

## UNIQUE GRIEF

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

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

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

of mourning, the lack of social support can make grieving more difficult.

## TRAUMATIC DEATH

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A sudden death is usually more difficult to cope with than an expected death. When a person is violently killed, the death is even more traumatic. Surviving family members and friends are emotionally assaulted with no time to gradually prepare for the loss. You could have never prepared for the incapacitating blow caused by your loved one's traumatic death.

### *Violence of the Death*

Your loved one's death was violent. Knowing this may be more painful for you than the experience was for the one who was killed. When people are seriously injured they usually go into shock and do not experience pain. Many people who have recovered from trauma do not remember the point of impact, whether it was from an automobile crash, a gunshot wound, or other form of trauma. In fact, most say that it was some time before they felt pain, even if they drifted in and out of consciousness.

Even so, you probably would have done anything to prevent the violation of your loved one's body. You grieve the loss of your loved one's body and may deeply resent the fact that it was not respected by the killer.

You may not have been able to see your loved one at the hospital or funeral home. As a result, you may be relying on fantasies to form a picture of how

he or she looked. You may even have doubts that your loved one died and may find yourself expecting him or her to walk through the door or call on the telephone.

Many people who were able to view the body of their loved one are glad they did. However, there are other ways to be assured of the reality of their death. The law enforcement agency that investigated the crash probably took photos. These photos may be at the prosecutor's office. The medical examiner or the funeral home may also have photos if you wish to view them. In some cases, they will not release such photos; however, you may enquire as to the possibility.

### *Senselessness of the Death*

Another difficult component of traumatic death is the senselessness of your loved one's death. People generally understand that death occurs when bodies grow old or are no longer able to fight disease. Your loved one's death, however, was clearly someone's fault. The fact that someone chose to be so negligent and reckless makes no sense at all. Knowing that your loved one's death could have been prevented may be one of the most painful aspects of your grieving.

## **WORKING THROUGH GRIEF**

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Because grief work is so demanding, you may look for any way out of going through it. None of us want to face grief. None of us want to feel the loneliness and heartache it brings. You will not get over your loss

– or under it – nor is there any way around it. You cannot wait it out. You have to go squarely through the middle of it.

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

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

- sadness, confusion, anxiety
- horror and anguish
- powerlessness, loss of control, helplessness
- anger at God and injustice in the world
- anger toward oneself or the one who was killed
- guilt for not being able to prevent the crash
- physical symptoms such as insomnia or indigestion
- irritability

**M**aking your way through grief is often referred to as “doing grief work.” Grieving is work. It is the most difficult work any of us will ever do.

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

You may need to talk about your experiences and your feelings. There is tremendous support in being with others who have also experienced loss.

## DIMENSIONS OF GRIEF

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

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

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

your grief means truly experiencing the depth and intensity of your pain and anguish.

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

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

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

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

## RECEIVING HELP FROM OTHERS

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The quality and quantity of understanding support you get during your grief journey will have a major

influence on your capacity to heal. You cannot – nor should you try – to do this alone. Because mourning is a process that occurs over time, you may need support for months and even years after the death of someone in your life.

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

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

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

## UNIQUE COMPONENTS OF UNSANCTIONED GRIEF

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Relationships vary in intensity and importance throughout our lives. Some relationships remain stable over a lifetime and are extremely valued. As each ensuing year passes, the bonds grow deeper.

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

The closer the relationship is to the deceased person, the loss will be more deeply felt. While research tells us that grief is a normal phenomenon, the intensity of the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased is not always taken into account. It is assumed that “closeness of relationship” exists only among spouses and/or immediate family members. Often friends learn of the death days, weeks or even months after the death has occurred.

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

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

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

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

Steve's parents acknowledged the relationship by allowing Clive to sit with the family during the funeral. Once the funeral was over, however, he felt forgotten. No one ever asked him how he was doing or offered to help him in any way. He was anxious about expressing his grief, believing those close to

him would not take his pain seriously. The reaction Clive expected from anyone he confided in was “Steve was not family, after all. Why are you carrying on like this?” Clive felt he had to bear his pain alone.

### *Reactions of the Unrelated Companion*

The level of intimacy among friends is higher than in many other social relationships. The demands of friendship for mutual trust, openness, self-disclosure, concern for each other’s interests, affection and warmth lead to intense identification that is so great, the sense of loss of self and the threat to self is very intense. There is both the fear that “it could have been me” and the relief that “it wasn’t me.” The death of someone we care about confronts us with the possibility of our own death and makes many uncomfortable.

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

**F**ran and John had been best church friends since grade school. Fran was a very talented singer and a member of the church’s choir. After her death caused by an impaired driver, John became

obsessed with singing in the choir, thinking that he could keep her memory alive if he “took her place.” John was not a talented singer, and therefore had to rehearse constantly. Because of his self-imposed endless rehearsing, he would frequently turn down invitations by friends to socialize, and eventually, his friends stopped asking.

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

### *The Family's Reaction*

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

Families may perceive others as competition for their affections and time and hence may try to exclude them from participating in important decisions needing to be made. Examples of these decisions include planning a meaningful memorial service, making the necessary funeral arrangements

or even selecting the burial clothing. Often the family “takes care of their own” at the time of a death. Those outside clear and immediate kinship can be easily forgotten. This includes friends, lovers, co-workers, neighbors, etc.

**M**ichael and Bonnie had been living together for almost a year. They had talked about marriage, but their busy professional lives always seemed to hinder their plans. When Michael died suddenly, Bonnie looked to Michael’s parents for support. When Bonnie became part of Michael’s life, Michael’s family embraced Bonnie as part of the family. But in the days that followed Michael’s death, it was as though strangers invaded their home. Michael’s family claimed his body; they emptied out the home Bonnie and Michael had shared. Within days, Michael’s family was gone with the furniture, the pictures, computer, clothes, lawn equipment; the house was stripped bare. Bonnie was invited by Michael’s family to attend the funeral but had no say in the service or internment.

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

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

### *Nontraditional Relationships*

The highest at-risk group is those relationships for which society has denied acceptable social means for grief work. Those in nontraditional relationships are frequently inhibited from some behaviors that are therapeutic.

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

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

Sandy and Jeff had been having an affair for more than five years. No one knew about the affair, and now that Jeff has been killed in an impaired driving crash, Sandy does not know where to turn. She certainly couldn't tell her husband or family what Jeff meant to her and even if she could confide in someone she'd never risk hurting Jeff's wife or children. Sandy avoided the memorial service by masquerading an illness for fear that her grief reaction might raise suspicion.

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

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

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

*Caring for yourself:*

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

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

### *Focus on Life*

Early in your grief you may have felt that you barely existed. When others told you to cheer up and get on with your life there seemed to be an unwillingness to share in your grief journey.

Ultimately, you will have to decide when it is right to give more of your attention to living. You can use your grief to continue to drag you down, or you can use it to rebuild your life, probably with more compassion and understanding than you had before.

You may understand, in a way most people do not, how vulnerable we all are and how important it is to make each day count. You may never feel quite as safe as you once did, nor quite as trusting. These are changes that often occur after enormous loss. They are all compatible with healing.

For some, enduring trauma ignites a spark of activity to right some of the wrongs involved in a sudden violent death. Most victims/survivors want to prevent it for others. Thousands of men, women and teenagers have joined Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) after their loved ones were killed or injured. MADD helps victims/survivors cope emotionally, helps them through the criminal justice system and works to prevent drunk driving crashes.

**M**ADD and other organizations similar to MADD can provide you with the opportunity to do what you can so others don't experience the tragedy you have. Some people find it helps them enormously to work to end drunk driving and victimization. It can feel as though it is the one activity that might bring something constructive out of their loss.

**G**etting involved in an organization or activity is not something that needs to start immediately, take stock of how you are doing before you invest your time and energy into a project. Make sure that you are in a place where helping won't drain you emotionally and physically.

**G**oing on can be a way of showing that life, as it was represented in your loved one, matters to you. It can be important too for others who love you and depend on you. For your own sake and for the sake of those who need you and love you, you have a responsibility to try to heal. You could not prevent the outcome of the drunk driving crash that killed your loved one. You can, however, control how you choose to cope with their death, and how you choose to live the rest of your life.

*For more information or assistance  
visit MADD's website at [www.madd.org](http://www.madd.org)  
or call 1-877-MADD-HELP (1-877-623-3435).*

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