without you. I am devastated that you were taken from me. I am angry that you had to suffer so. It was so hard to see you in your torment and pain. But that's not how I will remember you.

I will always remember you full of life and warmth and kindness. I will remember the laughter and the love. I will remember the precious time we shared. I will remember your vitality and your grace.

Your death has left a gaping hole in my life. But as hard as it is to be without you, I take comfort in the knowledge that you are at last at peace and free of pain.

Rest in peace. God bless you. Amen.

RABBI NAOMI LEVY

Neveh Shalom's Yad b'Yad volunteers do not need an explanation of what you are feeling. We are simply good listeners, trained to offer support in whatever your needs might be. We are happy to meet for a cup of coffee/tea. Asking for help during these “middle months” of the first year of mourning might be difficult for most of you. We understand that. If you would like help with a referral to a clinician or you would like to meet with clergy, we can facilitate that.

You may have initially chosen not to attend synagogue to say *Kaddish*. However, months later you might change your mind, but find it difficult to reach out. Please do not hesitate to get in touch. Our volunteers will join you at any time-- for a Friday evening service, a Saturday morning service, weekday early morning *minyán*, or a *Yizkor* service.

While Judaism clearly marks the time during the first month, the subsequent months of grieving are more fluid and individualized. Rituals encourage each mourner to move toward living.

Who shares in the community's trouble will also share in its consolation.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD

Forgotten Groups Of Mourners

Congregation *Neveh Shalom* has a philosophy to meet the need of each mourner. You may be a part of a group of mourners not often addressed in our traditions. For example, a grandchild who lost a beloved grandparent may chose to stand and say *Kaddish*. A spouse or sibling may choose to say *Kaddish* for the year rather than the prescribed month of *Shloshim*.

Additionally, grandparents are a forgotten set of profound mourners. Losing a grandchild can be an especially devastating loss because it is “out of generational order.” Bereaved grandparents have more life experience with death, and therefore, our culture expects them to cope on their own.

Yad b’Yad wants to reach out to these forgotten mourners. We have volunteers of different ages, specific for each group.

*O God of my deliverance
When I cry out in the night before You
Let my prayer reach You.
Incline Your ear to my cry...
O God, I am like one who has lost all
strength
Wandering freely among the dead.*

---PSALM 88

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