

THE LANGUAGE OF LOSS



a therapist's guide
to assist you through your grief

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Introduction

When someone you love dies, it feels as though your life has been turned upside down. Each day is so painful that you're not sure you can survive. Suddenly, you are experiencing emotions that are overpowering and there are moments when you unexpectedly break down crying. It is so hard to concentrate that it feels as though you are losing your mind, however you are not losing your mind. You are grieving.

A death in the family is life-changing. I was thirteen years old when my father died suddenly, at age 37, of an aneurysm of the brain. My mother, brothers, and I were not prepared to handle the changes and emotions we were experiencing. While friends and family tried to support us, they just didn't know what to do, and neither did we.

Death is a life event in which we have no control, and yet, we try very hard to control our emotions. The term "closure" is often used when referring to the death of someone we love. This term suggests that in time you won't feel these emotions of sadness and eventually, you will close this chapter of your life. I do not use the word "closure" when describing the grief process because I believe you should not "close" or "shut out" this experience or the feelings that come with it. As a grief therapist I try to assist my clients in finding a place within their lives for this loss. Grief is not about forgetting or letting time pass. The experiences that you had with this person while they were alive are a part of you. These experiences are what make you, you. It is just that the person is not "physically" with you.

In the late 1960s, psychiatrist, Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified a "grief cycle" of emotions. The emotions she identified were denial and isolation, anger, depression and acceptance. Kubler-Ross found that each of these emotions may be experienced at different times during the grief process, with no specific order or sequence. For example, the moment you are told that someone you love has died you may feel instant anger and then the next week experience feelings of depression. Another person may experience denial first and then anger.

In working with individuals who have lost someone, I find that they do experience the emotions Kubler-Ross identified in her grief cycle. I also have learned that there are other feelings and situations that are a result of the death. In addition to anger and depression, most individuals experience some level of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, family conflict, and a need to understand how children grieve.

The purpose of the Language of Loss Workbook is to help those who are grieving understand their emotions and struggles, and to offer specific tasks and resources. The goal of grief therapy is to, first, feel better, and secondly, figure out where to place this major loss within the context of your life. I hope you find this workbook useful during your time of grief.

Dawn M. Higgins, LCSW



Where are you in your grieving?

The following questions may help you identify how you are coping with the loss of your loved one:

1. Has there been an increase and/or a decrease in the following:

Eating
Sleeping
Physical Ailments
Watching Television

Medication Intake
Caffeine Intake
Tobacco Intake
Alcohol Intake

If you are experiencing an increase and/or decrease in any of the above activities you need to pay attention to this behavior. See the section on Depression.

2. Are you isolating yourself from friends and family members?

While it is okay to not socialize for a while because you may not feel like being around other people, it is important to keep social contact. Try and have lunch or dinner with a friend or family member once a week. If after three months you are still not socializing you may want to see a therapist. See the section on Depression /Counseling.

3. Are you going through any of the following events at this time?

Moving
Marriage/Divorce/Separation
Caregiver of an elderly or ill relative

Financial Stresses
Illness

Grieving tends to magnify other stressors in your life. If you are experiencing any of the above events you are probably feeling additional stress. See the sections on Depression and Anger.





What are Normal Grief Responses?

Having difficulty concentrating or remembering.

Sometimes forget that the person has died.

Cry often.

Want to repeatedly talk about the details of how the person died.

Having strong feelings of anger.

Feel responsible for the person's death.

Having trouble sleeping.

Feel extremely sad.

Sometimes feel the presence of the deceased in the room.

Chapter One...

Shock/Post-traumatic Stress Disorder





CRISIS

A death in the family is a CRISIS.

Definition of Crisis:

"Crisis is a perception of an event or situation as an intolerable difficulty that exceeds the resources and coping mechanisms of the person" (Gilliland and James, 1988).

A death in the family is a crisis. When a 40-year old man who is a husband and father of two children suddenly dies of a heart attack, the family is left feeling shocked and confused. These feelings are similar to those when a natural disaster occurs, such as a hurricane. However, in a natural disaster assistance is brought in immediately to help everyone affected so that they have the support and resources needed. But when there is a death in the family, we attend funeral or memorial services, and then give the family privacy. Getting assistance as soon as possible will help you decide what comforts you and your family. Knowing what feelings are normal and learning about the resources available is the beginning to a healthy grieving process.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

The death of someone you love is traumatic. The level of shock you experience may be mild to severe depending on the circumstances surrounding the death. For example, an unexpected death may result in more intense feelings of shock. The level of trauma you experience may cause you to have chronic anxiety, nightmares, and difficulty talking about or being near something that reminds you about how the person died. These are some of the symptoms of Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Are you experiencing the following?

Nightmares

Feeling Anxious

Avoidance of talking about the events surrounding the death

Flashbacks of events surrounding the death

If you answered yes to any of the above symptoms you may be experiencing Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). And that is NORMAL! These reactions are a way for your body to protect your mind. You are trying to understand and process this major event and your body is helping you cope. However, these symptoms could manifest into a more serious physical condition. If these symptoms are affecting your ability to function during the day, then it is important to talk to a counselor. For example, if you are losing sleep regularly, especially during the hours of 2 am to 4am, physical health problems may result.



What is the treatment for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

One way of getting rid of the nightmares and the anxiety is to talk about the specifics of your dreams and your fears. This may be done in individual counseling or within a support group. Depending on the severity of your symptoms, a therapist may recommend medication in addition to the counseling sessions.

Another treatment used to treat Post-traumatic stress disorder is Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). EMDR therapy is a clinical treatment used to help survivors of trauma. The concept of EMDR is that with eye movements, the brain's processing system is stimulated. This stimulation may allow the client to identify the source of the fear. Make sure your therapist is properly trained in EMDR. For more information on EMDR refer to the EMDR Institute's web-site: <http://www.emdr.com>.



Stress Factors:

Part of how you grieve is determined by other factors that may not be in your control. Being aware and acknowledging the additional stress factors in your life will help reduce your level of stress. Here are factors that may be causing you additional stress:

Gender Women and men grieve differently. Most men prefer to work out their grief by staying active and doing physical activities (ie. Work, sports, gym). Women, however, prefer to process their grief by talking about their situation and the events surrounding the death.

Age If the person who has died is close to your own age you may feel more vulnerable. You may become concerned about your own mortality.

Health If you have a life-threatening or chronic disease, a death may cause the illness to worsen. Pay attention to how you're feeling and take care of your health.

Circumstanceness of the Death Whether a death is unexpected or is a result of a long-term illness, both can increase your level of stress. Individuals with unexpected deaths tend to have more physical symptoms than those who are somewhat prepared.

Relationship with the Deceased What role did this person play in your life? Were they someone who helped you make major decisions or were they your emotional support system? Define your loss.

Prior Losses If you have had a previous loss (ie. loss of a parent and now spouse has died), your grief will feel more intense. If you did not grieve the first loss, the second loss will be more difficult and you will probably continually think back to your first loss.





Finances If this death has put you in financial difficulty it is important to attend to your situation immediately. This is a stressor that only gets worse if not addressed. You may not care about money because of the loss, but this situation will only increase your emotions. Most county or state governments offer free financial counseling.

Community Involvement The more support systems you have within the community the less stress you will experience. These support systems may be a church, club, neighbors, school, etc.



What causes you stress



When you are grieving, any small activity may seem like a huge task. These activities increase your level of stress. Identify what activities make up your day by listing all of your tasks in the last 24 hours.

These tasks would include: brushing your teeth, walking the dog, and/or having dinner with a friend

Yesterday I...

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____
13. _____
14. _____
15. _____
16. _____
17. _____
18. _____
19. _____
20. _____
21. _____
22. _____
23. _____
24. _____

Now look over your list of activities and decide which ones were not necessary. Did you go to dinner with a friend out of obligation? Could you have given the kids money to buy lunch at school instead of packing lunches this week? Be aware of your activities and what you can eliminate in order to reduce your stress.



How to Interview a Therapist

What are the different types of therapists?


Psychiatrist is a medical doctor who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of cognitive and behavioral disorders. He/she is certified to prescribe medication.

Psychologist has a doctoral degree in psychology, licensed in his/her state, and is trained to diagnose and treat all cognitive and behavioral disorders.

Psychotherapist/MSW/LSW/LCSW has a masters in social work(MSW), licensed in his/her state(LSW or LCSW), and is trained to diagnose and treat all cognitive and behavioral disorders. It is the responsibility of the social worker to understand the person's environment as well as mental health.

All of the above professions are appropriate for grief counseling.





Questions to Ask your Therapist
If you decide to seek individual counseling remember, you are the client. Interview your therapist. Here are some questions to ask:



What made you decide to become a therapist?

Sometimes personal experiences inspire a person to become a therapist. In some cases, if a therapist has had an experience with a particular problem, they may have different insight that is helpful. But a personal experience is not necessary for an individual to be a good therapist in a particular field.

How long do you think I need to see you?

There should be a goal set with a specific treatment plan in place

What type of treatment do you see as necessary?

As a client you should know the type of treatment the therapist is using. Part of therapy is becoming educated on the therapeutic process.

Do you keep notes of our sessions?

This question is important if there is a possible lawsuit surrounding the events of the death. While your sessions should be kept confidential by your therapist, notes may be subpoenaed into court.

Remember:

Therapy only works if you are comfortable with your therapist

#1 Question Asked:

How long will I feel like this?

Answer:

There is no specific time frame, however, here are some guidelines...

During the first 3 months following the death of someone you love, your emotions will be very intense. You will not be able to attend a support group during this period, because your feelings are too close to the surface. This may be a time to see an individual counselor if you are having great difficulty.

From months 3-6 you will start to feel a relief in the intensity of your emotions. But remember part of grieving is bouncing back and forth between the feelings of denial, anger, depression and acceptance. You may go a week feeling pretty good and then one day you find yourself deeply depressed. A support group may be very helpful at this time.

From 6 months to a year your life should be somewhat back to its normal routine. The emotional outbursts have significantly decreased. But, once again, this is grief, so an event such as graduation and/or a birthday may trigger those old feelings.





What is complicated grief?

Complicated grief is when it has been six months to a year and your emotions are intense on a daily basis. You are finding it difficult to resume daily life activities. If this is occurring, consult with a grief counselor.

Stay Active in Society

Grief can be very isolating. Understanding that you do have support, even though you aren't able to see it at the present moment, is important. Sometimes it is difficult to ask for help. You may not realize all of the support systems in your life. Identify your support systems by writing down the names of your friends, close family members, and the neighbors you call friends. Remember: your community and church is there to support you.

My Friends:

1. _____

2. _____

My Family:

1. _____

2. _____

My Neighbors:

1. _____

2. _____

My Community

1. _____

2. _____

Tomorrow I will call ...

to just say hello.

Chapter Two...

Depression





What are the symptoms of Depression?

Feelings of deep sadness

Loss of interest in most or all activities

Increase or decrease in appetite

Not able to sleep

Loss of Concentration

Fatigue

If you are grieving, it is NORMAL to have symptoms of depression. This is a very sad time. You lost someone that was very important to you, so it is normal to be depressed.

When do you need to seek counseling?

If you have a history of depression, see your therapist immediately to monitor your level of depression. If you do not have a history of depression, be aware of the intensity of your symptoms, the length of time of the symptoms (greater than 3 weeks), how often they occur (once a day/all day), if you are having suicidal thoughts, and if the symptoms are affecting your daily functioning. If you are having problems in any of these areas consult with a therapist.

Take Care of Your Health

When you are grieving it is very important to make sure you are taking good care of your health. Exercising, getting proper sleep, and eating nutritional meals **will make you feel better**. Here are some ways to make sure you are staying healthy:

Exercise You do not have to be an athletic person to put exercise in your daily activities. Make a commitment to walk around the block. If you are in an office, go out for lunch. Do not sit at your desk. The more you exercise the more likely you will sleep better and have less anxiety

Eat an Apple a Day A loss of appetite is a common symptom of grief. However, if your body does not get the nutrition it needs, your depression will increase. Making sure you eat 3 balanced meals a day may be an overwhelming task, so keep it simple and eat one nutritional item a day. For example, eat an apple a day. Fill out the log below and see just what you are doing to keep yourself healthy:

This morning I ate:

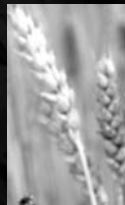
_____	_____
_____	_____

For lunch I ate:

_____	_____
_____	_____

For dinner I ate:

_____	_____
_____	_____





Alcohol is a depressant Sometimes when we are feeling stressed and anxious, we try and relax by having a glass of wine, beer or some other alcoholic beverage. But what most people do not realize is that alcohol is a depressant. Alcohol will increase your depression. Also, alcohol will effect your sleep.

Get a good night's sleep A lack of sleep will increase depression. Also, getting the proper amount of sleep is imperative to functioning during the day. The hours of 2 am to 4 am are the most critical for appropriate sleep. If you are not sleeping during these hours consistently, you may need to consult with your doctor. Below are some suggestions in helping you get a good night sleep:

1. **Exercise**
2. **Read a book before going to bed.**
3. **Do not watch television when you awake in the middle of the night. TV is a stimulant.**
4. **Make sure you have eaten a well-balanced dinner before 8pm.**
5. **Do not drink any beverages that contain alcohol or caffeine.**



Have a Good Cry!

Why is it good to Cry?

Crying can be embarrassing when you are in a very public place like a restaurant, store, or at a friend's home. But it is important to let go and cry so that the tension in your body is released. Keeping this emotion inside may result in physical ailments.

Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross believes it is very important to cry. Crying is an outlet for the intense emotions you are feeling. She suggests never to "offer" kleenex to someone who is crying. Her reasoning is that by offering a Kleenex, the person is being sent the message to compose themselves and stop crying.

It is medically proven that your body can only cry for so long. You will stop at some point. After a good cry your body will feel less stressed. It may also relax you enough to get a good night sleep.

When was the last time you had a Good Cry?

The last time I cried was _____.

After I cried I felt _____.





Find your Spiritual Activity

A "spiritual activity" is one where you say to yourself, "Life is really good". When you are depressed the goal is to try and find a way to make yourself feel better. My spiritual activity is sailing. When I am out on the water, there is a moment when it becomes very quiet and I feel, "Life is really good". For some people it is a golf swing, walking on the beach, sitting on their porch in the late evening, or watching their children play. We all have had that moment when we say to ourselves, "Life is really good."

What is your Spiritual Activity?

I feel "Life is really good" when I am:

Now do this activity as often as possible.

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When you are grieving it is very important to make sure you are taking good care of your health. Exercising, getting proper sleep, and eating nutritional meals **will make you feel better**. Here are some ways to make sure you are staying healthy:

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_____	_____

For lunch I ate:

_____	_____
_____	_____

For dinner I ate:

_____	_____
_____	_____





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Avoid "Thinking Time"

What is "thinking time"?

Thinking time is when you are alone and you begin to reminisce. Something triggers the thought and a domino affect occurs where you have a flood of memories. Feelings of depression and sadness begin.

Some examples of "thinking time"

Driving in the car. You are driving in the car and a song on the radio reminds you of the person you have lost. You arrive at work very sad and upset. Suggestion: Listen to talk radio or a book on tape.

Watching TV alone. The house becomes very quiet except for the noise of the television and your mind starts to wander. You see the picture on the mantle or you realize this is the time of night you both spent time together or talked on the phone. Suggestion: Invite a friend over to watch TV together.

Sitting by yourself. You are in a restaurant or in a park where you see others enjoying themselves. It reminds you of what you shared with the person who has died and what you have lost becomes very real. Suggestion: Do activities with a friend so that the thought process doesn't begin.





Create a P H Y S I C A L Memory

Memories can be painful, especially the happy ones because they remind us of what we lost. However, memories are what help us keep a relationship with the person who died. A "**physical**" memory brings comfort because it is something we can touch and hold. It may be the picture of the person in a special frame or a personal possession of theirs, such as a pin or necklace that we can put in our pocket and touch when we need comfort. Some individuals have found great comfort in holding something in their hands that symbolizes the person they love.

Here's a suggestion on where to begin in creating your physical memory:

Think of the person you have lost by using your five senses.

When I think of _____

I SEE (how you remember their image)

I HEAR (their voice)

I SMELL (their scent or perfume)

I TOUCH (their feel)

I TASTE (maybe a shared ice-cream)

In Honor of ...

One of the reasons we have cemeteries is to give us a place to visit the person we lost. Most cemeteries are very quiet, peaceful and private. Many people go to the cemetery to talk to the deceased. It is very normal to talk out loud to the person who has died. If you do not find comfort in visiting the cemetery, but want a special place, here are some thoughts:

Your Private Place

Not everyone finds comfort in the cemetery, in fact some people find it too painful to visit. When I have a client who does not want to visit the cemetery, but would like to have a place to go, I suggest they create their own private place. This special place may be somewhere that you and the person you lost would visit together, or it is a place that you shared something very special. Many people have created a space within their own yard by planting the person's favorite tree or flowers. One woman told me she planted a willow tree in her backyard because it reminded her of her husband's love of nature.

Statue "Grief"

In the Washington, DC area there is a monument in Rock Creek Cemetery that Eleanor Roosevelt would visit when she wanted to have a private moment during her years in the White House. The monument is the Adams Memorial. Henry Adams commissioned artist Augustus Saint-Gaudens to create a sculpture to honor his wife, Marian, who had committed suicide after the death of her father. It has been said that after Mark Twain visited the statue in 1906, he named it "Grief". This monument is a wonderful place to visit if you are searching for your own private place.





Do not make any
**MAJOR
DECISIONS**

Within the first year
following the death.

FOR EXAMPLE:

Selling your house and moving

Changing jobs

Giving away family items

Chapter Three...

Anger





I'm so ANGRY!!!!

Anger is an emotion that can be very scary because you may feel out of control. It is very normal to be angry when someone you love has died. It isn't fair! We tend to try and STOP being angry, however, this emotion is real and it needs to get out. Instead of stopping your anger, try and express it in a healthy way.

Here are some suggestions...

How do you Express your Anger?

Everyone expresses anger differently. Some people yell, stomp around, breath heavily while others internalize the anger without ever letting their feelings known. Handling anger in any of these ways can add stress and result in physical illness. First, identify how you express your anger:

When I become angry I let others know by: (shouting, being loud, throwing things)

When I am angry my body feels: (warm, headache, anxious)

When I am angry I tell: (my wife, my husband, my friend)

When I am angry I cool down in: (5 minutes, one day, can't resolve my anger for a long time)

The most recent event that made me angry was:

I handled this event by: (losing my temper, talking calmly to someone)





Physical Activity

Physical movement is a great way to release your anger. Here are some alternatives to the negative expressions of anger (ie. Yelling, throwing things, stomping around):

Walk around the block

Clean out a closet

Ride a bike

Throw a ball for the dog

Play a game of Golf

Go to the gym

**Play basketball, softball,
or kickball with the kids**

Take a swim

Take a long shower or hot bath

Go jogging

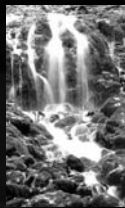
Be Selfish!

**This is a time to be good to yourself.
Every time you feel angry do something
nice for yourself.**

**These are things I love to do
(ie. Get a massage, take a hot bath):**

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

**Now when you feel angry, pamper yourself.
Do something you love.**





Try and Relax!

If you are someone who keeps your anger inside until it builds up, you are putting your health at risk. If you are not comfortable expressing your anger, finding a way to relax may be a more successful way of releasing your tension.

Yoga

One of the main concepts of yoga is to properly align your body while sitting, standing, and sleeping. This helps your body feel complete relaxation. If you have never tried yoga, I suggest you take a beginner yoga class. After you become comfortable with the different yoga poses purchase one of the yoga videotapes. This will allow you to do a 20-minute yoga workout whenever you are feeling angry and need to release tension. My favorite yoga tape is by Rodney Yee.

Take a Hot Bath

Taking a long hot bath before going to bed can be very relaxing. Take the time to find your favorite bath oils or soaps and place a hot face cloth over your eyes. You may find yourself falling asleep.

A cup of Tea (decaffeinated)

A cup of decaffeinated hot tea may sooth your anxiety. Purchase an herbal tea that you find pleasing. Chamomile and green tea are especially helpful in relaxation.

Finding Meaning

When someone has died we often look for some meaning as to why this has happened. From anger we look to whom or what we can blame for this loss

Lawsuits

If you are planning to file a lawsuit or are in litigation because of the circumstances surrounding the death, your emotions of grief will magnify. It is very difficult to separate your feelings relating to the loss and your feelings regarding the lawsuit. When the legal process has ended you may experience a resurgence of intense emotions. Because any litigation is stressful, it is prudent to see a therapist during this time. However, remember to ask how the notes are being recorded because in some cases they could be brought into court.

Doctors

Doctors are whom we look to when someone is terminally ill or has been critically injured. Sometimes mistakes are made and sometimes everything possible was done. Talk over the circumstances with a non-family member and LISTEN. Try to determine if, because of your anger, you are trying to blame someone. You are entitled to your feelings and someone may be to blame --- just make sure.

Self-Guilt

You may feel a sense of responsibility for the person's death, even though, logically, you had no control over this event. This is something to talk over with a therapist or within a support group. When the terrorist attacks on September 11th occurred, so many people felt they could have done something to prevent this tragedy. The sense that we have no power is one that is difficult to accept. It is important to acknowledge that you do not have control over death





Time of death

During my time at Hospice as a grief therapist, so many families would express their distress and sometimes anger that the person died when they had left the room "for just five minutes". The family member went to get a cup of coffee or left to make a phone call and the person died at that moment. It occurs so often that the social workers at Hospice believe the dying person **chooses** to die while their loved one is out of the room. It may be because the deceased is trying to protect a loved one by not dying in front of them.

Difficult Relationship with the Deceased

When you lose someone with whom you had a difficult relationship you may feel very angry. This is especially true when a parent who was an alcoholic, an abuser, or neglectful has died. When someone has a difficult relationship with a parent, that person is always hopeful the relationship will improve. If the relationship was still difficult at the time of the parent's death, all hope is lost for a better relationship. This may stir intense feelings of anger. It is hard to accept that the relationship wasn't good and that it never will be. However, no one is all bad or all good. So acknowledge the good qualities of the relationship or parent as well as the bad.



JOURNAL

Many individuals have found keeping a journal extremely helpful in assessing their lives.

For the next 6 months on the 1st day of the month, write about how you feel and how things are different in your life.

Month 1 _____

Month 2 _____

Month 3 _____

Month 4 _____

Month 5 _____

Month 6 _____

Now review the past 6 months and see how your feelings have changed or remained the same. If you your feelings have not changed, you may want to see a grief counselor or join a grief support group



Chapter Four...

Family Conflict



Family Conflicts and How they Work

When there is a death in the family often there are many disagreements or arguments. The core reason for most arguments is because each family member probably is coping with the death in different ways. One person may want to immediately clean out the closets of the deceased and another family member may want to wait a year. Emotions and opinions are very strong at a time like this. Sometimes it is hard to believe you are related to one another.

Be aware that you have all suffered a loss and just because your brother or sister does not outwardly "act" like you do, does not mean they are suffering less. This is a time to ACCEPT everyone's way of coping.

The first way to begin accepting one another's actions is to identify your family system. A family system is the way you, as a family, handle any type of crisis. One way to figure out your family system is by creating a Genogram.



What is a Genogram?

A Genogram is a family tree with a description of the nature of everyone's relationships. Once you have done your family's Genogram you will see a pattern of how your family relates to one another. Some of the patterns I see in families of which most individuals are not aware are: a history of multiple marriages by one individual, an early death of a parent and that death was never grieved, a history of alcoholism, a death of a newborn that the family no longer speaks of, one family member has a strained relationship with all other members. A Genogram is a map of your family's coping mechanisms and support systems.

Key of Symbols

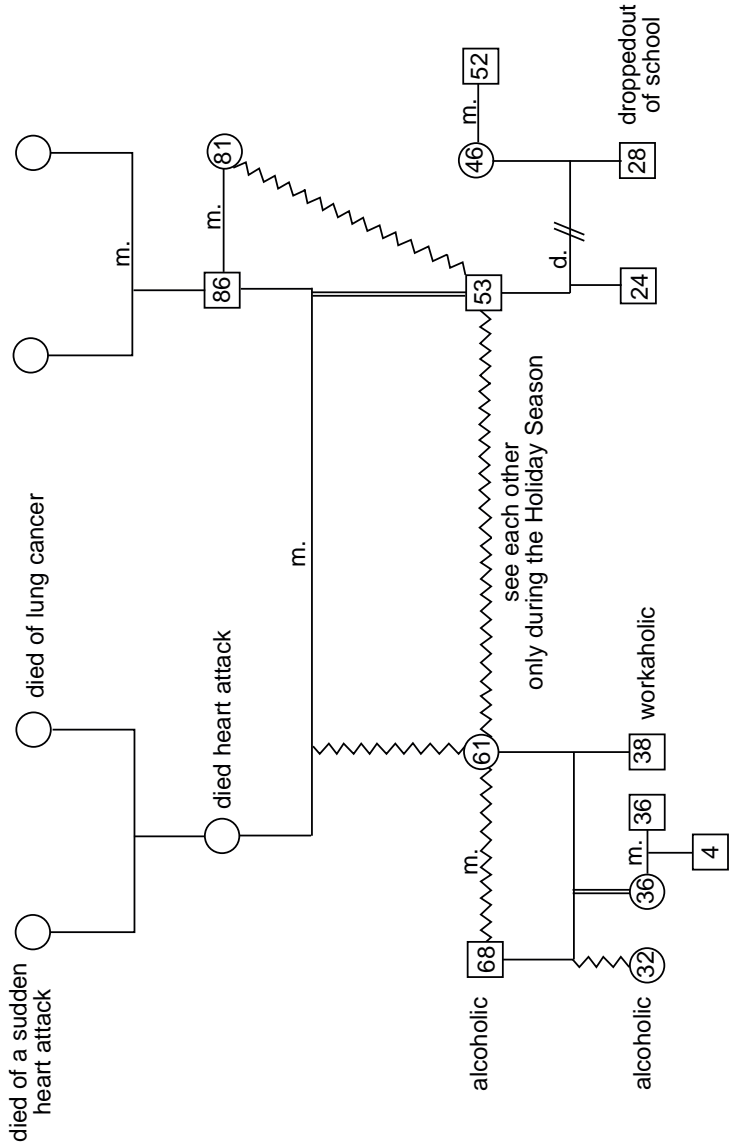
O female	male
X Deceased	-- relationship ended
^a relationship strained	= strong relationship
m. married	d. divorced

Questions to Ask:

How old are your grandparents (if living) or how old were they when they died? How did they die? What did they do for a living? How many children did they have? Diagram the children in the family. This will be the part of the genogram that includes your parents. What were the relationships like between the children and the parents. Are the relationships between the siblings strained, strong, or neutral? Is anyone in the family an alcoholic or dependent on drugs? Has anyone had a difficult illness or are presently ill? How often does everyone see one another?




Example of a Genogram



Create your own Genogram:





How would you describe your Family System?

Now that you have just completed your family Genogram, what did you learn about your family that you were not aware of before?

I was surprised to learn that:

I forgot about:

We are a family that handles a crisis by:

The person(s) that determines what the family will do is:

I am comfortable/uncomfortable with my family system because:

Family Differences

Remember: everyone handles a death differently. One factor to look at is the Family Hierarchy.

Family Hierarchy

Families tend to have a hierarchy where one parent or one child makes most of the decisions. Sometimes one member is considered rebellious and undependable. Another family member may be the strong one who everyone calls in a crisis. Determine who has what role in your family. When there is a death, the family members will fall in to their role because this is how the family functions.

Areas of Difficulty

Identify the areas where your family has difficulty agreeing and see if you are able to determine the reasons for the arguments by using your genogram.

My family is not agreeing on the following:

The main factor(s) of the disagreement is:





Are you a family that Triangles?

What are Triangles?

A triangle is when you have a concern with one family member and you talk it over with other members in the family to gain support. Ideally, the discussion should only occur between you and the one family member. However, members in families tend to call each other or they call family members outside of the immediate family, such as a grandparent, cousin or aunt. Triangles exist, in every family.

The reason triangles increase family conflict is because too many opinions are solicited. The discussion should be **BETWEEN ONLY THE TWO CONCERNED PARTIES!** It doesn't matter what everyone in the family thinks, this is a discussion between two people. The next time you have an urge to call someone to solicit support over a problem you are having with someone else – Stop – and recognize you are about to form a triangle.

Here are some ways to determine if you are forming triangles or you are part of a triangle:

When you feel stressed and are anxious about something, your first reaction is to pick up the phone and call others.

You find that you are frequently in the role of mediator or family moderator.

When there is a family argument you think of who in the family will be on "your side".

Recommendation: To gain a better understanding of triangles in families, I recommend reading the book *The Dance of Anger* by Harriet Lerner, Phd.

The Holidays

The holidays can be a very painful time when someone you love has died. It is a time when families and friends gather and celebrate with rituals and traditions. The first year after the death I recommend doing something entirely different than your regular traditional celebrating. Then for the second year return to your family traditions. This time will allow you to find a place in your life for the person who has died and decide how you would like to remember them during the holidays.

Start by identifying your family traditions and what would be something you could do different.

Every year we...

This year we will...





Important Dates

Throughout the year there are dates that remind you of your loss. While major holidays are times your friends and family will share your feelings of loss, sometimes there are dates that only you remember. These dates include birthdays, anniversaries, and even the date of death. List the dates that are important to you and put them on your calendar. Do something special just for you on those important dates.

Dates that are Important to Me:

Date of Death: _____

Birthdays: _____

Anniversaries: _____

When we met: _____

A day that was special to us: _____

Chapter Five...

Children and Grief





What do we tell the Children?

When children experience a death of someone close, they are often confused about what is happening. Most adults try not to cry or discuss the death in front of the children. Children are highly perceptive and continually observe their surroundings. Trying to hide all aspects of death from a child creates a feeling of insecurity and anxiety. The child knows something is wrong, but is left to his/her own skills to figure it out.

I conduct focus groups with adults who have lost a parent before they turned eighteen. In all of my groups, nine out of ten individuals were not told the specifics of how their parent died. Most had researched the cause of death when they became adults. It is distressing not to know the specifics of how your parent died.

Helen Fitzgerald, author and art therapist, specializing in children and death, stresses the importance of telling your children in very "concrete" terms what has happened. Fitzgerald tells a story of a young widow taking her six year old son to Disney World for a summer vacation and the mother asking the child if he had a good time. His response was, "Yes, but next year can we visit Daddy in heaven?"

While this is a good time to teach your child about your beliefs, first answer their questions with factual statements.

How Do Children Understand Death?

The age and the maturity of the child determine how they comprehend the death. Here are some guidelines:

Ages 2 to 5

- May think the deceased is "sleeping"
- Does not understand what "dead" means
- May think the deceased is playing a game

Ages 6 to 8

- Asks very specific questions, such as, what happens to the body
- Magical thinking where the child wishes the person to come back
- May believe they did something to cause the person to die

Ages 9 to 12

- Have an understanding of what death is
- May be concerned with the death of the other parent or relative
- Ask questions that may seem morbid

Ages 13 to 17

- Completely understands death
- May romanticize death and dying
- Struggle between security of parents and breaking away into adulthood
- May take more risks to defy death





When should I worry?

As adults, we need to remember that children are still processing and developing their coping skills. They are trying to comprehend their surroundings and through this process they make adjustments to their new environment. Children are often referred to as "resilient". If a child does not display emotions of sadness they are described as resilient. I find this term is used when adults can't stand to see children suffer sadness and so emotions are not explored. Children are resilient, so they will most likely, adjust to their environment by keeping their feelings and emotions inside. This is not positive. This child needs a place where the focus is on his/her feelings and what is going through his/her mind. Here are some things to consider:

Surviving Parent

A child learns from their parents. So when a death occurs in the family, especially the death of one of the parents, the child depends on the surviving parent to help them grieve. However, what often happens is that the surviving parent is so overwhelmed by their own grief, that they are not available to the child. In this situation, a lot of times the child becomes the parent in the house. When a surviving parent cannot cope, he/she should seek counseling. It is also a good time to try and find a support group for the children. Children tend to feel embarrassed about the death of their parent, so being with other children who have lost a parent gives them comfort that there are other kids like them.

Anxiety

When a child experiences a death in the family, there is a loss of security. The world becomes a very unsure place and there is a sense of "are we going to be ok?" Seeing an adult cry, especially an adult that a child admires, can be very upsetting to the child. It is important to tell children that when we are sad we cry, but that everything is going to be okay. The adults need to make the child feel safe by being open about how they are feeling and letting them know that the adults are there to take care of them.

The Chicago Barr-Harris Center, a grief and loss center for children who have lost a parent, conducted a study where they found children acquired anxiety when a parent died. This anxiety created a decrease in concentration so that the child's academic performance suffered. The study suggested that it is okay for the child to have grades moderately decline in the first 6 months and that by the end of the first year the grades should go back to normal. If they are still struggling with school after one year, consult with a child grief therapist.

I have found in working with children that most children develop this anxiety and that the more the surviving parent helps the child keep a routine, the less anxiety. Children are dealing with the uncertainty that death brings, so keeping a routine and schedule brings back stability.





How Children Grieve

The way a child expresses their grief is through their play. Taking your child to a grief therapist who uses play therapy and art therapy may be beneficial in helping your child with the loss, but you as a parent can use play and art to help your child as well.

Here are some tips when playing with your child:

Play a game that allows the child to be creative, such as puppets, mime games, doing a play or drawing and painting.

Ask the child about their work, do not guess what it is. This will give you a better understanding of what the child is thinking.

Do not become uncomfortable when the child acts out the actual death event or funeral. This is normal. If the child seems obsessed with the events, seek professional advice.

Affirm a child's feelings by saying, "This must be hard for you." Or "You must miss your Mom very much."

Anything you don't understand, ASK! The child will want to share with you their thoughts.

Do not become discouraged if your child has a short attention span for the activity. If the describing of the art work is too hard, the child will start another activity until they can cope with talking about it again. Be patient.

Loss of a Child

Every loss is a major loss, but the death of a child is one that can feel unsurvivable. This loss is one that is very different than any other type of death. The loss of a child is very unnatural. All the hope and dreams for that child have died; maybe that is why the death of a child is the most difficult to accept. If you have lost a child I suggest seeing a grief therapist who specializes in child loss. There is an organization called Compassionate Friends that has local chapters across the country. The website for Compassionate Friends is www.compassionatefriends.org.

The death of a child is so hard to understand and accept. That is why it is important to consider contacting the organizations and counselors who have worked with parents and families that have lost a child.





Chapter Six...

Books to Read



Books to Read

General Grief

Living Through Personal Crisis by Ann Kaiser Stearns

The Mourning Handbook by Helen Fitzgerald

Tuesdays with Morrie by Mitch Albom

On Death and Dying by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, MD

Living When a Loved One Has Died by Earl Grollman

When Bad Things Happen to Good People by Harold S. Kushner

I'd Rather Laugh by Linda Richman

Widow/Widowers

Grief Observed by C.S. Lewis

Companion Through the Darkness by Stephanie Ericson

Widow to Widow by Genevieve Davis Ginsburg, M.S.

Alone and Surviving by Rae Lindsay

Why Her, Why Now: A Man's Journey through Death and Grief by Long Elmer

Loss of a Parent

Motherless Daughters by Hope Edeleman

The Loss That is Forever by Maxine Harris, PhD

Father Loss by Neil Chethik

Loss of a Child

The Worst Loss Barbara D. Rosof

A Broken Heart Still Beats by Anne McCracken and Mary Semel

Helping Children Grieve

Keys to Helping Children Deal with Death and Grief by Joy Johnson

The Grieving Child by Helen Fitzgerald

The Grieving Teen by Helen Fitzgerald

Spiritual

Man's Search for Meaning by Viktor E. Frankl

The Sacred Art of Dying by Kenneth Kramer

Grace and Grit by Ken Wilber



Notes

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Personal Notes



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