

Dealing with Unrecognized Grief

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A 10-year-old boy is constantly being reprimanded for being disruptive in class, a 16-year-old girl starts to smoke marijuana frequently, and a 39-year-old woman about to adopt, expecting to feel excited, instead feels an overwhelming sadness. Each is experiencing grief at some level, but not recognizing this.

Grief comes in different forms, is unique to each person, and often surprises people with its strength and tenacity. It can result in an overwhelming sense of loss of control, uncertainty, pain, anger, depression, and imbalance.

There are two categories of grief that often go unrecognized by the griever and by his or her family, friends, and colleagues. They are known as disenfranchised grief and ambiguous loss.

In disenfranchised grief, the grief is not openly acknowledged, socially accepted, or publicly mourned. Examples of this include:

- Surrogate mothers and birth mothers who have given up their babies
- Couples dealing with infertility
- Losing someone to mental illness, addiction, or a personality change due to brain injury or even conversion
- Divorce
- Migration
- A partner's over-commitment to work
- Death of an ex-spouse or lover
- Adoption and foster care
- Pet loss
- New medical diagnosis or testing indicating one is at risk for a particular illness
- Exclusion of the griever from discussion and rituals involving a death (i.e. the elderly, the young, the developmentally disabled)

Ambiguous loss is one of the most stressful losses that people can experience, according to Pauline Boss, who has written about two basic kinds of ambiguous loss. One involves a person who is present in body, but not in mind. This includes people with Alzheimer's disease, chronic mental illness such as depression, or a chemical or psychological addiction, as well as people who are excessively preoccupied with their work or other outside interests.

The other kind of ambiguous loss involves an individual or family member who is perceived as physically absent but psychologically present. In these cases it is unclear whether the missing loved one is dead or alive. Examples of this include a soldier missing in action, an abducted or runaway child, or someone who has suffered a

catastrophic accident or act of violence in which the body is not found. In these instances, there is no proof of death, no funeral, minimal public grieving, and no closure.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to grief, as there are many variables associated with each situation, but there are some general tips for the griever and those concerned about them:

- Acknowledge and appreciate your loss as real and valid.
- If you feel grief, accept that you have a right to your feelings, and take as much time as you need in your own way, as long as you're not hurting yourself or others.
- Recognize that the grief will impact all areas of your life.
- Don't make any additional major changes for at least six months following the death or loss of someone significant in your life.
- Anticipate that certain dates, such as holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries, either those of the deceased or others', will be particularly difficult, and plan for them, so that you can cope. This might mean honoring the person in a meaningful way, recognizing that feelings can be triggered at these times, and planning for extra social supports
- If there are not socially sanctioned rituals, create your own, such as planting a tree or writing a message and putting it in a helium balloon.
- Remember the importance of physical activity to release pent-up emotions and to release endorphins to help your mood.
- Be kind and patient with yourself. Be mindful of the "shoulds" you and others may place on you.
- Understand that grief reactions come in ebbs and flows.
- Find someone who understands your need to be comforted, affirmed, and validated.
- Take care of yourself. Try to do at least one thing each day that is healthy and relaxing. Taking time "off" from grieving is not disrespectful or any indication of your caring, but helps you develop the strength and stamina you need for the trying times.