



Expressions of Grief

A Quick Guide
to the
Five Stages of Grief

First..... Jenn's story

There are two absolutes in our existence: birth and death, everything else falls into the space in between. Life as we know it will have a beginning and an end. We have accepted as a society that birth is supposed to bring joy and that death brings sorrow. This is not however always the case. Many times for reasons I don't think we completely understand yet – birth doesn't always bring joy. Some mothers struggle to adapt to the new little life and are then left feeling isolated and ashamed when they are experiencing anything less than picture perfect and feel more depression and joy. The same can be said for death. There are many reference materials that suggest grief is a "forever thing". That it will always be there. Again, if we experiencing anything outside the norm we are left again feeling depressed and isolated. The simple thought that anyone must endure something forever is in itself daunting. My intention in doing this work is to offer support to those who have experienced loss of any kind wherever and however they are experiencing it. Also, I strongly feel there is a need to create real awareness. There is nothing more real than loss yet in most instances we are ill equipped to deal with it. This doesn't mean we can't. It simply means that we need to learn a new way and as humans we are very equipped to both learn and adapt.

I have had many experiences with loss but today I will focus on one that significantly directed my life and is in large part the inspiration for doing this work. My father. He passed at the age of 47 as a result of terminal brain cancer. My father was a man who was happiest in nature. He loved to camp, fish, watch the birds and just enjoy. This was where he was at his best and where I have my fondest memories. His motto was "slow and steady wins the race".

When my father was diagnosed with cancer I was terrified of him being ill and potentially losing him. I couldn't imagine my life without him. When it became evident that remission was not expected I took a leave of absence to become his primary caregiver. His last wish was to die at home and it was important to make that happen, partly because I wanted to spend as much time with him as possible and then because on some level I felt that the process of dying could be as natural as birth and didn't need to be so highly medicalized. It was in my father's dying process that I learned more about him and life in any other six week period than I am currently aware of. I learned about his regrets and his acknowledgement that he wished he had made different choices as a husband, a son, and a father. That he wished he hadn't have let fear stand in the way of the things that were really in his heart to do and that he had spent more time ensuring that his children and grand children knew how much he loved them. That his first set of children, of which I am the eldest had gotten to experience him the way the second set had. That he had spent more time coaching them in sports and teaching them more about the things he loved and why. That he hadn't screwed up his first marriage so badly and he would have appreciated everything that was there for him. These were things that I may never know about him unless for this situation. It was a time that held two very opposing sides: one of extreme challenge and sadness and the other of true appreciation and joy.

Anyone who has been a caregiver for someone who is terminally ill can likely relate to my experience on some level. My father had decided early on in his diagnosis to stop all radiation and chemotherapy treatments. We had to travel five hours to get to the treatments and they left him feeling so horrible for days afterwards. He opted for quality, for him this meant time at home with his family, over quantity. In a matter of weeks he went from walking and talking to being unable to sit without assistance, requiring a liquid diet and being totally dependant for all of his personal care. He would often be up several times in the night requiring pain medication and sometimes just needing to talk. My dad was

both a proud man and very stoic so to see him so vulnerable and emotional was so out of character and for me heart wrenching. I also had 3 young children at the time and my siblings from my dad's second family were 10 and 8 at the time so there was also a lot of uncertainty about the best way to support these five young children who were also experiencing loss and seeing their father and grandfather change daily. To answer their questions and to respect their need to handle things in their own way. For some it was to be outside spending time with friends, laughing and having fun and for my youngest who was 6 at the time it was rubbing her grandfathers head and telling him everything would be ok. Was this ok? Should I be encouraging her to be outside with the others. Should I be insisting that the others spend more time inside with him before he passed. Perhaps it was simple fatigue but I allowed everything to happen how it was going to happen and on the day my father passed, some chose to go to school and others wanted to stay close to home. Again, this was honoured and I can't say it was because that's what we were instructed to do. It was more that I was exhausted and didn't have any energy to argue or guide the process one way or the other. In hind sight I can see the true value of allowing everyone to process things in the way they need to do for themselves. Not unlike many things in life, there is no manual or right and wrong way of doing things. We all have our own way and if we can allow that process to emerge naturally we will see it happens and moves along quite naturally. If we can sleep when our bodies say sleep and wake when it feels good to be awake we will actually move through the process in the best way for us. Not in some prescribed, one size fits all method.

For me as his caregiver I felt two conflicting and strong emotions. I cycled between relief and guilt for quite sometime following his death. I was tired. I longed for a full night sleep, a long shower and my routine. Some sort of "normal". Guilt because I felt this way and because I wondered if I had done everything I could do. Did he die in the way he wanted too? Was he comfortable? I even began experiencing guilt because I had taken the leave from work and my coworkers had to pick up my slack. Now as I assist people through their process I see that relief is quite commonly experienced as is guilt after caregiving someone and I wondered why no one talked to me about this. Why had I spent so many years carrying these emotions? I couldn't help but feel that if someone had told me it was both expected and natural to feel this way I would have processed my father's death quite differently. I wouldn't have been contributing to my guilt and been in constant conflict with myself and my emotions. Again, another inspiration for doing this work. I feel as a society we need to support each other more. There was no magic words that someone could have said to me that would make everything ok but it certainly would have been great if people didn't avoid me because they didn't know what to say or that they thought there was a better way for me to be dealing with things. I can't say it enough – there isn't a right or wrong way – there is only your way and if you honour that and are allowing and gentle with yourself you will move through that process in a very natural way. This doesn't mean it will easy but it will occur in a way that works for you.

There are many articles written about grief and its stages. Some present as 5, some as 7. For the purposes here we will use the 5 stage model. It is important to note that these 5 stages are not absolutes. As a hypnotherapist, I am only aware of them as a baseline, as a point of reference. I do not guide my clients to move from one to another or cycle through them in any way as this feels unnatural for me and restrictive. I will touch on each them following the description and share if and what I experienced with each one. This is not a directive for how you "should" be feeling. It is simply to share my experience as there may be something in my experience that helps you to know that however or whatever you are experiencing is exactly right for you. For those who may be supporting someone through the grief process it will provide you with some basic guidance to understand what someone you know may be going through. Know that it is not a requirement to say the right thing, most times there is nothing right to say. I benefitted the most from someone just being there or even friends who took the kids to their regular activities to give me some time.

The Five Stages taken from <https://psychcentral.com/lib/the-5-stages-of-loss-and-grief/>

1. Denial & Isolation

The first reaction to learning about the terminal illness, loss, or death of a cherished loved one is to deny the reality of the situation. "This isn't happening, this can't be happening," people often think. It is a normal reaction to rationalize overwhelming emotions. It is a defense mechanism that buffers the immediate shock of the loss. We block out the words and hide from the facts. This is a temporary response that carries us through the first wave of pain.

I did experience some form of this. TO me it felt like everything had slowed down completely and I was very aware of each step from having him moved to the funeral home to making the arrangements to the few days I had at home after the service to returning to work and trying to slip back into normal life. I wanted to lock myself in room and sleep until someone told me it had all been a very bad dream and that we were heading out camping the following weekend. I went through a period of time where I didn't want to talk about the whole damn experience one more damn time so I avoided everyone doing only what was absolutely required of me.

2. Anger

As the masking effects of denial and isolation begin to wear, reality and its pain re-emerge. We are not ready. The intense emotion is deflected from our vulnerable core, redirected and expressed instead as anger. The anger may be aimed at inanimate objects, complete strangers, friends or family. Anger may be directed at our dying or deceased loved one. Rationally, we know the person is not to be blamed. Emotionally, however, we may resent the person for causing us pain or for leaving us. We feel guilty for being angry, and this makes us more angry.

Remember, grieving is a personal process that has no time limit, nor one "right" way to do it.

The doctor who diagnosed the illness and was unable to cure the disease might become a convenient target. Health professionals deal with death and dying every day. That does not make them immune to the suffering of their patients or to those who grieve for them. Do not hesitate to ask your doctor to give you extra time or to explain just once more the details of your loved one's illness. Arrange a special appointment or ask that he telephone you at the end of his day. Ask for clear answers to your questions regarding medical diagnosis and treatment. Understand the options available to you. Take your time.

I would say for me I relate to anger the most. I recall to this day almost 21 years later feeling complete rage at the doctor who had tried to surgically remove my father's brain tumour. My father was one day post surgery and the head neurologist came into the hospital room to first explain that my dad had hemorrhaged during surgery, second the cancer was spread throughout his body and he wouldn't live more than six months, and thirdly that had he have perhaps taken better care of himself and not smoked and drank he may not be in this situation. He then promptly asked my father if he would agree to be part of scientific research. Not to mention that he was with my

dad for less than 15 minutes before moving on to spread his cheer with the guy in the next bed who had no family there and was being diagnosed with spinal cancer. I'm certain if I saw that doctor today I would recognize him immediately and would have some words for him. I don't think I was as upset about my father being ill as I was with the insensitive way in which it was handled. As a professional I always strive to meet my clients where they are at. This is hard news to hear and I don't think when we are in the business of sharing news like this that we can allow ourselves to become desensitized to the impact that it will have. Although it is a natural part of life, it is one of the most difficult parts of life and we must be sensitive and remember this!

I also experienced anger at my step-mother for years following my dad's passing. My father had requested a specific place for his ashes to be spread. It was his favourite, remote camping spot. I had envisioned going there as a family, camping for a weekend, spreading his ashes and enjoying this place he loved so much. That was not to be. Since his passing, she has guarded those ashes as though it was him. About 7 years ago my siblings and my youngest drove out to this place, spent the day and I visualized spreading his ashes there. It became more important to me to recognize that he wasn't a box of ashes, to let it go, respect his wishes to the best of my ability and move forward. Now that I better understand that she is processing in her own way and I don't need it to be a certain way to have peace.

I used to experience anger at occasions or events that I knew he would have enjoyed. Now I've come to this place where I believe he is there in some form, enjoying the whole experience with us. This is what works for me!

3. Bargaining

The normal reaction to feelings of helplessness and vulnerability is often a need to regain control—

If only we had sought medical attention sooner...
If only we got a second opinion from another doctor...
If only we had tried to be a better person toward them...

Secretly, we may make a deal with God or our higher power in an attempt to postpone the inevitable. This is a weaker line of defense to protect us from the painful reality.

This was not something I recall experiencing at all. Perhaps because my focus was on assisting my father to pass in the way he wanted. I can't say.

4. Depression

Two types of [depression](#) are associated with mourning. The first one is a reaction to practical implications relating to the loss. Sadness and regret predominate this type of depression. We worry about the costs and burial. We worry that, in our grief, we have spent less time with others that depend on us. This phase may be eased by simple clarification and reassurance. We may need a bit of helpful cooperation and a few kind words. The second type of depression is more subtle and, in a sense, perhaps more private. It is our quiet preparation to separate and to bid our loved one farewell. Sometimes all we really need is a hug.

I did experience a mild depression throughout my father's illness and for a period of time afterwards. I had heaped an extreme amount of pressure on myself to look after my father, my children, my siblings, and my step mother and exhausted myself trying to ensure that everything was as good as it could be for everyone. I allowed them their natural process but didn't extend the same courtesy to myself. I think my biggest message to people is to really honour and respect yourself in how you need to move through your process. I moved closer to the mountains a couple of months following my father's death and it was in spending a lot of time outdoors and doing some of the things we enjoyed doing together that I began to feel like myself again.

5. Acceptance

Reaching this stage of mourning is a gift not afforded to everyone. Death may be sudden and unexpected or we may never see beyond our anger or denial. It is not necessarily a mark of bravery to resist the inevitable and to deny ourselves the opportunity to make our peace. This phase is marked by withdrawal and calm. This is not a period of happiness and must be distinguished from depression.

Loved ones that are terminally ill or aging appear to go through a final period of withdrawal. This is by no means a suggestion that they are aware of their own impending death or such, only that physical decline may be sufficient to produce a similar response. Their behavior implies that it is natural to reach a stage at which social interaction is limited. The dignity and grace shown by our dying loved ones may well be their last gift to us.

Coping with loss is ultimately a deeply personal and singular experience — nobody can help you go through it more easily or understand all the emotions that you're going through. But others can be there for you and help comfort you through this process. The best thing you can do is to allow yourself to feel the grief as it comes over you. Resisting it only will prolong the natural process of healing.

I don't recall any points in time where I specifically accepted his illness or his passing. I do believe that the time we spent together in his illness was some of the closest times we had ever had. I saw a side of my father that I would have never known otherwise and I was grateful then and I remain grateful to this day. I know that experience taught me to appreciate and enjoy life to its fullest capacity each and everyday.

Moving Forward

Having had this experience has taught me more about life than death. The experience of his dying process was difficult but I have learned so much and I don't think I would have learned in any other way. I am a better parent and grandparent. I am more clear about who and what is important to me. I have found a strength I didn't know I had. I am continuously reminding to slow down, go easy and enjoy life. I see the best parts of him all around me. I see him in my brothers. I see him in my oldest son. I see him in the birds, the trees and the mountains. I see him and the experience how I have chosen and needed to see it, in just the right way that fits for me. I chose to allow myself to come to that place and make it easier and more fulfilling for me. There is no one or nothing that can tell you how you should do it. Its something you have to feel your way too. Give yourself the time and the space to do it in a way that is right for you.

Look at the stages and my experience as just that, someone's experience and some information that may be useful to you as you experience loss or support someone who is experiencing loss. You may relate to all of it, none of it or parts of it. Take what feels right to you. Know that it is a process. You

can't force it or stop it. It moves in its own natural way. Allow each day to be a new day and be ok with wherever you are at. We have chosen to create a support and community so we can use our experiences to make your journey a little easier along the way.