Understanding Grief

Embracing your grief begins with accepting all of your feelings and reactions as normal. You cannot control or avoid grief, no matter how long you avoid embracing it. When you attempt to ignore your grief, it will interrupt your life and demand attention. Strong responses to small events are your feelings of grief trying to force into your self-awareness. You may have a very strong reaction to breaking or losing something, to something that is slightly annoying with intense anger or abruptly quit an activity you enjoyed or did with your loved one. By paying attention to your strong feelings to little things or to abrupt changes, you can become aware of how your feelings are demanding attention.

Feelings of grief are like the waves of the ocean. You cannot stop the waves in the ocean, just as you cannot stop the feelings of grief. At times your feelings are quietly present and its low tide. Other times they are intense and its high tide. This is the normal flow of your feelings as you grieve. Just as you accept the presence of these feelings, a storm arrives and all of your feelings become very intense and overwhelming. Like storms, your feelings of grief may appear quickly and may last longer than you expected; they will eventually move through. You can only ride the waves of your grief and find a safe place to feel them.

When you are riding a wave of grief, you are having a “grieving moment,” not a bad day. Telling yourself that you are having a grieving day, reminds you that all of your feelings are okay, and it allows you to recognize their presence and accept them even though you do not want to feel them.

The process of grief is best described by the following poem:

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“Grief
You don’t get over it
you just get through it
you don’t get by it
because you can’t get around it
it doesn’t “get better”
it just gets different
every day...
grief puts on a new face.”
(Feiereisen, as cited in Noel and Blair, 2007).
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Gay Hendrick in his workbook, Learning to Love Yourself has a metaphor for understanding how you may process your painful feelings. “…think of a painful feeling as being like a bonfire in a field. At first it is hot, unapproachable. Later it may still smolder. Even later, you can walk on the ground without pain, but you know there is an essence of the fire that still remains. Take your own time, but be sure to walk over the ground again. You must do so because whatever you run away from runs you“ (Brook and Blair, 2007 p. 56).

The intensity of every grief response is related to the strength of your attachment to who or what you lost. Everyone recognizes the loss of a partner, child, parent, or sibling as significant relationships and therefore, an
intense grief response is expected and considered normal. Other significant losses that frequently are not recognize as significant are the loss of a boyfriend or girlfriend, a close friend, co-worker or a pet. When people do not recognize these relationships as significant, their response to the strength of the grieving person’s feelings is viewed as overreacting. A serious illness or chronic disease is a life changing event and a very significant loss. People do not realize that you are grieving the loss of your health and what that means to your sense of self, identity and your hopes and dreams for the future. The loss of your house is the loss of your past. The loss of your job is the loss of your identity and perhaps your dreams for the future. When others do not recognize your loss as significant and your feelings of grief, you tend to ignore your feelings and believe they are invalid. This response may push you into avoiding dealing with your grief until another loss demands your attention.

When your loss was a very significant part of your life, something is missing and there is an empty space. Your life does not feel real and everything seems off balance. You turn to share something or be comforted by your mother or father, spouse or partner, child, sister or brother, a special loved one, a co-worker or your pet and they are not there. Your health may have dramatically changed and you may forget for a moment that you cannot do something and your life again feels just not right. These are reminders of what you have lost and become “grieving moments.”

Your grief journey is different based on the quality and closeness of your relationship with whom or what you lost. Memories from the past significantly affect your grief journey. When your memories are mostly positive, there are moments of sadness and joy as you remember your loved one. When your memories are filled with pain, hurt, and anger, your feelings of grief are usually more intense and interrupt your grieving process until you resolve your feelings about this relationship. These painful memories and unfinished issues are particularly difficult for children, teenagers, and young adults who have not discovered who they are and what they want to do in their life.

The Phases of Grief

Phases are different than stages. Stages have a very clear beginning, middle and an end, like climbing steps. Phases are broad general categories based on periods of time where people experience similar reactions and feelings that you cycle through during your grief journey. Teresa Rando has described three phases of grief: avoidance, confrontation and accommodation (Rando, 1988). How you experience each phase of grief is influenced by gender, age, sudden or anticipated loss or death, and the cause of death or reason for the loss (Rando, 1988).

The Avoidance Phase

In the avoidance phase, you are trying to comprehend that this unbelievable event really happened. Usually avoidance is judged by others as an unhealthy response. Avoidance is normal and a necessary component of healing. When you experience a significant loss, your initial response is usually shock. Shock is both a physical and an emotional response. When you are in shock, you are not fully aware of what is happening around you and time seems to stop or move very slowly like a dream. Many people immediately express their sadness and cry. This is what our society considers a normal response to loss. Others immediately focus on the details of what needs to be done. Doing a familiar activity is doing something that is normal and gives you a moment of feeling in control when the world around you is out of control. Sometimes people cannot sit still and may become over involved in activities that allow them to avoid facing the finality of what happened and the very intense feelings.
Even if you had time to prepare for your loss, you still experience disbelief. ‘I knew this was going to happen, but not now… I thought something was wrong, but not this.’ You protect yourself from accepting the reality of this unthinkable event with disbelief and anger. You may protest what happened… ‘No, this couldn’t have happened. I just saw this person or everything was fine yesterday. This must be a mistake. If only I had done this or said this, it would never have happened…’ (Rando, 1988). When you begin to question what you ‘should have’ or ‘if only had’ done, you may experience feelings of guilt. Protest and expressing your anger at what happened allows you to postpone your sorrow until you are ready to experience your sadness. As you realize that your protests, questions, activities and guilt are not going to change anything, you begin to accept that this did happen and you could not have prevented it, you begin to allow yourself to face and feel your pain.

**Confrontation Phase**

The confrontation phase begins when you recognize the finality of your loss and that your life will never be the same. For some people, they do not really believe the finality of what happened until somewhere around nine months when they no longer expect their loved one or co-worker to walk through the door or that their health will return to ‘normal’. This is the most painful time and your feelings of guilt, anger, fear and sadness become more intense and acute (Rando, 1988).

“Guilt is a normal and expectable aspect of the grieving experience” (Rando, 1988 p.32). In all relationships there is a “mixture of positive and negative feelings… there always will be occasions when you feel guilty for the things that you did or failed to do” (Rando, 1988). Guilt is a common response when you do not live up to your expectations of yourself and the beliefs and standards you have for how you and others should act and live their life. “[I]n the initial stages of grief you will probably dwell on all of the bad things that you did in your relationship with the deceased, while over focusing on all the good things [your loved one did]” (Rando, 1988 p. 33). Some people get stuck in their feelings of guilt which interferes with their ability to accept the finality of the death of their loved one. “With time, the image of yourself and your loved one will be balanced out with the reality of the relationship and you will be able to look at both of you realistically, accepting the positive and negative aspect of each of you” (Rando, 1988 p. 33). You are now able to accept the finality of who you lost and you feel intense heartbreak, sorrow and deep sadness.

This may be a very exhausting time and you may feel just too tired to do much of anything and nothing seems to matter anymore. You may find yourself just sitting or doing routine activities and not thinking about anything. If someone asked what you were thinking about you do not what to say. Scattered memories, thoughts and feelings quickly float through your mind like butterflies only stopping for a second. This type of mindless activity allows you to feel your heartache and deep sadness with a sense of being able to handle the pain. As you accept your life will not return to the way it was, you may feel that part of you has died and there is no meaning in your life and nothing matters.

At times your heartache and deep sadness become too much and then you go back into the avoidance phase where you give yourself a break before moving back into confronting your very painful feelings. Some people quickly make a decision that changes their life that gives their life meaning. These decisions are frequently a way to avoid confronting the intense pain of your loss by moving quickly into accepting your loss and prematurely move into the accommodation phase. These decisions and changes may be a relief for yourself and close friends and family because it means that you are over your grief. Not confronting and dealing with your pain prevents you from grieving and learning how to live in your new world.
It takes time to move through the confrontation phase. Your mind is preoccupied by your very painful feelings and thoughts that usually interfere with your ability to concentrate. Many people begin thinking they must be depressed because they have been feeling this way for a long time. This is a time when other people say, ‘You just need to move on and start living your life.’ This statement usually reflects their concern and fears about you. Friends and people you work with may be concerned about your difficulty concentrating and become frustrated with how this affects your ability to function and the quality of your work. These responses frequently reflect their lack of understanding the process of grief.

Many of the normal responses to grief are similar to depression and it is important to be aware of when your grieving has become distorted and not healthy. Noel Brooks and Pamela Blair (2007, p. 56) have identified seven warning signs of distorted grief:

- **Extreme Avoidant Behavior** – not interacting with anyone for over 3 weeks or keeping yourself so busy that you have no time to feel.
- **Lack of Self-Care** – taking care of your basic needs is necessary to have the energy and emotional capacity to travel through your grief process.
- **Prolonged Denial** – after 6-10 months and you are still in denial, and stuck in avoidance, the first phase of grief (Rando, 1988).
- **Self-Destructive Thoughts** - are not unusual when you are grieving but they pass quickly. Persistent, obsessive thoughts hurt you and stop your ability to grieve. You need to consult a professional to guide you in working through your self-destructive thoughts.
- **Displaced Anger** – is a common way of expressing your pain and a way of denying your loss. If your anger is hurting you in your personal or professional areas or hurting others, seek help immediately.
- **Prolonged Depression or Anxiety** – may include extreme avoidant behavior, lack of self-care, prolonged denial, self-destructive thoughts and displaced anger. The combination and strength of the above warning signs intensifies your depression and anxiety and it is important to seek help quickly.
- **Self-Medication** – is using a substance in excess to deaden your pain. Alcohol and illegal or legal drugs are frequent substances that are abused and may become addictive. Excessive eating is harmful to your health and may become a disorder. Seek help from an organization or professional that specializes in these disorders.

The warning signs above are all ways of protecting you from confronting the finality of what happened and your intense pain. It is not until you face your pain that you are able to move beyond the intensity of your pain and begin the process of living your life with your loss.

**Accommodation Phase**

In the accommodation phase, you experience a “gradual decline of your acute grief and the beginning of an emotional and social reentry in the everyday world in which you learn to live with your loss” (Rando, 1988, p. 19). One day, you realize that you did not think about who or what you lost for 5-10 minutes, and these moments begin to increase. At some point the overwhelming pain and feelings of grief lessen and you may smile or even laugh. You may immediately panic and think, ‘I am forgetting.’ This is not true. You will never forget. This is the beginning of your “emotional and social reentry” (Rando, 1988) into your everyday life.
Many people begin to feel a relationship and connection to their loved one without the heartbreak and deep sadness. A father who lost his son had played golf with his son everyday during the summer. Sometime during the summer after his son died, the father began to play golf by himself and continued to play golf every day just as he had done before his son died. Golfing alone was very painful because he was confronting the reality that his son was no longer with him. After a while when he played golf, this became a very special time to be close to his son. As time passes you accept your loss and can accept the changes that this loss has brought. Your sadness has become softer and quieter and allows you to continue living your new life without ever forgetting. Your pain and feelings of grief may resurface at holidays, anniversaries, special family events or a moment that reminds you of your loved one.

Ceremonies, new traditions, rituals, and a symbolic activity may become part of acknowledging your loss, letting go of the pain, and remembering and honoring who or what you lost. Some people…light a candle…release balloons…make a scrapbook…journal…write a letter and keep it, mail it, or burn it…or make a place in their home to remember and honor. A woman, who lost her son cut up his jeans and shirts and made them into a patchwork quilted jacket. Another woman sewed her mother’s jewelry on a pretty tapestry vest. Some people do a special activity that connects them to their loved one. People, who have lost their health and reached a milestone in living their life now, may have a celebration. People, who lost their job, may celebrate finding a new job, a new career or a new beginning in their life. Find what works for you.

Frequently, holidays, anniversaries, and special events in your life remind you of how your life was and this is a time when people experience some stronger feelings of sadness and perhaps anger. You may think you are just too tired or cranky or don’t care, and not realize that this is your grief re-emerging. It is during these special times that you are reminded of how things use to be. These grief responses to special times may happen for a few years, before they become small waves of sadness and a time of remembrance. In the case of a chronic illness, the feelings of intense grief re-emerge every time you experience a recurrence or something that you can no longer do. Eventually you can accept what has happened; although your life is different you can continue living your life even with some happiness. You may begin new traditions and integrate them with what you have always done.

With a significant loss, people frequently question their previous beliefs about life and what is important. Some people question their faith and for others their faith is strengthened. The realization that you cannot control what happens in life means there is no guarantee about tomorrow so you can no longer wait to do what is important to you. You gradually begin making changes in your life that reflect what is most important to you now. These changes may confuse the people who are close to you and some relationships may change. These changes may also strengthen your old relationships and new relationships may begin. You are making accommodations and beginning a new journey.

As you travel through the phases of grief, you cannot say that you are over your disbelief, heartbreak, guilt, anger, sadness, and fear because your feelings of grief ebb and flow through all the phases at different times with different intensity. You will experience each phase many times over the next three or more years. “Not all grievers will experience all of the reactions and feelings described in each phase. These are only the many possible responses to loss” (Rando, 1988 p. 20).
The parts of the poem below describe the experiences you may have as you move through the accommodation phase. Even when your feelings of grief reemerge, you will move back through the accommodation phase more quickly.

I Am Free

...If my parting has left a void,
Then fill it with remembered joy.
A friendship shared, a laugh, a kiss,
Ah yes, these things I too will miss.
Be not burdened with times of sorrow:
I wish you the sunshine of tomorrow.
My life's been full I've savored much,
Good times, good friends, a loved one's touch...

Unknown

The Effect of Different Loses on your Grief Journey

Loss of a Child

The most powerful and unimaginable loss is the loss of a child. Parents feel tremendous pain and overwhelming heartbreak. The wind is knocked out of them and they do not feel they can catch their breath. A parent never expects to outlive their child and their child’s death violates how life should be. They wish that they had died instead of their child. The loss of a child leaves a very painful empty space. You have lost part of yourself and all of your hopes and dreams for your child and for your future with your child. “You also lose the family as you have known it” (Rando, 1988 p. 156).

“With the death of a child you lose a very special love source-someone who needs, depends upon, admires, and appreciates you in a unique and gratifying way” (Rando, 1988 p. 165). The loss of the child’s role and function in the family can interfere with how the family grieves. Perhaps this child made the family laugh, or maybe this child was sensitive to everyone’s feelings and provided comfort or maybe this child helped the family communicate and resolve differences.

When your child who is living at home dies, every day there is this empty space in your family as your patterns have changed and your family rhythms are out of balance. Your home sounds, looks, and feels different… the house is too quiet… the activities of the family change… no more sports or music and theater events… your life is not filled with driving your child to their activities…the phone rings less…. …fewer friends come over. This is a constant reminder of your loss. It may also be difficult for family friends because when they come to your house, they also feel the large empty space. It is important to talk about your child with family friends. This helps both of you grieve and keeps your child alive in your family. This is very difficult in the beginning and eventually it becomes a sad and treasured memory. It is also difficult when you meet new people. A mother of two children, who lost a child, said “When I am asked how many children I always say two. How could I deny the child that is no longer with me or present in my life?”

With the loss of an only child who is living at home, you have also lost a major part of your identity and focus in your life. You will always be a parent but now you do not have a child to actively parent. The empty space between the parents without their child frequently becomes very large and painful, because it is a constant reminder of the loss of your child. There is no longer the daily noise of child. The house is silent and empty without the things a child brings into the home…toys all over the floor… the sound of an instrument or a basketball, football or baseball…no book bag…no children in your home. The lack of children in your home
becomes a constant reminder of your child’s death. The emptiness in your home becomes a source of heartbreak, hurt, anger and sadness. Many couples who have lost their only child cannot move through the confrontation phase and begin the emotional and social re-entry or slow connection to everyday life (Rando, 1988). If one partner begins to re-connect with everyday life, the other partner may feel angry because they believe their partner is forgetting their child. Many parents who have lost an only child cannot lessen the acute pain and loss of being a parent. Some parents may separate and others may try to fill the empty space by having another child. Parents who lose their adult child may have also lost a very close friend. They may have talked with their child frequently and done many things with their child. Perhaps they would never be a grandparent or would never experience their child as a parent. The family is forever changed and there will always be this empty space.

It takes longer to move through the grieving process when you lose a child regardless of the age of your child. You cycle through the phases and feelings of grief many times. Not talking about your child interferes with the grieving and keeps you in the avoidance phase. Talking about your child, sharing memories, talking about how your child would react to something in this moment are ways of bringing your child into your life. As parents move into the accommodation phase, some parents talk about a small sad space with all their memories of the child who died. Stronger feelings of grief frequently emerge as the child who died would have reached significant milestones. You always wonder what your child would be like now…what they would be doing…and all the things parents wonder about when their child was born.

Loss of a Parent or Sibling
You are never ready for your parent or sibling to die even if their death is anticipated. When you live at home, you experience your loss every day when your parent or sibling is longer there to meet your daily needs. The roles your parent or sibling had in your life are empty and everyone’s role and function the family is had different. Your mother no longer makes you lunch and no one knows what you like and do not like for lunch. ‘Who is going to play catch with me or can teach me to cook and who am I going to talk to when I am scared or sad’. Your family has changed.

Regardless of your age when you lose a parent or sibling, feelings of sadness, fear, or anger may re-emerge unexpectedly and be expressed through uncharacteristic behavior. It is important for loved ones to recognize that this change in behavior may be feelings of grief demanding attention and your loved one needs understanding and comfort. This is particularly necessary for young children who may not have the language and self-awareness to express verbally what they are feeling and need.

Parents or sibling have a different role and significance in your development and growth into adulthood based upon your age and attachment to them when they die. Young children may not understand what has happened. When their parent or sibling is no longer present, there is large a empty space which is confusing and scary. Most adults assume children are okay because children do not know or understand what is happening. Children do know that everyone and everything is different and may only be able to express their feelings of grief through irritating, negative behavior. Teenagers and young adults, who are still in the process of becoming their own person and separating from their parents, may have unresolved issues and feel guilty about what they may have said or did that will never be resolved. Living at home is a constant reminder of these painful feelings that may be intensified by their last interaction with their loved one.

When you are an adult and living on your own, your grief and the empty space you experience is more than the loss of your parents. You “are grieving for [your] family of origin—the last attachment to [your] childhood” (Brooks, 1999 p. 28). As you grieve the loss of your connection to your childhood, old feelings may emerge
and you become aware of old unfinished issues with your parent or sibling that you no longer will be able to
resolve with them. When both your parents have died, you no longer have a generation between you and death.
You have lost the buffer that has protected you from facing your own mortality (Brooks, 1999). As you grow
and move through the different stages of your life, you may become more aware of the emptiness you feel
without your parent or sibling being part of your life.

Grieving the loss of a sibling and particularly the loss of a parent continues to ebb and flow as you grow into
adulthood. These feelings of loss reemerge when the parent (or sibling) is not present for significant activities,
events and milestones such as…going to events where everyone’s parents, mother, or father are present…a
performance in a recital…sporting event…prom… graduation…marriage…a child being born and other
important events. Talking about your feelings and sharing your thoughts about your loved one not being with
you and what you think your loved one would have felt, is how you bring your loved one into these special
moments.

The Loss of Someone Who Chose to Die
When the cause of death is suicide, it complicates your grieving and intensifies your shock, guilt and anger.
With more guilt, you may ask yourself more questions that may just make it harder to move through the phases
of grief… ‘How could they have done this? If only I had realized…If only I said or done…What could I have
done to stop this?…What could I have done that may have made this worse?’ Your questions and answers have
no answer and frequently increase your anger that they chose to kill themselves instead of facing their problems.

Suicide is difficult for everyone to accept, it is particularly difficult for close family members and anyone who
spent part of every day with this person, such as a co-worker. The grief of anyone who was the last person to
see the person usually has very strong feelings of guilt because they believe they should have been able to
prevent it. Children have a more difficult time when someone chooses to die because they usually do not
understand what happened and frequently believe if this person really loved them, they would not have decided
to die and leave them. Throughout the child and family member’s life, the anger at their loved who committed
suicide may re-emerge throughout the life of a child or family members, particularly when their loved one is not
present at special events and milestones. Suicide generally increases the length of time you are in each phase
and the number of times you cycle through the phases.

Loss of a Significant Relationship with Children
When a couple decides to end a relationship and there are children, the grief process is very different because
they have lost their family, and yet everyone is still alive. The fact that someone chose to end the relationship
or marriage changes all the family relationships and creates a great deal of hurt, guilt and anger. Children are
grieving not only the loss of their family but the availability of both parents whenever they feel a need to talk
with them. Frequently the children are angry at one or both of their parents for leaving them and changing their
family. They did not choose this, it just happened to them. It is very important to allow your children to
express their feelings and listen without any judgments, particularly without judgments about the other parent.
Even the person who chose to end the relationship usually feels anger and sadness at the loss of their family and
even their partner. The guilt, anger, fear, and sadness become more intense as the family is being divided into
two families and all the roles and pattern are different. This is a time when very important decisions that affect
the two families and family relationships need to be made. There tends to be many differences and conflicts as
these decisions are influenced by all the old the hurts, anger, unresolved issues and ineffective patterns in the
relationship. All the issues that caused the relationship to end are still part of their parental relationship. When
each partner does not resolve these issues in their parental relationship, the children frequently feel caught in the
middle and may become fearful that they will have to choose one parent. Until the parents begin to work together as parents, the children will feel scared.

Children need a place in each parent’s home that is their space so they know they will have a relationship and home with each parent. As the children develop a routine in each of their homes and experience availability of both parents, the children will experience their world as more stable and less scary. As parents resolve their issues with their former partner and accept what has happened, grieving can begin and eventually each new family may be able to find a new rhythm and balance in their new homes and life. There is no finality to the relationship as parents and the new parenting relationship will continue to change as the needs of each child and their relationships with their parents change. These periods of change are periods when grief usually re-emerges.

Loss of Your Health and Abilities to Live Your Life as You Always Did
Someone with a serious illness or chronic health condition is grieving the loss of everything they used to be able to do and what they may not be able to do in the future. Usually you feel angry at your body because it betrayed you and you can no longer count on it. You may no longer feel independent because you need to rely on others and feel like a burden to your co-workers and friends. Feelings of incompetence and lack of worth are a common response. What we can do and what we look like, are a major part of our identity. As you are confronting these new limitations, you may withdraw from others until you understand and begin to experience how these limitations will affect your life. Some people ignore these new limitations and go into the world and see what they are able to do. Eventually, your condition will demand attention and you will no longer be able to ignore how it will change your life. As with any loss it is important to accept where the person is with their emotional and behavioral response to this major change in identity and their life. It is important to remember that you are not your diagnosis or condition and to focus your attention on what you can do and what is important to you.

A serious illness or chronic health condition is frequently not visible to others and so other people may make judgments about what you are doing or not doing. A person who has an invisible disease and needs a handicap parking sticker may encounter negative looks and comments when they get out of the car and can walk. No one understands that by the time they walk to where they are going, they may not be able to walk back to their vehicle. The immediate judgment is that this person is taking advantage of their situation or has been given an unfair advantage. Many people do not let others know about their condition, because they are afraid of discrimination and/or judgment.

Every time your condition changes and decreases what you can do, you go back to the beginning and recycle through the phases. You are angry. Life is just unfair…enough is enough! You may have barely moved through your feeling of grief from your initial loss and now you are overwhelmed and overloaded with these additional losses. As you go through the phases again, your anger and fear are very strong and most people feel helpless. The thought that you may lose your independence and not being able to live your life without assistance may become persistent and stronger as what you are able to do decreases. You identity changes as you begin to feel less competent and worthy at work and in your professional and personal relationships. This is particularly true when you no longer can work or become more dependent on others. All of your fear and anger becomes intense sadness and pain. You begin to mourn the life you had. Most people become stuck in the confrontation phase as they cannot visually a positive future and how they will be able to accommodate their life to this new reality. This is a time when people become very depressed and do not see how talking with anyone will help. Talking with someone may help you accept what has happened, find meaning in your life and
focus on each of moment that you experience some joy. *When you are no longer able to weed your garden, focus on the flowers and enjoy their beauty.*

**It’s Your Journey**

People who have not experienced a significant loss may not understand that everyone’s grief journey is unique with no set time table. It is important for you to be aware of your grief process and accept how you are grieving. Only you can decide if you are stuck in a feeling for too long and need to talk with someone. Others do not know what is right for you…they only have their opinions and their own experiences which are not yours.

Written 2012 by Nancy Apperson and Edited by Barb Cuppett and Karen Smith

**Note:** “The process of Grief” includes the personal grieving experiences of Nancy Apperson, Barb Cuppett, and Karen Smith myself as well as the grief experiences of the people in our lives who experienced a significant loss. Finally, we agreed on the content in “The process of Grief” as reflective of all of our experiences.

**Primary References**


**Additional Resources on Grief**


