

AM I SUPPOSED TO FEEL LIKE THIS?

What to expect when
tragedy devastates your life

AN INFORMATIVE VIEW OF THE GRIEVING PROCESS

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Yulee Triplett Schafer

Foreword by Christopher M. Davis

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FOREWORD

BY CHRISTOPHER M. DAVIS
ATTORNEY AT LAW

I cannot tell you the number of times I have sat down with a client who has endured a tremendous loss and have found that I had little to offer them, aside from my legal services in holding the negligent party responsible as an acknowledgment for their wrongdoing.

Yulee Triplett Schafer is a friend and respected expert in the grief field. Her book, “Am I Supposed to Feel Like This?” sensitively expresses what I have long wanted to say. Yulee’s writings come from the heart, as well as her years of experience in helping others through the grieving process while working as an advocate for victims and their families in the Kentucky Commonwealth Attorney’s office.

The pain we feel at the loss of life is tremendous, but Yulee explains to us that any kind of loss – life, ability to work, or even a cherished automobile – can trigger grief. Thanks to her book, we can understand what loss and grief do to all of us, work through the steps and anticipate what emotions to expect next.

I am hopeful that reading this book will be the first step for families and loved ones toward recovering from these life-altering situations.

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I need to thank my husband Mike who has encouraged me every step of this journey. I am very grateful to him and his support. Thank you to both my girls; Rachael and Savannah, they are the light of my life. To the rest of my family and friends for their help and understanding as I worked long hours writing, interviewing and reliving *painful* memories putting this all together. I also send out my most gracious thanks to the members of Kentuckians Voice for Crime Victims for allowing me to pick their brains. A very special and sincere thank you to Claudia, Anne, Beverly and Charles.

Thank you all for trusting me with a special and personal part of your lives.



WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

For about 14 years I worked with crime victims. For 12 of those years I worked as a Victim's Advocate in the Office of the Commonwealth's Attorney in Jefferson County Kentucky. As a Victim's Advocate I worked with the victims of felony offenses as they struggled their way through the unfamiliar territory of the criminal justice system. I would work very closely with the victims making sure they knew what was going on with their case, important court dates and understood the prosecution process. This process of prosecuting a criminal defendant usually takes at least one year and often longer. During that time I became close to the victims and their families I worked with. I would, as well as all of the advocates, work very hard to meet the emotional needs of the victims that came through our office. I consider my time in

the Office of the Commonwealth's Attorney as the defining era of my professional life.

During my time at the Office of the Commonwealth's Attorney most of the cases I was assigned were homicide cases. The victims in these cases were the survivors of someone who had been killed. Because these cases were generally more complicated they took longer to resolve. As a result I was able to spend more time with the families and loved ones of the person killed. This closeness allowed me to witness and experience the grief and sadness hundreds of families had to endure when they lost someone dear to them. Of the many lessons I learned one of the most important ones is that no two families or even two people grieve the same way. When YOU are grieving no one will know exactly how you feel.

Even though grieving is experienced differently from person to person there are some common reactions to losing a loved one. People I worked with expressed and experienced feelings of self-doubt, instability, fear and confusion. Many of them thought they were losing their minds. They were suddenly thrust into an unfamiliar world where they did not know how they were supposed to feel. They experienced true feelings but then doubted the validity of those feelings.

My goal in writing this book is to help people who have suffered a loss to understand what they may be going through. I want to help them to understand a little more about the actual grieving process and hopefully be able to identify with

some of the stages. I hope to give them comfort in knowing that even though the grieving process can make a person feel like they are losing their minds, they are not.

A second purpose is to educate readers who may not be grieving a loss on this process. As you read through the book you will see many of the sections will suggest that someone grieving will need or should rely on a close friend for support. The following pages will give you a fundamental understanding of the grieving process. This understanding will help you become a strong emotional supporter for a friend or loved one who has suffered a loss.



UNDERSTANDING YOUR GRIEF

There are many definitions as well as explanations for grief. Some refer to it as bereavement but it is nothing more than a term that describes the emotions associated with a loss. A common misconception is that grief is isolated to losing a person to death. The emotions that a person experiences when someone they love has died can be intense, painful and sometimes debilitating. But something to remember is that a person can grieve after any loss. It could be something as simple as losing a favorite piece of jewelry or even an article of clothing. You can also grieve the loss of a relationship if you experience a divorce, you can experience grief if you have had an accident and can no longer do things you were once able to do. When you graduate from high school or college, when you change jobs or even relocate you can grieve the loss of an era in your life. Once you lose something or someone

that is special to you and you know you will not get it back, you grieve.

In an effort to understand the grieving process you can go to a bookstore and there are shelves upon shelves of books on the subject. One of the most common philosophies is that developed by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross describing the stages of grief. These stages are identified as denial, followed by anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance.

There is also a condition that has been termed “complicated grief”. This occurs when the sadness is so overwhelming for such a long period of time it affects your ability to move on with your life. Complicated grief is so paralyzing it can prevent you from working and even caring for yourself.

I have spoken to several people who have suffered the loss of a loved one, usually a family member. I have asked them specifically about the stages of grief and what the experiences were like for them. The wisdom I have walked away with is that grief is as individual and specific as DNA. No two people will grieve in the same way. Some may go through all of the stages outlined above and in that order. Others may experience a few of the stages and some may not experience any of the stages. Occasionally others may experience more than one stage at the same time.

DENIAL

Denial is said to be the first stage a person goes through when they have suffered a loss of some type. The common thoughts during this stage are similar to:

“This is a mistake”

“This can’t be happening to me”

“I’m sure there has been some misunderstanding”

“This sort of thing happens to other people, not me or my family”

Denial is defined as the act of asserting that something alleged is not real, it is an unconscious defense mechanism which is characterized by the refusal to acknowledge external painful realities as well as internal thoughts or feelings. Denial as a defense mechanism is a protection of a person’s psychological well-being in the midst of traumatic situations. Initial denial will protect a person who has lost a loved one. This means the survivor may not be able to mentally accept the reality of the loss and instead may ignore the heartbreaking reality or even deny its existence.

This is not a stage that everyone goes through when they have suffered a loss. It could also just be a very short stage ending only when the reality is overwhelmingly confirmed. Some have said the feelings of denial are like feeling numb or in a fog until you are mentally strong enough to recognize the reality of the loss.

ANGER

The next stage or phase is anger. Anger is defined as a strong emotion manifested by feelings directed toward either a real or supposed grievance. This feeling of displeasure shows itself in a desire to fight back at the cause of this feeling. If a person dies because of injuries resulting from an accident the common recipient of the anger is the person who caused the accident. “Because of that person’s actions I have been denied the happiness my loved one brought to me. They must pay somehow”.

Sometimes the anger can be directed at the loved one who has died. “If only my loved one had not taken that particular road, he/she knew how dangerous it is. They should have known better and now my heart is broken because of them”.

Many times the anger a person feels is directed toward God or another higher being. Depending on what a person’s belief system is they may have the view that we are all in the hands of a higher being and that higher being is responsible for the act that caused their loss. Either God did it on purpose, “Why did God take my loved one?” or even by neglect, “How did God let this happen?”

Again the anger may or may not be present. It may be short-lived or be with the survivor for a lengthy amount of time. It could be stronger at times; it sometimes goes away and then comes back. Another one of the consistent comments I received from the people I spoke with is that when they were going through their anger phase even though it was painful,

it told them they were alive and capable of emotion and that provided an amount of comfort they desperately needed. They felt like they were no longer in the fog of denial.

BARGAINING

Bargaining is a phase where the grieving person offers something in hopes that either the incident didn't occur, that the painful feelings are eased or even they have some contact with the person who has died. I'm sure many have heard people say "I would give anything for just one more day with my loved one". Some bargaining can be in the terms of your emotions and desperate pleas. "Please God, take my pain away, I promise to go to church more often..."

When my father passed away I had several dreams about him right after his death. Even years later I still have occasional dreams with him prominently in them. He is always happy and laughing. My sister has not dreamed of our father but has said that she would like to have dreams similar to the ones I have about Dad.

Just as in the other phases, someone suffering a loss may or may not experience the bargaining phase. They may experience it as the initial phase or even a final phase. This phase if experienced can be very intense or mild. It could be the result of anger or could even result in anger if the agreement suggested in the bargain is not reached. At this point you are putting thoughts together with actions. Again, this is another sign that you as a survivor are alive and thinking.

DEPRESSION

Depression is probably one of the most recognized stages that someone who has suffered a loss goes through. Depression is actually a mental state, just like happiness, sadness, irritability and all others. It is characterized by a pessimistic sense of inadequacy and a despondent lack of activity. Depression is, however, more than just a mood. It is a disorder that cannot just be made to go away. People in a depressive state cannot just pull themselves together. This is a common and frustrating misconception.

Signs of depressive states are loss of interest in activities they once enjoyed. A person may either gain or lose weight due to overeating or loss of appetite; they may lose their emotional expression (having a flat affect); they may become fatigued and have low self-worth. One may develop disturbed sleep patterns and countless other symptoms. Another sign of depression is drug and alcohol abuse.

I know I have painted a hopeless picture of depression but know that it is a very common disorder; it affects about 121 million people around the world. It is treatable and is NOT a sign of weakness.

ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance is defined as the mental attitude that something is believable and should be accepted as true. Literally it means taking what is offered. What acceptance does NOT mean is putting up with or resigning yourself to something. Nor does

it mean accepting defeat, giving in or just grinning and bearing the situation. Acceptance does not diminish the depth of your feelings. It does mean opening yourself up to the reality at present. At the acceptance phase you acknowledge how it is right here and now. At this point you will let go of the struggle. You are no longer living in the past. In no means are you sacrificing the memory of your loved one. You can be, and still may be, sad, depressed, angry and a myriad of other emotions. But what you are doing at this point is taking what has been given to you and acknowledging its reality.

Charles is a friend who has gentle eyes and is a beautiful singer. He is a retired pastor and approaches all aspects of his life in a very calm but strong spiritual manner. When I spent time with Charles he reminded me of the bible verse “To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to reap that which has been planted.”

Charles’ sister was murdered several years ago. She was shot in the head several times by her estranged husband as she sat in her car. Within the past year his son died suddenly while exercising. He had an aneurism that ruptured and he died instantly. In both circumstances Charles did not experience denial. He had no doubt as to the reality in both instances.

The only anger Charles experienced was when he first heard about his sister’s murder. His immediate thought was to put a knife in the man’s throat. Immediately after that thought he realized that he too would become a murderer just like

the man who killed his sister. He did not want to become that man. Charles was never angry about his son passing away, he was happy in his relationship with his son. He misses his son but recognizes that it is a sign that he is remembering his son. He never remembers going through a bargaining stage or even any depression with either of his tragedies.

Charles has accepted both. He recognizes more now that we will all be gone one day. He addresses each day as a preparation for his own departure.

He recommends that anyone with sorrow should read the word of God. That is where the help is.

At the other end of the loss spectrum is my husband Mike. Mike was attending a multiple day conference recently. After a day of seminars filled with exciting information he spent some time in the lobby of the hotel after dinner with other conference attendees. The next morning when he woke up he realized that he had left his new coat (favorite coat ever) on one of the couches in the lobby the evening before. When he went down to get it the coat was nowhere to be seen. He went to the front desk asking if it had been turned in to the lost and found and it had not. His first thought was “Surely someone didn’t steal my coat” (**denial**). He asked the hotel staff to keep looking for the coat in hopes that it may turn up. Once he realized the hotel did not have the coat he was furious because he realized that someone had taken HIS coat, HIS favorite coat, a coat that did not belong to them (**anger**). Over breakfast several thoughts went through his mind

ranging from “Maybe someone from the conference recognized it and picked it up.” To “Hopefully the person who took it will bring it back, maybe if I keep asking the front desk it will show up” (**bargaining**).

As the day wore on and the coat did not show up the reality hit him and he realized that his coat was gone he became sad and even a bit melancholy. He frequently extolled the virtues and the exceptional deal he had gotten on the coat (**depression**). The next morning after checking again with the front desk he began to say how he had other coats and that it really was just a coat. He could probably find another one similar and possibly even get a similar deal (**acceptance**).

These stories show that a person can grieve the loss of many different things; it is losing something special that you cared about. When you grieve you may or may not grieve the way the books say to grieve, the way your friends and relatives think you ought to grieve or even the way you think you should grieve. No one knows how you feel. No one else has had the same relationship with what was lost that you have had. Your grief is yours and no one else's. Allow yourself to mourn and know that whatever you feel is the right way to feel. Know that you are not alone and that whatever feelings you have they are yours and they are real.



DENIAL

Denial is almost like a knee-jerk reaction. As I said in chapter 1 *denial is the act of asserting that something alleged is not real*. It is your mind's way of protecting you. The reality will not become real until you are prepared/ready to experience the actuality. It is as if the loss is nonexistent. Denial is a true defense mechanism.

In psychology, denial is a concept based on the theories of Sigmund Freud. Through his theories you may better understand how defense mechanisms work. According to Freud, three motivating forces influence human behavior: the id, ego, and superego.

The id consists of basic survival instincts. If the id were the only influence on behavior, humans would exclusively seek to increase pleasure, decrease pain, and achieve immediate gratification of desires. The ego consists of rational thinking.

It enables us to analyze the real risks as well as the benefits of a situation, to tolerate some pain for future profit. The superego is the basis of moral standards and forms the basis of the conscience.

These three forces all have different goals (id, pleasure; ego, reality; superego, morality) and continually strive for dominance, resulting in internal conflict. This conflict produces anxiety. The ego, which functions as a mediator between the two extremes of the id and the superego, attempts to reduce this anxiety by using defense mechanisms. Defense mechanisms are indirect ways of dealing or coping with anxiety, in this case loss of a loved one. A defense mechanism could be explaining problems away or blaming others for problems. Denial is one of many defense mechanisms. It entails ignoring or refusing to believe an unpleasant reality. Even though denial will protect one's psychological well-being in traumatic situations, it does not resolve the anxiety-producing situation and, if overused, can lead to psychological disorders.

Denial is said to be the first stage a person goes through when they have suffered a loss. The good news is that this stage is generally temporary and seldom do people re-experience this stage. As I said it is a temporary phase and its job is to protect us and to prepare us for the next stage. It has been called nature's way of softening the blow.

People who are in denial are said to build barriers around the painful areas in their life. These barriers will not allow us or anyone else to go into the painful area.

Some of the behaviors associated with denial can be feeling numb, where you go through the motions but in an unfeeling way, almost zombie-like. This may be perceived as a lack of caring for the loved one or the event that took the loved one. In denial you may not speak of the event or your feelings about the event thinking it is the only way for you to remain sane.

Another behavior could be bouts of panic attacks as well as being in an alarmed or anxious state. You may find yourself in a state of confusion and choose to isolate yourself, withdrawing from friends and loved ones. I mentioned some common denying thoughts in the introduction. Others include:

“This really is not a big deal”

“I shouldn’t feel bad”

“It’s all for the best”

Denial can also be on the level of acknowledging the event but denying the seriousness or the emotional impact the event has on you. This is known as minimizing. An example of minimizing thoughts may be the parent of a teenager who was killed while riding with a friend. They may be thinking “It was bound to happen sooner or later. Teens are such reckless drivers.”

A person can also acknowledge the occurrence of the event as well as the seriousness of the event but attribute unwanted thoughts or emotions to others. This is called projection. An example of projection would be in the same scenario with

the teen dying in an accident, the father of the teen saying that he is fine but worried about the child's mother being so devastated she may be unable to function when the reality is he has those particular worries about himself. He is denying the reality within himself.

In the case of a woman who has lost her husband some of the realities may be "Who is going to cut the grass now?" or "How am I going to afford school supplies for the kids this year?" She may then feel guilty for having these thoughts so she will then just put them out of her mind, in a sense denying their existence.

Remember this denial phase is not a stage everyone goes through when they have suffered a loss. It could also be just a very short stage ending only when the reality is overwhelmingly confirmed and your mind is prepared for the next stage. This denial stage will diminish as you acknowledge the impact of the loss and recognize what it means in real life.



ANGER

If you experience the denial phase you will most likely at some point come to the realization that you have indeed lost something dear. You may at this point move onto the anger phase. Some do and others may not. The denial phase is over when you accept as a reality that something or someone you love is gone and you are mentally strong enough to move on to the next phase. It will still be difficult and painful; you may become angry, very angry. Some have also experienced feelings of helplessness and of being powerless along with feelings of abandonment. All of which can bring about feelings of profound anger.

Again, anger is defined as a *strong emotion manifested by feelings oriented toward either a real or supposed grievance*. This feeling can cause you to want to fight or attack whatever caused your loss. This could be anyone or anything, whatever

or whoever you see as the cause. Our human sense of justice makes us want to see someone “pay” for our loss.

As with denial anger may or may not be present. If it is, it may be short-lived or feel like it will last the rest of eternity. Another common reaction to anger is one of guilt for feeling angry. Then the anger can become self-directed. You are angry about the loss and then feel guilty about being angry. This ends with anger towards yourself for having these feelings.

During this phase it is also common to lash out at friends and loved ones. The anger that is directed towards them could be because you perceive they are not grieving the same way you are, they have “gotten over it” or that the loss to them is not significant. Friends and family need to understand that the fights you may be starting and the anger you are feeling is not directed towards them but towards the situation. It is helpful for those close to someone who has suffered a loss to know that the anger is not directed at them. During these times the person who is grieving is more than likely feeling the most alone.

Again, everyone is different and grieves in their own way; they may or may not get angry. If you have suffered a loss and feel angry please do yourself a favor and do not feel guilty about these feelings. Rely on friends and loved ones, they want to help and will understand that the anger is not directed at them.

I have a friend who is a lovely person. She has successfully raised two wonderful children on her own. She is a highly devoted grandmother and is civically active in her community. Beverly was very open with me when she spoke to me about her losses and how she grieved.

When she was younger her husband died in his sleep at age 39. She was very angry at him for leaving her to raise their children by herself. Beverly did not experience the denial phase when her husband died as she was right next to him when he passed away.

During our conversation Beverly also said that she was angry with her husband because he had medical issues. She made sure that when he was at home he ate healthy meals but she was unable to control what he ate when she wasn't around. Beverly felt she was doing her part to keep him healthy but was unsure of how well he cared for himself when she wasn't around. She stayed mad at him for many years. She eventually recognized the anger was just that she was very lonely for him. She, like so many others, spoke to him in the house thinking he was still around.

When I asked Beverly about the duration of her anger she said it wasn't until her daughter was grown that she felt like she had honestly come to terms with her anger. She was very candid about the experience that eased her anger. Her daughter, in her early twenties at the time, was spending time with some friends and they decided to have a séance. The purpose of the séance was to speak to a lost loved one her

daughter's friends had lost and missed. During the séance Beverly's husband spoke to her daughter and told her the he was happy and for her to tell Beverly he was sorry.

Unfortunately Beverly's grief did not end there. Not long after her husband passed away Beverly's brother was shot and killed by his daughter.

Again, there was no denial on Beverly's part when he was murdered. There was no disbelief or feelings that some mistake had occurred. After he was shot he was in the hospital on a respirator for a few days before he passed away. Again Beverly was angry and the anger she felt was directed at her brother's daughter for shooting him as well as the justice system.

The niece was charged criminally for his murder. She alleged abuse for her defense. For the duration of the prosecution process Beverly and her family had to endure allegations of abuse they knew were false. During this process it was difficult for her family to proceed through the grieving process. The criminal prosecution process is generally a lengthy process and was just that in the case against her niece. The case was speckled with several issues that required numerous hearings. Each hearing prolonged the process as well as reopened the wounds she and her family were attempting to heal. They often found it difficult to move on in their grieving.

Her niece was convicted and given a prison sentence. Unfortunately she was given an early release after serving only a few years of her sentence.

Beverly offers this advice to anyone who may be grieving a loss. The true friends will be there through the tears and smiles, let them help you. Beverly realizes now that the anger from losing her husband was from missing him so much. She often wondered if the loneliness would ever go away. She explained to me that it never goes away, you put it somewhere but you always know it is there. The hurt eventually goes away, the deep gut hurt that you couldn't bend over and squeeze out. Sometimes you get so angry because you are in so much pain.

Beverly also wants everyone to know that if there is a tragedy and kids are involved keep a special eye on them, they grieve as well but in a less conspicuous manner than adults. It is easy to look at children and think they are not grieving because they are not showing the same signs as adults. They too grieve. Beverly is at peace now. She knows she is supposed to feel this way.



BARGAINING

Bargaining is a phase where *we offer something in hopes that either the incident didn't occur or that the painful feelings are eased.*

When a person experiences pain of any type they try to alleviate the pain. If it is a physical pain you may take an aspirin or soak in a hot bath. Whatever means you have you will utilize to make the pain go away. There are some physical pains you have that you know will go away on their own in their own time. An example is the headache you get when you go to the crowded market and have to stand in line with a lot of noise and commotion around you. You know that when you get out in the fresh air and have some peace and quiet the headache will go away.

Emotional pains are the same way, we all want the pain to go away but it isn't as easy to rid yourself of these pains as it is

physical pains. We look to see what we have control of what may have the ability to take the pain away. When we start looking for these avenues that's when the bargaining begins. We may think that if we spend more time at our place of worship the pain may ease. If we only think about the good in the world the aching in our hearts will go away. This may or may not work. You may find yourself going through a period of trial and error. You will try different actions and/or activities and see if they ease your pain. It is a means of bargaining we may go through to ease our pain.

This phase can also be classified as the "if only" phase. Another way of explaining is a sort of retrospective bargaining. A person grieving may find themselves thinking of ways they could have prevented the loss. They may also become obsessed with thoughts of ways they could have been better to the person they lost. Another common thought during this phase is "If I hadn't loved this person so much the pain wouldn't be so bad". Just remember that the core of bargaining is to help the pain go away.

Just like the other phases, someone suffering a loss may or may not experience the bargaining phase. They may experience it as the initial phase or even a final phase. Bargaining, if experienced, can be very intense or very mild. It could be the result of anger or could even result in anger. Again, this is another sign that you as a survivor are alive and thinking. You are actively moving through the grieving process.



DEPRESSION

When we speak of depression we need to remember it is *probably one of the most recognized stages that someone who has suffered a loss goes through*. It is also most likely the loneliest as well. Depression and bereavement are so similar that many confuse bereavement with depression. They both have similar symptoms; some of them can be but are not limited to:

- Intense feelings of low self-worth
- Obsession with dying and a preoccupation with death
- Thoughts of suicide
- Periods of inactivity
- Not having the strength or desire to perform simple tasks

- Low functionality, at school, work, home or in social settings
- Changes in sleep patterns; either not being able to get enough sleep, not being able to sleep at all or sporadic and restless periods of sleep
- Changes in eating habits, eating excessively or not having an appetite and not eating at all
- Physical ailments including body aches and digestive issues
- Extreme sadness

The difference between the two is that with bereavement the symptoms can come and go. This is a part of the process. With depression you suffer from many of the symptoms for most of the time for several weeks. It needs to be noted that a high percentage of people grieving go through a true, maybe brief, period of depression or being in a depressive state. It is normal.

If you have suffered a loss and feel like your grieving is moving to a depressive state it is a good idea to speak to someone about it. Whether you are in a bereavement state or depressive state they are both much easier to fight if you are not alone. Having a trusted friend, relative, spiritual guide or even doctor you can talk to can make a huge difference in your recovery.

There are several misconceptions about depression; many who don't understand that it is an illness and feel that it is something you can just pop out of. Others view it as a sign of weakness. Both are false. It is not a sign of weakness and you can't just pop out of it by choice. Depression is like any physical illness, it needs to be treated. The treatments vary just like treatments for other illnesses. The most common are medication, therapy or a combination of the two.

Remember how common it is. As I have said before over 121 million around the world are affected by depression. It has also been reported that 20 to 30 percent of bereaved people suffer clinical depression within one month after a loss. Of those suffering up to 15 percent are still suffering after one year. Remember, it is common, treatable and not a sign of weakness.

Another anxiety disorder that may present itself during this time is post traumatic stress disorder, PTSD. Many have heard of PTSD but assume it is isolated to soldiers fighting in battles. The truth is PTSD can develop when a person has been exposed to a traumatic event that either threatened or actually caused harm. An auto accident can be such an event.

Several years ago I was in an accident where my vehicle rolled over. I was unhurt but terrified. Since then when I travel that particular highway my pulse quickens and I tend to grab the steering wheel tighter. I get very nervous and highly excitable at near misses in the car. High speeds scare me. I don't know if I will ever feel as comfortable in the car as I was prior to

the accident. Those around me know why I react the way I do and that helps greatly.

Some of the symptoms of PTSD are:

- Reliving the incident with either nightmares or daydreams
- Avoidance of situations that may remind you of the trauma
- Sleep issues
- Anger issues
- Hyper vigilance

Hyper vigilance is a state of enhanced sensory sensitivity accompanied by an exaggerated intensity of behaviors whose purpose is to detect threats, similar to my over-reaction in the car. Depression is a common thread with those experiencing PTSD. I cannot say it enough; both are common, treatable and not a sign of weakness.

My friend Claudia is about one of the most successful people I know. She is brilliant as well as beautiful. She and her husband have a wonderful marriage and are the parents of two stunning happy children. Claudia is also part owner of a business that is not only successful but does a lot of good for the community. She is healthy, happy and very much together.

When I first met Claudia and was going through the “getting to know you” stage I found out that her older brother had been killed when she was a child. I never mentioned it or asked her about it as it had happened so long ago and honestly it never really came up.

Claudia is such a strong phenomenal person and I am thrilled to have her as a close friend. When I decided to write this book I went through my list of people to talk with about their grief. It was actually as an afterthought that I asked Claudia with the thought of getting some insight into what a child may experience. She was gracious, honest and open with me.

Claudia’s brother Eric was 10 years older than her. Because of the age difference she viewed him as both her protector and playmate. He was working on Valentine’s night and wanted to get home quickly so he could go to a dance. He normally took a bus home but decided to jump a train. The train ran right by where he worked and very close to their house. He jumped on with no problem but when he went to jump off his feet got tangled and he fell and suffered a severe head injury. He was in a coma for three weeks before it became apparent that he would never come out of it.

Claudia didn’t remember too much from the time, her first memory was when she went to visit him in the hospital. At age 10 she recognized that the body in front of her was not that of her brother. When he was taken off life support and died all she remembers is feeling numb. She remembers people coming over to her house but feeling no emotion about what

had happened. It wasn't until the end of the funeral service that the emotion hit her. The fog had lifted and her pain and sadness as a 10-year-old ravaged her at that moment. Claudia ran to her older sister to be comforted barely making it before she collapsed into her sister's arms.

She remembers being very angry, specifically with God for taking her brother. Her anger remained with her for a long time. She recognizes now that the anger she was experiencing at the time was also depression. All of the members of her family retreated to their own haven to process their grief. She felt abandoned by her brother. She was angry at God for taking her brother; she also felt God had abandoned her. Claudia was feeling abandoned by her family for not being there for her. At age 13 she began drinking and doing drugs to numb her own pain. There were times during this period of her life that she had feelings of wanting to go see her brother. Claudia didn't feel like they were true suicidal feelings but feelings of intense loneliness for Eric.

Claudia continued with her destructive habits through high school and college. Right before she graduated from college she realized that it was up to her to end these habits and move on in her life as a grown woman. She successfully walked away from those habits. In talking to her it was apparent that this was the beginning of the acceptance stage for her. She and her family; mother and siblings, have within the past year taken a family retreat where each of them have together as a family faced the death of her brother.

The final advice that she has to offer is that no matter what age your children are if there is a loss, please help them grieve. They are grieving as well but do not have the same tools adults have to help them. They are aware of what is happening, they have the knowledge of the event externally but may not be emotionally mature enough to understand the very frightening time they are going through.

I feel like I need to end this chapter with a reminder that depression is not a sign of weakness, is treatable and is common.



ACCEPTANCE

Remember acceptance is defined as *the mental attitude that something is believable and should be accepted as true*. If you remember the denial stage you were experiencing something that was unbelievable and unacceptable. Once you get to this phase, the acceptance is a signal that you are at the end of your active grieving. You have reached a spot or level of understanding of your loss that you can now cope with your loss. You can take the love you have for the person you have lost and their love for you and put it in your heart. You can then move on with your life guilt free.

An important fact to remember is just because you have accepted the loss it will not wipe away the memory of your loved one. The loss you have suffered will always be a part of you. What happens in the acceptance stage is that the loss is no longer a point in the “right now” part of your life. It becomes a part of your past. The debilitating feelings of pain

you experienced during the grieving process will ease. If you can think of your grief or loss as a scar you will see that it will always be with you and a part of you. A reminder of something that happened that caused you pain, an injury. As time goes on the pain of the injury lessens and is replaced by the scar, a less painful reminder of an injury.

At this phase you will let go of the struggle. You will not be sacrificing the memory of your loved one. You are remembering your loved one pain-free and with a dignified resolve.

During this phase so many of the painful emotions begin to taper off, the anger will not be so hot, the mourning won't be so lonely and the sadness will not dictate your life. You will begin to function as a whole person again. During the earlier stages you may not have been able to even consider how your life would continue without your loved one. Once you have reached this stage of acceptance you will begin to adapt to a new and different life, a life in which your loved one is not an active part of but it will be okay with you. Again, you may still get lonely and melancholy for that person but it will be less painful as time goes on. Time alone is not the salve that heals but it allows you to work through the process of grieving and amazingly you will feel better.

One of the sweetest ladies I have ever met is my friend Anne. She is a mother, grandmother and adored by her great-grandchildren. Anyone who lives in the south or has visited the south is familiar with angel biscuits. Anne makes the best ones I have ever tasted. Anne has devastatingly lost two sons

to murder in separate incidences. Anne's older son, Brad, was shot while he slept in 1983. Brad was a sergeant in the military and had been stationed in Germany for three years. He, his wife and their 5-year-old son moved home in December of 1982. He was killed in February of 1983.

In May of 2002 her other son Byron was responding to a call from a neighbor about a break-in. Byron was shot and killed as he responded to his neighbors call for help. Both cases resulted in criminal charges which eventually came to emotionally depleting trials for Anne and her family.

The circumstances behind Brad's murder were unfortunately like something you would see on television. Brad's wife had an affair with another man and was behind the plot to kill Brad. It wasn't long after the murder that Brad's wife was facing charges involving the shooting of Brad leaving the care of their 5-year-old to Anne and her husband.

When I spoke to Anne initially about the grieving process she felt that she never had the time to grieve the death of Brad because she immediately had the responsibility of raising her grandson who had just had his father murdered while at the same time his mother was facing charges involving the murder. Once we began speaking of the different stages she offered incredible insight.

When I asked her if she recalled experiencing denial she recalled that when she and her husband got the phone call and immediately went to Brad's house she was in shock and kept hoping that they would pass Brad on the way. Once

they got to his street they saw all of the emergency vehicles as well as the news media and the reality began to hit. They were able to make their way into the house before an officer stopped them and took them outside and told them that their son had been killed. It was then that she realized with finality that her son was indeed gone. Anne recalled that she felt like she was on auto-pilot. She immediately began taking care of her grandson and not remembering the specifics of her emotions.

She recalls feeling some hatred and anger early on. It was early in the prosecution process of her first son's murder that she and her husband both realized that the hate and anger they were experiencing would eat them up. They made the decision that they had to make something good come of this. They started a victim's support group that has tirelessly worked for 25 years fighting for victims and their rights. Because of their work hundreds of crime victims all over the state of Kentucky have had a place to go, a safe-haven where they are surrounded by people who have had similar experiences. They are the personification of "pillars of strength".

When I asked her about whether she has accepted the deaths she told me that she has accepted the deaths but will never accept the way they died. She explained that no one has the right to take another's life. She has accepted both deaths because her belief is that children are never ours, they are on loan from God.

As with each person I spoke with I ended the conversation with what advice would they have to offer someone who is grieving a loss or anything they would like to add. Anne commented that one of the hardest things for her to hear was “It was God’s will”. Anne has a strong faith and feels that it was not God’s will that she lose two sons to murder but the devil’s will and that God does not always intervene with the devil’s work. She also wants people to know that it is not painful when friends speak about the deceased. The silence is. By speaking of the lost loved one and remembering them is a great tribute. By not speaking of them they seem to not exist. She also thought it was good as well as healthy to cry.

One quote that she appreciates and adheres to is by Lois McMaster Bujold: “The dead cannot cry out for justice; it is the duty of the living to do so for them.”

It is important to remember that getting to this phase will be different for each person. What may take one person three months to get to the acceptance may take another over a year. It is vital that you be patient with yourself. Your body and mind will move you when you are ready to be moved.



COMPLICATED GRIEF

As I mentioned in chapter 1 on *Understanding Your Grief* there is a condition known as “complicated grief”. This occurs when you have suffered a loss but are unable to process the grief. It is a debilitating disorder. The end of the grieving process is signified by accepting the loss and having the ability to begin your life again. Someone suffering from complicated grief is having trouble with both acceptance and moving forward. It is as if you are frozen within the grieving process, the emotions are extremely severe, long lasting and can seem terminal.

The symptoms of complicated grief are very similar to those in the early stages of grief. The difference is when the natural grieving process progresses the symptoms will ease. However, for the person suffering from complicated grief the symptoms will not go away and in some instances can worsen. A person can feel like they are in a perpetual state

of bereavement with no end in sight. This is painful both physically as well as emotionally. The feelings of loneliness are devastating. A person may feel alone in their grief as well as having a heightened sense of loneliness for their lost loved one.

Some of the symptoms to be aware of that will distinguish complicated grief from normal grief include the **continuation** of or **increase** in:

- Deep sadness
- Lack of ability to enjoy life anymore
- Cannot perform normal routines
- Becoming less social
- Bitterness and preoccupation with your loss
- Intense yearning for the lost loved one

Remember, a person progressing through the stages of grief may experience some of these symptoms as well but the key is to be aware of the length and intensity of the symptoms. Unfortunately, as I mentioned earlier, this type of complicated or abnormal grief can cause not only emotional problems but physical and social issues as well. Some of the lingering complications to be aware of that indicate complicated grief include but are not limited to:

- Feelings of anxiety
- Suicidal thoughts

- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Substance abuse
- Increased risk of heart disease.

There is good news as well as bad news about this disorder. The bad news is it is a frightening disorder as well as dangerous disorder. The good news is it is easily treatable. The two main treatments for complicated grief are just like those for depression, medication and therapy. The medicinal treatment is usually antidepressants. These are used to alleviate or reduce the severity of the symptoms. Therapy can take many forms; you can use art therapy, group therapy, grief therapy or even psychotherapy. The goal of therapy is to lessen your severe symptoms by helping you to explore and process your emotions. Therapy is also a good means of developing coping skills for future anxieties. A huge benefit of participating in therapy is that you are able to ease the common feelings of guilt that so many carry through their grief.

As with common grief it is very important to take care of your body. Eating well and physical exercise can do wonders for the mind. It also helps to surround yourself with trusting friends that have an understanding of the grieving process.

If you suspect that you or someone you care about is suffering from complicated grief it is important to address these issues. Everyone has a right to feel better.



CONCLUSION

As I was researching for this book I came across several articles that intrigued me. Some were about the mourning customs from the Victorian era. At first I was amazed at the rules and etiquette involved in mourning. Some of the customs that I found to be particularly interesting were that all of the clocks were stopped at the time of the person's death. The reason is that if the clocks were not stopped the family would have bad luck.

All of the windows were draped as were the mirrors. This was because the thought was the spirit of the loved one would be trapped in the glass. The body of the deceased was to remain in the house until burial and had to be watched over at all times. When it was removed from the house it was taken feet first or again, bad luck would strike the family.

During that time period there was a very specific period of mourning. Interestingly, the society recognized two periods

of mourning. The first being “deep” or “full” mourning followed by a period of “half” mourning. The length of these periods was determined by the circumstance of the loss, whether it be a child, wife, parent or husband.

Losing a husband was the longest. The full mourning lasted one year. In that year the widow was only allowed to wear black crepe dresses and were required to have a veil covering their faces. No jewelry was allowed and social activities were limited to attending church. The widow was not allowed to attend the burial. After a year the widow could move to half mourning which also lasted one year. When the widow entered the half mourning phase she could trade her crepe dress for a silk dress, still black. She could begin to wear limited jewelry, pearls only. Any breeches in these rules of etiquette were thought to be scandalous and the person was ostracized.

My initial reactions to these rules were horror for those having to suffer through them but then I realized how reassuring it would be to have an entire year to process the grief you are experiencing. Anymore a person is granted one, maybe two weeks before they are expected to resume their normal life. We could certainly learn something from the Victorian era.

It may take just a short amount of time before you are feeling “normal” again or it may take longer than you expected. Either way it is important to allow yourself the time needed to grieve.

If you are a person who has suffered a loss I hope this book has helped you understand what you have experienced and may be currently experiencing. Remember that your grieving is your own and the grieving timeline is your own as well. Do not let anyone tell you how to grieve.



AFTERWORD

Achievement from my view is being tolerant, being able to laugh at yourself. Performing honest work and being good and involved citizens. Always ask whether it is fair, just and honest.

HENRY A. TRIPLETT
1989

Thank you all for trusting me with a special and personal part of your lives.

This project has allowed me to tell a story of my own that I have wanted to tell for a couple of years but have not found the right venue until now. My story is about the perfect passing and my own experience with the grieving process.

Henry A. Triplett is my father and he passed away in November of 2006. He was a brilliant, funny man with a questionable sense of style. He was a former judge that had a legendary reputation for his brilliance in the courtroom. All who knew him could tell an amusing story about his antics, he was a clever practical joker. His sense of style was non-existent, in his mind all colors and patterns were made to go together. He was a champion fighter for those mistreated and whose rights had been violated. His sense of justice was the air he breathed and the blood that ran through his body. His nickname in my immediate family was Waldo.

Dad loved good food, his gun collection, shooting clay pigeons, smoking his cigarettes and drinking. He loved entertaining and to be entertained. He was a voracious reader and found peace in sitting on the porch either reading or cleaning his shot guns, he had many. His ideal establishment would be a combination book store, deli and gun shop. He was also an avid University of Louisville sports fan. He defined himself as a “cornbread eatin’ southern democrat”. He was very active in politics and extremely loyal to his party. He maintained a heavy crush on Hilary Clinton.

Living the life of good, rich food; smoking every day since the time he was 12 years old and proverbially burning the candle at both ends caused his health to begin its decline in 1987 when he had a heart attack. He recovered and took excellent care of himself for about a year but reverted to his old habits again. Over the next 18 years his health deteriorated and he had several health related incidents where he probably should not have survived. Each incident he addressed with impeccable manners and a fantastic sense of humor. He told one physician right before a fairly intense procedure that his legal specialty was medical malpractice.

By the autumn of 2006 he was so sick and frail it was hard to believe he was the same man. Physically he was a fraction of the man he had once been but his mind was still sharp and could still tell a story better than anyone I know. It was hard for him to eat and he could not be on his feet for more than a few minutes.

One Sunday morning my family and I stopped in to visit Mom and Dad. My sister was there as well. It was a beautiful fall afternoon and Dad told us he wanted to take a walk. His reason for wanting to walk was he was building up his stamina so he had the strength to make it to the voting booth on election day the next week. He felt compelled to cancel out his republican therapist's vote. He was able to walk for about 10 yards before he needed to turn around. It was great that we had that experience with him.

WA