

Solace



Introduction



You are experiencing this death in your unique way. Your experience is valid for you. Your response is right for you. Your way is the right way for you, for now. Don't let anyone suggest that you are mourning the wrong way. You are your own expert.

Trends come and trends go. Philosophies are in vogue and out. Stop listening to bereavement experts; they will change their minds and what is considered abnormal today will be obligatory tomorrow.

For example, there was a time when experts claimed that you must talk about the death, cry about the death, wail about the death. You were instructed to go directly to a psychiatrist if you were unable to loudly express your grief.


Today we know better. I am here to tell you that the death of a loved one is not a mandatory trauma that prevents you from functioning. You can handle this ordeal, painful as it is. You will cope with the death in the same manner you have coped with other difficult situations in your past. If you come from a family of stoic people, you will probably suffer quietly and then get back to your regular routine. The absence of outward signs of distress may be your typical coping style, an indication of your strong spiritual outlook, or simply the way in which your family handles a crisis.

Here is what Elaine said soon after the death of her much-beloved husband to whom she was married for forty-two years:

“I allowed myself to cry and feel sorry for myself for a few days and then I said, *Enough*. I looked forward and didn’t look back. It’s been three years now since he died and I feel okay and my life is progressing. Of course I think about Don, but only for a few minutes here and there. And even then I think only about the good days, before he got sick. I refuse to allow myself to think of those bad, dark days at the end of his life.”

Somehow Elaine has been able to pull this off. Some of her relatives think she is hard-hearted. Some of her friends think she is not telling the truth. Elaine insists that she can actually stop herself from reminiscing. She says that in her past, whenever there were troubles in her life, she had the ability to block them out of her mind. And that method of coping works for her.

 *Suggestions from a Neighbor*

Keep your loved one’s address book. My mother’s telephone/address book is the greatest inheritance I have from her. I love seeing her handwriting and reading the names of all the people she was involved with—everyone from doctors to neighbors to the dressmaker. It’s been many years since she’s gone and I still feel good whenever I look at that book. 

Whatever works to make life bearable at this time is what’s right for you. Steve told me that when his wife died, he threw himself into his work. His extended family wondered why he didn’t visit them more often. They wanted to feed him and to talk to him about his beloved wife. His friends wondered why he didn’t show up for their weekly basketball games. His boss wondered why he was working late into the night and on weekends, too.

Steve said, “I was afraid that if I stopped I would crack up. So I just kept going. I rarely spoke to anyone. Finally, about five months after Madeline

passed away, I felt strong enough to talk about her, or at least to mention her name.”

According to researchers, mourners who avoid confronting their loss and do not speak about their feelings recover from their bereavement at the same rate as the mourners who process and work through all their thoughts and feelings.

Countless survivors of unspeakable tragedies have managed to endure precisely because they refused to speak about their ordeals. Often, after decades, these people finally felt emotionally protected from their painful memories. And that is when they began to speak about the traumas they had lived through—be it witnessing a murder, surviving a rape, escaping from the Holocaust, or enduring a childhood of physical or sexual abuse. Sometimes, silence gives strength.

Similarly, if your family is a family of wailers I suspect your mourning cries will be heard by many, and then you, too, will return to your regular routine. Loud volume is part of the bereavement process for you.

Whether you avoid talking about it or loudly shout it, or choose a style of expression that is in-between, your grief exists. Your grieving style makes no difference when it comes to your recovery. You will recover. Think about the way you were before the death, before that final illness if there was one. That is the state you will return to when you finish grieving. And I promise you, you will finish. Of course, even when grieving is over, you will still have strong sad feelings, but the day-to-day intensity will be diminished.

Please ignore the folks who insist that if only you tried harder or if only you put your mind to it, you could feel better instantly. They mean well but they are misguided. They are akin to the folks who insist that if you “think positive.” you can cure cancer. Positive thinking is wonderful. It can help you cope with a situation and it may help you regard the situation in a new way. It may even boost your immune system. However, it does not change the situation. Sadly, your loved one is still gone.

What Is Bereavement?



After a death, you go through a normal life crisis and like any other normal life crisis you need a period of adjustment. We call the period of adjustment after a death *bereavement*. Bereavement is a process. It is a healing process. Bereavement is the state of sorrow you feel after a loved one is gone and that state encompasses both grief and mourning.

Grief is your emotional response to the loss. What you experience in your mind and in your body is your grief response. Grief reactions seem automatic and beyond your control. When you sob or scream or huddle under your bedcovers, you are expressing your grief. Grief symptoms alert others to your situation; everyone you encounter is thus reminded to treat you gently. Most of your grief reactions will occur when you are alone; grief is a private experience. Comfort yourself by knowing that your grief reactions are a continuation of your love.

Mourning describes the things you do because you are grieved. The actions you take during mourning are determined by the social, cultural, and religious groups to which you belong. Mourning actions are planned actions, as opposed to the spontaneous emotional outbursts of grief. When you say a particular prayer or when you decide to stay home rather than go to a dance, you are following mourning rituals.

Bereavement is a psychologically necessary state. Whether you react with

anger or with numbness is not the point. The point is that you are reacting and it is normal and necessary for you to do so.

Adjusting to a death is particularly difficult if you had no preparation for it. In the past, when something new was coming up in your life, you prepared for it. Prior to marriage comes engagement, which is a period of adjustment. Prior to parenthood, there is a pregnancy, another period of adjustment. When moving to a new neighborhood, you anticipate reaching out to community institutions to help you adjust. After accepting a new job, you learn about the culture of the new workplace. All these transitions, even though prepared for, create difficult emotional adjustments. Each bride, new dad, new neighbor, or new employee, at first, feels unsure when assuming the new role. Uneasy feelings are expected and are simply part of that period of adjustment.

And so, too, it is with bereavement. Possibly, you never prepared to be without your loved one and never imagined what it would feel like. Bereavement is your period of adjustment. Bereavement is the process that helps you adjust to your new state—the state of living with that empty chair.

Someone you loved has died and you are going through a normal life crisis. Powerful emotions may emerge. Fear of becoming overwhelmed may appear. Pain may surface. And still you must go on. Even though you are bereaved, you are expected to continue with your responsibilities, your chores, and your life. It is necessary for you to take care of yourself. It is necessary for you to go on living even though that chair is still empty. not an easy task. But you *can* do it. You will do it.

RENEE'S STORY

I was twenty-two years old with a new baby when my father was diagnosed with lung cancer. We had been extremely close and he was gone in six weeks. I wasn't yet over his death when two years later my twenty-eight-year-old husband was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

I wish somebody at hospice would have told me that certain signs—blue feet, labored breathing—meant the end was imminent. I had no clue and thought those symptoms were just part of the illness.

I was not prepared for the true sadness and shock I felt. And I was not prepared for the anger I had toward others who still had a father and still had a husband. I'm fifty years old and I still feel that my father abandoned me.

I don't feel abandoned by my husband because within two years of my husband's death I remarried the perfect man for me.

If I had it to do over again, I would have waited to get rid of their personal effects and taken my time to choose what I wanted to keep.

I think there should be sensitivity training for how to care for the caregivers. I was exhausted all the time but people kept asking how my husband was, not me. All the focus was on my husband, but I was working eight hours a day because we needed the health coverage, and I was arranging for child care, taking care of everything and everyone. Those were dreadful days for me.

As you begin your trek through bereavement, you may wish for a temporary separation from the world. Most religions have a prescribed number of days when you are required to observe rituals and abandon your daily obligations. Many employers offer bereavement leave. Take advantage of these opportunities.

Even though death has physically removed your loved one from you, please understand that the relationship still exists. You cannot eliminate a deep attachment. It remains. And that is a good thing.

You are not alone. The U.S. Census Bureau of Vital Statistics keeps track of the way we die and when we die. The bureau notes that the average life expectancy of Americans is rapidly nearing eighty years old. That's the good news. Yet, whenever someone does die, there is a mourner. That's the sad news.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are almost 12 million widows and 2.69 million widowers in the United States today. Almost half (43 percent) of all women age 65 and older are widows. By the time a woman reaches age 85, and these days many, many women do reach that age, and fully 79 percent are widowed.


Your loved one may have died because of an age-related illness, or from

cancer, of AIDS or from the complications of diabetes, of murder or from suicide, or perhaps from an infection he picked up in the hospital. Your loved one may have died while defending our country in the armed forces or after being hit by a drunken driver. Or, your loved one may have slipped on a patch of ice, as did Dr. Atkins of diet fame, or he may have been killed by fireworks or by botulism, or perhaps a heart attack or stroke did him in.

Sooner or later every life comes to an end. And it is the survivor who is left with the empty chair. Rich or poor, young or old, no one is exempt from feeling grief. All mourn. All suffer.

Your loved one, thankfully, has left you with memories. You have the memories of shared activities, and also the memories of a shared life. The hopes and dreams, the perceptions and ideas, the habits and viewpoints of your beloved are still yours to access. That is a good thing. The chair is still empty, but your memory bank is full.

 *Suggestions from Barry, A Widower*

The more I looked at photos, the more my memories came back. I remembered the trips we took and the events we attended. Although the pictures made me cry a lot, they also made me realize what a full life we shared. Take out your scrapbooks and photo albums and remember to print out any photos you have on your computer or in your phone. 

Some philosophers have opined that true love might be proved by wishing to outlive your loved one. In that way, the person you love will not have to suffer the anguish of grief. Grief is tough. Grief feels as if it will break your heart.

INITIAL NUMBNESS

Countless documents have been written to explain what you should be feeling today and what you should be feeling next week and next month, too. Please ignore all such advice. *Your* time frame is the right time frame for you.

Amitai Etzioni, the well-known professor and sociologist, wrote an op-ed article for the *New York Times* after his young-adult son died. That untimely death occurred soon after the death of Etzioni's wife in a car crash.

“There seems to be an expectation that after a great loss we will progress systematically through the well-known stages of grief. . . . My family, close friends, and I keep busy. . . . We try to avoid thinking about either the immediate past or the bereft future. . . . I presume that many a psychiatrist and New Age minister would point out that by keeping busy we avoid “healthy” grieving. To hell with that. The void left by our loss is just too deep.”

Bereavement typically includes three distinct stages: initial numbness, disorganization, and reorganization. But, some people may spend two days in stage one, a month in stage two, and then go on to the final stage; while others are in stage one for many months and stage two for several years. Such variations are normal and many people vacillate from stage two to stage three over a long period of time. Your stage one may be very different from your neighbor's stage one. These stages are just broad, general outlines of a typical bereavement period.

Usually, the first stage is characterized by feelings of numbness. Simply getting through the day is an accomplishment.

LARRY NEWMAN'S STORY

My father's death was totally unexpected. How does a person prepare for disbelief? My father died on a Saturday night. He and my mother were playing poker at a friend's house. My father was usually unlucky in cards. Finally, he won a hand. As he reached over to pull in his winnings, he looked at my mother and collapsed. He suffered a massive myocardial infarction and instantly died.

My father was my best friend and I still, after all these years, want to pick up the phone and share some news with him. Work was the best therapy for me. Also therapeutic was helping my mother and

other family members. I was the person to make the funeral arrangements and designated to be the mature, level-headed one.

Although it has been more than thirty years and I am a grandfather today, I still suffer over the death of my father because I miss him so much. My suffering now is not about mourning but rather about a feeling of emptiness. My tower of strength crumbled way too soon.

This stage of emotional numbness begins at the moment of death. If you are fortunate, you have friends and family around you and they will provide food and comfort and car rides and telephone numbers. Afterward, you may not remember what they've done for you because during this time you are in somewhat of a daze. You may feel as if you are suspended in an unreal state. You may not even be able to grasp the full significance of your loss. Maybe you are thinking you're in the middle of a bad dream and soon you'll awaken.

You may notice that you are maintaining an emotional distance from the devoted folks who are helping you. That's exactly how it should be. You have to do so much and arrange so much that you cannot let anything interfere with your tasks. If you stop to get close to your loving helpers, your feelings just might emerge and overpower you.


Instead, this is the time to concentrate on discharging the immediate chores having to do with the funeral, banks, lawyers, and more. You may feel as if you are functioning in an automatic, robotic way. That's good; it helps your mind protect you from fully recognizing the painful finality of death. You'll be better prepared to confront reality after a bit of time has elapsed.

If you are overwhelmed by the number of people who are calling you, simply put a general message on your answering machine. Let callers know that you appreciate their attentiveness but you won't be able to return their call for several weeks. This gets you off the hook for now, and you need only respond to those who will be most helpful to you at this time. Eventually, you'll get around to speaking to everyone. Eventually, you will want to speak to everyone. For now, though, your primary responsibility is to yourself.

This stage may last for just a couple of weeks or it may last for many,

many, months. Soon, you may feel worse. Ironically, that is progress. When you feel worse, it's because the next stage of bereavement is making itself known.

 *Suggestions from Cheryl in Oregon*

I took to bed and didn't get up for two weeks. My kids ate from the refrigerator or maybe at their friends' houses. I really don't know. It took me two weeks to be able to face the world. Not that it's easy now. My father was my everything and now I miss him more than words can say. Hide out in your room is my advice. I know it helped me. 

DISORGANIZATION

You know you are entering the next stage of bereavement when the insulation provided by shock is wearing off; your haze is lifting. And, sadly, the family members who were so attentive to you are now back pursuing their regular lives, and the friends who were so solicitous to you have likewise resumed their former commitments. You feel alone. People who phoned you daily might now be calling only once a week.


Joyce reported that after her father passed away, she didn't need to cook for ten days because each evening a full dinner magically appeared on her doorstep. Neighbors organized and volunteered and made sure she had food and wouldn't need to bother shopping or cooking. "But," said Joyce, "during those early days I had no appetite and everything was one big blur. The next few weeks were wretched times when I could barely push myself to the supermarket. I sure could have used some home-cooked food then."

It seems that for everyone but you life has returned to what it was before the death. This does not help you. Ironically, it is now that you could benefit from closeness; you no longer need that emotional distance. You are actually feeling your loss, feeling a void. There is acute loneliness and emptiness where once there was life. Please be reassured that these horri-

ble feelings are totally normal, appropriate, and expected during this phase of bereavement.

This is the time when friends, neighbors, and relatives may become alarmed about you. (“She was taking it so well, but now look at her. Could she be having a breakdown?”) That’s because during this period of disorganization many of your symptoms are the symptoms of depression. You may have shortness of breath and the need to frequently sigh. You may feel fatigued and perhaps have tightness in your throat. Your sleep habits and eating habits probably are not the best right now. This is all to be expected during this second stage of bereavement.

 *Suggestions from Alice in Brooklyn, New York*

I was helped by reading my husband’s boring accounting books. They would put me to sleep on the nights when I thought I wouldn’t be able to sleep. And I kept them on my night table for when I would wake up during the night. They always did the trick. So my advice to you is to get some boring books. 

Your Emotions Now

You are in despair and when people are in despair they feel bleak about their future. They are aimless and apathetic. You may wonder, “Where is my enthusiasm, my drive, my passion for life?” Don’t worry. Your true personality will return; you just need some time.

It is normal, at this stage, to feel a full range of emotions. You can feel strong and yet vulnerable; sad, but sometimes happy; lonely for companionship yet sometimes hostile toward certain people—even people who are trying to help. Sometimes a mourner will lash out at a helper for no apparent reason. Has this happened to you? If so, don’t worry. This is a fleeting part of stage-two bereavement.

Sometimes rage surfaces and you may shock yourself by directing that rage toward people you don’t even know. You may be angry at strangers just because they are alive and your beloved is not. And you may be angry at

your loved one for having died. Yes, you know it's not your loved one's fault, but nevertheless you've been abandoned. In your disorganized state you may ask, "Why me?" Strong feelings are proof of your humanity and of your attachment to the deceased. If a stranger had died your feelings would be faint, your reactions tepid.

William Shakespeare gave recognition to the fury of the bereaved in *King Henry VI* when he wrote: "We mourn in black; why mourn we not in blood?"

Other emotions expressed during this middle phase of bereavement may include shame, dread, panic, or helplessness. C. S. Lewis' book, *A Grief Observed*, begins with the sentence, "No one told me that grief felt so like fear."

Some people feel guilty during this time. You may feel guilty because you are experiencing relief. If your loss occurred after a long illness then even though you miss the person, a part of you feels relieved because your physical responsibilities have ended. You can now leave the house without worrying. You can sleep through the night without dread. It is okay to simultaneously feel devastation and relief.

Becky, a new widow, said, "These past six months were unbelievably frightening. I never knew which of those seizures or falls would kill him. I barely slept, I lost twenty-seven pounds, and I almost lost my sanity. I loved him deeply until the end but I am so relieved that it is over."

Are you feeling guilty because of words you spoke to your loved one? Please know that if you have a deep and meaningful relationship, you do have the luxury of sometimes shouting, resenting, and perhaps even saying, "Drop dead." Those words, spoken in anger, reflect a close relationship. Harsh words are proof of shared intimacy. You would never speak to a stranger with such intensity. Your words neither caused nor hastened the death. You do not have magical powers. If you did, you'd use those supernatural talents today to whisk you right through to the end of bereavement.

Strangely enough, if you had a difficult relationship with the deceased, you may be experiencing more upset than if your relationship was smooth. When the person with whom you had some issues is gone, there is no way for those issues to ever be resolved. While he was alive, you had hope for a resolution and for a good relationship. Now there is no hope.

Agnes came to my office for a consultation. Her mother had died about three weeks earlier. Agnes was puzzled by her response to the death. She asked,

“Dr. Roberta, why am I so upset? I saw my mother once a year, at Christmas, and I thought that was too often. She was not a good mother in any sense of the word. I left home when I was 18 and never looked back. So why am I weeping in your office at age 36? I didn’t even like her, and yet I can’t sleep at night and can barely keep myself together at work. What’s going on with me?”

I explained to Agnes that as long as her mother was alive she had hope—hope that they could have a decent relationship, hope that her mother would change, hope that they could talk about their past. But, now none of that is possible. Agnes was suffering because she had lost more than her mother; Agnes had lost her hope.

Cliff came to my office several months after his beloved wife passed away. I had known Jeanne from the neighborhood and saw the deterioration that occurred to her ill body during the past year. Cliff cared for her day and night. Jeanne outlived her original prognosis, which predicted she’d be gone in three months. She lingered for seven months.

Cliff said, “I loved my wife so much. We were together since high school. She was my best friend and the closest person to me. What’s wrong with me, Doctor? I haven’t cried and I’m not skipping a beat—just doing my life as always. I go to work and I chat with my colleagues as if nothing is wrong.”

I explained to Cliff that he had already done much of his mourning. *Anticipatory grief* is a normal reaction to loss and it begins before the death. People begin mourning the loss of the simple pleasures of life that they can no longer share with their loved one. During that time of serious illness the process of bereavement begins, and thoughts about the future without the loved one run rampant, even while the loved one is still alive. Cliff remembered that months earlier, before Jeanne died, he had a difficult time at work and would often get choked up when speaking to his staff.

When the death is preceded by anticipatory grief, it's likely that your mourning will follow a different path than if you did not have all that time to prepare for the inevitable ending. Cliff had several months in which to make funeral arrangements, enlist the aid of friends and family, think and plan for the times ahead, and imagine what life would be like without Jeanne. During those months, he had shed plenty of tears while balancing all the demands of running a household, caring for a terminally ill wife, and working his regular job. Cliff's course of bereavement is unique for him, just as your course of bereavement adapts to your particular situation.

Are you feeling sorry for yourself? Self-pity is often a necessary component to grief. Don't worry; you will pity yourself less as time goes on. You might still ask, "Why me?" but you won't spend so much time trying to come up with an answer. Instead, eventually, you will once again engage in life.

The distinguished actress, Helen Hayes, when asked to comment on her adjustment to widowhood, candidly admitted, "For two years I was just as crazy as you can be and still be at large. It was total confusion. How did I come out of it? I don't know, because I didn't know when I was in it that I was in it." Sometimes feelings of bereavement are so overwhelming that mourners, like actress Helen Hayes, do not realize how disorganized and discombobulated they are until a fair amount of time passes and they can look back at themselves with some objectivity.

Dr. Joyce Brothers, the preeminent psychologist, wrote about her feelings after the death of her beloved husband in her book *Widowed*. She said, "I maintained my lecture schedules, made television appearances, wrote my columns, flew back and forth across the country but it was all on automatic. The zest was gone."

This stage of bereavement is painful—and even more painful if you were dependent on the person who died. How dependent were you on the deceased? Did you depend on your loved one to provide you with encouragement? With understanding? With money? With meals? With conversation? With everything?

The more ways in which you needed and depended on your beloved, the more you will feel your loss. Whether it's changing the baby's diaper or changing the flat tire, balancing the checkbook or carving the turkey, you

will feel upset when you are compelled to do a chore that someone else used to do for you or with you.

Feelings of abandonment are quite common during this stage of bereavement. Willard Gaylin, a psychiatrist at Columbia University, has said, "If you feel you needed the other person in order to cope with life, then they threaten your very survival by dying and you feel abandoned."

My neighbor Helen was overwhelmed after the death of her dear husband of many decades. She had little to worry about; her husband had left a full portfolio of stocks and bonds. The bank accounts were brimming, too. Nevertheless, Helen felt her husband had abandoned her. She would now have to make decisions about investments. She never before did that; it was her husband's job. She would now have to make decisions about accountants and financial advisers. This, too, was always her husband's domain. Helen did not want to learn any of this, and yet it was her new responsibility. She needed her husband and felt deserted and neglected by him.

Bereavement may be particularly difficult for you if you were totally defined by the role you played in your relationship with your lost loved one. If your daily routine was all about responding and reacting to your loved one's needs, this is an extremely difficult time for you. Gradually, you will begin to live your life according to your needs. This will take time.

Not only have you lost your loved one, you've also lost your partner in certain activities. Does this death deprive you of a role you enjoyed? It's possible you have lost an important position. Perhaps now you have no one to cook for or no one who depends on you for advice or for money or for going out to the mall. Maybe there's no one to laugh at your jokes or to comment when you sing in the shower. It is normal for you to feel that emptiness.

During this middle phase of bereavement, life seems frightening and complicated. Daily tasks become monumental. The layer of psychological protection developed during the initial stage of bereavement has diminished. This is the time when you may be feeling sorry for yourself and your predicament. Sorrow for oneself is an appropriate and universal feeling at this point in time.

This is the time when desperate mourners do rash things that they may regret. Newly widowed people who were long-married may be so desper-

ate to be held and to feel another body next to their own that they invite strangers into their home or they commit themselves to inappropriate relationships. My friend Naomi, upon being widowed, figured out a wonderful way to be close to a man, be held by a man, and then be able to walk away unscathed at the end of the evening. She joined a local dance studio. As a side benefit, Naomi became an acclaimed tango dancer!

When he was widowed, Harry, a client, said, “After all these years of marriage, my body aches for the touch of a woman. I don’t mean sex necessarily. I just feel like I cannot live without my skin being touched.” Harry was helped when he booked a few sessions with a professional massage therapist.

Please don’t worry. You will soon finish with this stage and move on to a place of security and safety. You will once again feel at home in the world.

For now, it is normal for you to feel worse than you did immediately after the death. Instantly, after a calamity or emergency, your adrenalin gets you to do what must be done. Your grief response is put on hold while your determination provides strength for you. With the passing of time, your adrenalin dissipates and your determination withers and you feel your true feelings. It hurts. But, the hurt will lessen; I promise.

Some mourners feel terrible for a year or two after the death, although many observers wouldn’t know it. The majority of bereaved people, while still very sad at one month after the death, are able to resume functioning at that time. They still weep but not all day long. Many actually feel proud of their coping ability at this time. Do you?

Some bereaved people report that during the first year after the death, their thoughts tend to be negative. They think of the final illness or accident. They think of the sadness or the shock of it all. Mourners may accentuate the negative traits of their loved one soon after the death. This is a natural phenomenon and occurs most often when the last year(s) of the deceased’s life was very different than all previous years. The negative thinking does go away—but it takes time.

Here’s what Debbie said about her negativity:

“I urge other widows to think about the good years when they reminisce. Don’t do what I did at the beginning and think about the

years of sickness. My husband was ninety-two and I was in my seventies when he died. He was sick for five years, so I knew I would lose him and his death was not a shock. In fact, it was a relief because he was not himself during those last years. He was a problem both mentally and physically. Prior to his illness, he was never a problem and always a joy. We had been very close. Now I've learned not to let myself think about those last five years. Instead, I think about all of the other years. They were the good years. Our earlier life was very happy and full of fun. That's what I remember now when I think back. That was my Joe."

Remarkably, after about a year, negative thoughts and feelings are extremely rare. Your mind just doesn't go there anymore. Instead, you find that you are thinking about earlier times and happier events. This change in thinking seems to occur by itself, as if the mind is saying, "Enough, already, let's get on with life."

B.R.'s STORY

My mother was sixty-nine when she died. I knew she was very sick and when I returned from visiting her in Florida, I decided to put things in order in my business and then fly down and stay with her until she recovered.

During the night before my flight down, I suddenly awakened and sat bolt upright in my bed. I later learned that was the moment my mother had a stroke. But I didn't know that then and I went to the airport and landed in Florida thinking she was the same as when I left her earlier in the week. I called my sister from the airport and she told me she couldn't pick me up because mom was in the hospital and gravely ill.

I had a very slow taxi driver and I did think of beating him over the head, throwing him out of the car, and driving myself to the hospital. Good thing I didn't know the route; I might've done it.

I would have been helped during the illness and afterward if I had known about Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's book, *On Death and Dying*. If

I had known the information in the book at my last visit before mom's death, I would have talked to my mother about what she probably knew. We could have shared the process of dying by talking about it. It would have been easier for both of us.

It's been thirteen years and I am still bereaved. The only thing that helps a little is when a new baby is born into the family. With each birth some of the sadness lifts.

Your Needs Now

If you are having a difficult time now, please know that it is normal to suffer, feel overwhelmed, and wonder when you will get back on track. You also may be wondering what you can do to help yourself. Here are some ideas:

- *You need to talk about your life with the deceased.* If you find yourself repeating the same stories just give yourself permission to do so. You simply need to articulate certain memories. You may wish to inform your friends and family that this need will not last too long, but for now you'd appreciate it if they will listen to you as you review all aspects of the relationship. Your memories are important and sharing them will warm your heart.
- *You need to talk about the circumstances of the death.* It may be necessary for you to reiterate every last detail about that fateful day. Such recounting is good for you. As you relive those last few hours, your mind comes to recognize the reality of the death. Again, apprise others that this need to speak almost obsessively of particular incidents is temporary. People who love you will patiently listen as you recount that same story many times. Soon, your need won't be so urgent and you'll no longer want to report these tales.
- *You do need proper nutrition.* If your appetite is suffering, try to fill yourself with soup and with ice cream and take a daily multivitamin with minerals. Often, it is too much effort to figure out what to eat and then too difficult to actually chew your food. Soup slides down, so does ice cream. Eat them until your appetite returns. When people who care about you ask what they

can do for you, suggest having a meal together. Your appetite may perk up when you are not alone with your food.

- *You need sufficient sleep.* Sleep is restorative and every cell in your body benefits when you get a good night's sleep. Establish a gentle nightly ritual that will help you sleep. Perhaps a warm bath, maybe a calming conversation, or possibly some soothing music will help. To enhance falling asleep, stay away from caffeine and stay away from bright lights before bedtime. Use a task light, not an overhead light, in the evening because bright lights can act as stimulants. If you awaken during the night and have trouble falling asleep again, have something handy that will lull you back to sleep maybe a gentle CD to listen to, or a glass of water, or a favorite photo to look at. Please consult your medical doctor if sleeplessness persists. You deserve a good night's sleep.
- *You need to be reassured that your symptoms are not dangerous to your health and that your sleeplessness, loss of appetite, and depressive symptoms will soon leave.* It's true; some symptoms of the middle stage of bereavement resemble some symptoms of mental illness. The difference, of course, is that indications of mental illness do not permanently and spontaneously disappear; whereas your grief symptoms will soon be eradicated. If you were not mentally ill prior to the death of your loved one, you will not be mentally ill once you recover from bereavement. The death will not make you mentally ill.


REORGANIZATION

Time passes. Soon, the worst is over. You are now in the final stage of bereavement. You notice that your feelings are less intense. You're not crying as much. Upon awakening in the morning, your first thoughts are not always of the deceased. When falling asleep at night, your last thoughts are not always of the deceased. You notice that many times during each day you are comfortable and calm. You are at ease with yourself.

Maybe a few months have passed since the death, maybe a year, maybe two. You will go through bereavement according to your own timetable, not mine or anyone else's.


You can recognize the end of bereavement by noting that you are less involved in your past and you are becoming more interested in your future. You will never forget your loved one. He or she will always be part of your life. It is wise to maintain your attachment and preserve your bond. Good memories are crucial to a good life. You will honor those memories, and at the same time you will be committed to continuing on your own path through life. Death has made you aware of the value of life. Please cherish every day.

 *Suggestions from Vivian in Maine*

I made a mistake by putting my daughter's pictures in every room of the house. It made me feel good to look at them and it assured me that we would never forget her. But my other kids' friends were freaked out and didn't want to come to our house. Finally, one of my son's friends told him why he wasn't coming to hang out. So then we put the photos all in one upstairs room and the house was full of friends again. 

The goal of bereavement is not to sever your attachment to your beloved. The goal of bereavement is not to end the relationship. The goal is to weave your precious memories into your life in a helpful fashion. You and your deceased beloved have a relationship that will persist. And now you'll find yourself thinking more about the person's life than about his or her death. You will enjoy the comfort that comes from thinking sweet thoughts about your relationship and you will continue the relationship in your own way.

 *Suggestions from Lorraine, Remarried and Happy Again*

If you lost a spouse, my advice is don't wait too long to find another one. You need to love someone and you need to be loved by someone. You can keep loving a dead husband or wife and also love a live one. I'm doing it and it works well. 

<i>Stage of grief</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>
STAGE ONE: Numbness	Several weeks or months	Insulation Mechanical functioning
STAGE TWO: Disorganization	Many, many months	Sleep and appetite difficulties Sorrow for oneself Painful feelings Depression Loneliness
STAGE THREE: Reorganization	Several weeks or months	Occasional peacefulness Feelings less intense

During this final stage of bereavement you'll begin, once again, to have some fun. You have a right to paint the kitchen or to buy a new car or to laugh at a colleague's joke. And certainly it's time to get away for a few days, if at all possible. If you are lucky, there are people in your environment who will reach out to you and encourage you to reenter life.

This is the time to look for people or community institutions that will help you expand your social network. Join a political discussion group, book a cruise, enroll in a French class, sign up for bridge lessons, reconnect with Cousin Nancy, and go to the gym, too. The world has been diminished because of the loss of your loved one, but you are no longer diminished; you are emerging from your grief.

When you reach this point, you deserve congratulations. Bereavement is a long, hard journey. Finding your way through grief and learning to live again is an achievement worthy of praise.

<i>Needs</i>	<i>Developmental Task</i>	<i>Helper Functions</i>
Emotional distance	To protect self from feeling impact of loss	To assist with chores
Intimacy, Expression of feelings	To acknowledge impact of loss	To listen
Encouragement to reenter life's mainstream	Accept the loss	To expand the bereaved's social network

Cause for Concern?



Feelings and behaviors that occur during bereavement can seem extreme and sometimes scary. In addition, there are people attempting to tell you how you should be mourning your loved one and how you should be getting on with your life. You are in distress, you are experiencing some emotions you have never before experienced, and you may sometimes wonder, “Am I normal?”

WHEN TO WORRY

How do you determine if you are within the realm of normalcy or if you may be developing a more serious emotional condition?

In psychological studies, the people who at two months after the death are still in extreme distress and not yet functioning at all need some outside help. In fact, it is these very people who, if they don't get help, usually in the form of antidepressant medication, tend to remain somewhat impaired in their functioning for years.

Bereavement happens to an existing personality. You have your strengths and your weaknesses, and life has already given you some experience in coping with loss. Certain individuals, more than others, are extremely vulner-

able to the stresses of bereavement. Find out if you are among those who are at risk for extra suffering by answering these questions.

In the past have you suffered from:

- Major clinical depression?
- Generalized anxiety disorder?
- Panic attacks?
- Severe responses to a previous loss?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, your brain knows how to react in a troublesome fashion. Many people reexperience the strong, traumatic feelings of previous deaths when they are confronted with a new death. This *cumulative grief* is extremely painful and may create a more difficult bereavement path for you.

It is wise to look at yourself carefully and decide if you might be suffering from what is called *complicated grief*. Complicated grief is sometimes called *pathological mourning*. Pathological, in this phrase, simply means excessive. Complicated grief is diagnosed if several months after the death you are experiencing the following symptoms:

- *You have developed obsessions about the deceased and cannot think about anything or anyone else.* You'll notice that even when you are with other people, you cannot concentrate on the conversation. Your thoughts remain focused on your beloved.
- *You refuse to face the fact that the person has died.* At first, it may be normal to exclaim, "I can't believe he's gone." Later on, though, you should be able to articulate the following sentence: *I know that _____ is dead.* If you still cannot believe he is permanently gone, you'll live your life exactly as you did when he was with you. You plan as if he is with you and you speak as if he is with you. You do not engage in activities because you are waiting for him to join you.
- *You continue to yearn and search for the deceased.* You are restless and cannot find a comfortable place for yourself. You are nervous because nothing interests you except the idea of reuniting with your beloved.