

Grief Notes

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Multiple Losses by Joel Wiggins, Bereavement Coordinator

Each of us will experience the death of multiple loved ones in our lives. It is a sad reality of living in a world where aging and mortality have more control than we would like them to have. What we may not realize, is that these multiple losses may affect us in unexpected ways and may affect the way in which we process our grief. “Secondary Loss” refers to any situation where we have experienced the deaths of at least two and probably more people we care about. Those deaths may be consecutive or years apart. We may try to see each death and the grief that follows as its own little box to be processed individually, as if we could make some kind of systematic plan to handle our grief. The reality though is that one box usually bleeds and melts into the other and we may find that when someone else we care about dies, that death brings up a mess of past grief experiences and hurts.

Perhaps a good place to start is to acknowledge that grief never goes away. Grief does however change. As we move forward in our grief journey and process what has happened, we may return to a greater normalcy, even living our lives in healthy and meaningful ways. Grief, however, is always there and there will always be things that trigger it. There is perhaps no greater trigger than when someone else we love dies. Strong emotions, thoughts, and tears we believed had been set aside may come rushing back. We may feel a renewed sense of grief not just for the person who recently died, but for past losses as well. For many people this can be very unsettling. Some may even see it as a kind of failure in our lives, but we are simply being triggered by another loss. I have sat with many people over the years who make these “grief connections”. One woman shared how the death of her adult son had renewed her grief over her husband who had died over ten years before. Others who deal with the death of a second parent may feel renewed grief over the earlier parental death.

It is important to understand that grief is not some kind of competition or task to be completed. We don't lose at grief and we definitely don't fail at it. Grief is simply a fluid part of life itself, coming and going as it pleases. Death brings us face to face with mortality, so it might even be considered unusual for the death of one person we love to NOT remind us of past losses. Such experiences are useful because they allow us to see grief in a different light. Instead of viewing grief as “bad” or troublesome, new losses may help us to view it as a healthy emotional reality. After all, we grieve because we love and as some have pointed out, grief is the final expression of love toward another person. Second losses may also offer us new perspectives on processing our grief. For instance, if previous deaths and grieving experiences carried significant regrets, new ones may allow us to process things differently and do things differently. If we are able to do this, we may find that some healing is even brought to past regrets and hurts by implementation of healthier grieving practices. In the end, no matter what happens, remember that multiple losses often bring up old grief and that part of healthy processing will also be to view grief as a cumulative experience.



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