

HOSPICE *of the* VALLEY  
*Bereavement Literature*

## GRIEF: COPING WITH HIDDEN SORROW

Dorothy's ex-husband died just six months ago. They had shared 15 years of life together, children and lots of memories – some bad, many good. People now come up to her on the street and comment casually on her loss, some even congratulate her! But Dorothy feels grief. "Whom do I talk to?" Even now her new spouse seems uncomfortable – threatened by her memories.

Greg is a 13-year-old junior-high school student. His older brother recently died of AIDS, but Greg doesn't want any of his friends to know his brother was gay. His grief is very private.

Marie is a 70-year-old woman. She has been very depressed and withdrawn lately, ever since her prize terrier, Perzi, died. When Perzi was alive, she had security, companionship, and a compelling reason to walk and socialize. Now, she has none of these. She can't talk about her grief either. "People will think I'm just a silly old senile woman. Imagine grieving for a dog!"

Mark, a 22-year-old, moderately retarded man who lives at home, now refuses to sleep without a light. He easily cries and becomes frustrated. His regression is perplexing to his father. It happened soon after his grandmother died. She, too, lived at the house. "But it's not like Mark really understood," his mother adds.

### **What is Disenfranchised Grief?**

Each of these persons is experiencing grief, but in every case, the grief is disenfranchised. The individual's loss is not publicly recognized or acknowledged by others – sometimes not even by themselves. Because their grief cannot be shared, these grievers face special pain and problems.

By understanding these unique grief experiences, we can sensitize ourselves to the burden of hidden sorrow and more effectively cope with our own losses.

Grief can become disenfranchised for many reasons. Every society has conventions about grieving – rules that define for whom, how, for what, and for how long people should grieve. In our society the "who" is generally family: spouses, parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren and siblings have recognized rights to grief. The grief of others often is not considered.

We are attached to all sorts of people besides family. We can develop strong relationships with any people – fiancés, friends, co-workers, neighbors, teachers and therapists, to suggest a few. And when these people die, we experience grief.

### **Non-traditional Relationships**

Even more complicated are relationships that are hidden, or viewed negatively. Lovers and persons who live together, whether heterosexually or homosexually (or even platonically) face added burdens, which points to another aspect of disenfranchised grief. Sometimes it is not only others that inhibit grief. Sometimes we disenfranchise our own grief, because we are ashamed to talk about the relationship or loss.

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### **Characteristics of the Griever**

Often, conceptions of who can grieve a loss are based not only on relationships, but sometimes on the characteristics of the griever. Certain grievers, such as the very old or very young or the developmentally disabled, are often ignored. Many think these individuals just cannot possibly understand. They may not understand or express grief in the same way as others, but this doesn't mean that they do not feel the loss.

Emily is a good example of this. Emily is a 91-year-old resident of a nursing home. She is quite ill and at times confused. Recently her 69-year-old son Bob died. The family decided not to tell her, because they believed it would only upset her. Meanwhile, Emily wonders what terrible thing she did that would make Bob stop calling and visiting.

"You know Bob," she's told, "he's so busy, traveling all the time."

But where are the funny postcards that Bob always sent that gave her such joy and pride?

### **Hidden Losses**

Sometimes grief is disenfranchised because the loss is not recognized. Not everyone experiences loss after an abortion, but some women (and some men) do.

Many people discount the loss of a newborn or a miscarriage with the comment, "It's not as if they knew the child." Yet this ignores the great attachment that can form during the months and even years of planning, hoping, trying and waiting.

Humans can also form very close attachments with animals and deeply mourn their loss.

### **Losses Other Than Death**

Losses outside of death are often unrecognized, too. Margaret provides yet another example of disenfranchised loss. Though she cares daily for her husband, Tom, she grieves the loss of companionship and mourns the Tom who once was before he had Alzheimer's. The man she loved is no longer there, and he will never come back. She may be married, but she is really a hidden widow with silent sorrow.

### **Stigmatized Deaths**

And finally there are deaths that disenfranchise. Here too the shame of the loss is so great that grievers, even family members, are embarrassed to admit loss or share grief.

Like Greg, whose brother died of AIDS, the Richardses and the Vasquezes also find it hard to talk about their sons' deaths from AIDS. To share that loss with others means that they have to deal with the fears, questions and disapproval of others.

For the same reasons, Rita finds it hard to discuss her son's suicide; and Maria is ashamed to mention her son or to tell that he died trying to commit a robbery.

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### **Problems of Exclusion**

Each situation of disenfranchised grief, like any other grief, is different. Individuals will react in their own way. But disenfranchised grievers do share common problems.

First, they are often excluded from caring for dying persons. As painful as it can often be, caring for a dying person can help in the experience of grieving and frequently alleviates guilt, providing opportunities for closure. It is hard to deny the reality of death when one faces the evidence daily.

When Martin was dying of AIDS, his lover Bill was excluded from the hospital by Martin's parents. He is still haunted by that absence.

Second, disenfranchised grievers are often excluded from funeral rituals. Sometimes, as in Bill's case, this is intentional. But often it is unintended. It is simply that no one thinks to tell the disenfranchised or to bring them to the funeral.

For example, when Mark's grandmother died, the family just assumed that since Mark is retarded there was no point in taking him to the funeral or even asking him if he wanted to attend.

In some other cases, the person's role in the life of the deceased is ignored. Helen was informed when Nora, her 78-year-old best friend, died. But no family member asked Helen's thoughts on arrangements. It made Helen sad since Nora had often told her exactly how she wanted to be buried.

### **Lack of Closure**

In many cases of disenfranchised grief there are no funeral rituals. Pet loss, divorces, abortions, sometimes even parental loss may all lack the sense of closure that a funeral ritual can offer.

This exclusion is unfortunate since funeral rituals can be helpful to grievers. But again, disenfranchised grievers excluded from either planning or attending the ritual cannot derive those therapeutic benefits. Even when they do attend, they may find themselves in an awkward position. The ritual itself can be discomfoting.

This was Dorothy's experience when she attended her ex-husband's funeral. She did not know where to sit. Friends of her husband seemed strained and confused about what to say to her, or whether to first acknowledge her or her husband's widow.

Even the funeral service highlighted her isolation. "The rabbi acknowledged everyone – my kids, his brother, his wife, friends, everyone but me." And the service greatly angered her. "He [the rabbi] spent so much time talking about their relationship [that of her ex-husband and his new wife] – how wonderful it was. I kept thinking, 'How does he praise that adulteress? What about the commandments?'"

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### **Absence of Social Support**

Disenfranchised grievers often lack social support. One thing that helps greatly in grief is sharing the loss with empathic others. Being able to talk about loss and receive help from others can be a healing process. Conversely, not being able to discuss loss, not to feel others' support, complicates grief.

Disenfranchised grievers experience their loss in diverse ways. Others may not know about their loss. They cannot share their pain. They may not get time off from work. For example, when Bill's lover died, Bill could not tell his co-workers, because few of them knew he was gay.

### **Legal Difficulties**

Disenfranchised grievers can face other problems as well. There may be practical and legal difficulties. When Martin died, Bill had protracted property battles with Martin's parents and difficulties with his landlord, since only Martin's name was on the lease.

Disenfranchised grievers experience strong feelings that are often complicated or exacerbated by the relationship, by the type of loss or by isolation. These lead to the central paradox of disenfranchised grief: though grief is often intense, the social support that assists other grievers is absent.

### **Suggestions**

What can you do if you are experiencing hidden loss? The first important step is to realize that wherever there has been attachment, grief is a natural and normal response to loss. Simply recognizing your grief can ease some of the isolation of disenfranchised grief.

Think about the loss. If you are fortunate enough to have empathetic friends, share your feelings and reactions with them. If that is not possible, consider a self-help group or a grief counselor.

Try to find ways to acknowledge the loss. If the funeral ritual was not helpful, you may consider your own private rituals.

That is what Bill did. Excluded from any meaningful role in Martin's funeral, he decided to invite some friends for a private memorial service at a sympathetic church.

Dorothy and her children shared a quiet dinner at what had once been their family's favorite restaurant, sharing their memories, both good and bad, of her ex-husband and her children's father and remembering their lives together and apart.

If you choose to mark the loss with your own private rituals, remember the needs of other mourners. Sylvia, for example, remembers her long-standing extramarital relationship with Ted by leaving long-stemmed roses on his grave on significant holidays. Unfortunately, her actions have

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greatly increased the anger and grief of Ted's wife. It would have been better if Sylvia had been sensitive enough not to intrude on another's grief.

If others around you are experiencing disenfranchised grief, listen to their loss. Respect their grief even if you don't necessarily understand or approve of the relationship. And remember that grievers such as the very young, the developmentally disabled, the confused, the disoriented, and the distressed may not always understand or express loss in traditional ways, but that does not mean their attachments are not felt or that their losses are not grieved.

### **What Does the Future Hold?**

Experiences such as divorce and AIDS that can lead to disenfranchised grief show no signs of abating. As developmentally disabled persons live longer, they too are far more likely to experience losses of parents and even siblings.

Dr. Therese A. Rando, a noted grief therapist, fears that as cases of disenfranchised grief rise, psychologists will see more and more complicated mourning. But perhaps that can be avoided if we remember that people exist in multiple relationships. We have a tremendous capacity to form meaningful attachments that extend over time and even species. And whenever these attachments are lost, we reaffirm that there is grief.

— Kenneth J. Doka, in *Bereavement Magazine*