

DEATH *and* DYING

Carol Antoinette Peacock

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Dedication

*In memory of my father,
Andrew Clinton Peacock*

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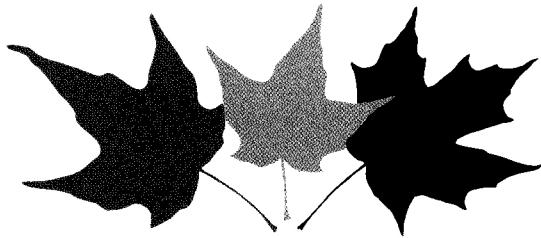


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Grief Up CLOSE

Eleven-year-old Carrie came home from school to find an ambulance and two police cars in front of her house. She watched as medics carried her father out on a stretcher. The sirens blared, and the ambulance sped her father to the hospital. Carrie's father died of heart failure several hours later. She never even had a chance to say good-bye.

Carrie couldn't believe what had happened. "I was in a daze," Carrie recalls. "How could my father be dead, I kept wondering. It didn't make any sense."

For weeks after her father's death, Carrie couldn't sleep. She was so sad that she cried until the sun came up. Each

morning, Carrie stayed in bed, too exhausted and too depressed to move. She lost her appetite and went for days without eating. When Carrie went back to school, she avoided her friends because she didn't want to talk about her father. She dropped out of the school play and quit the soccer team.

Carrie couldn't focus. Her grades suffered. She began to have fainting spells and get bad headaches. Sometimes she threw up. Carrie even found herself looking for her father at the breakfast table where he usually sat. Sometimes she called out for him.

Carrie was not herself. She was afraid she was going crazy.

What Is Grief?

Carrie's responses to her father's death are part of what we call grieving. Grief is a natural response to loss. It is the way people react when they lose someone they love.

To understand grief, let's start with loss, which triggers grief. Most people experience some form of loss early in their lives. First losses can include the loss of a beloved teddy bear, the loss of a tooth, or even the loss of parents' undivided attention when a brother or sister is born. For young people, the most common losses, in order of likelihood, are:

- Death of a pet
- Death of a grandparent

- Parents' divorce
- Moving (loss of familiar home, neighborhood, friends)
- Death of a parent or sibling
- Death of a friend

Of all the losses you will experience, the death of someone you love is one of the most difficult. Grief is painful for everyone. Young people grappling with grief for the first time are often confused and frightened. Like Carrie, they may fear they are going crazy.

Your Grief Journal. Throughout this book, we will suggest writing exercises and activities to help you handle your grief. Find an old notebook, or buy a special one covered in fabric or shiny paper. Keep your Grief Journal in a private place so that you can write freely, whenever you wish.

Grief expert Earl A. Grollman, a writer and rabbi, has spoken with thousands of young people about how to cope with grief. "When you lose, you grieve," he writes. "Like all people who suffer the loss of someone they love, you are going through a grieving process. Grief is unbearable heartache, sorrow, loneliness. Because you loved, grief walks by your side... Grief is not a disorder, a disease, or a sign of weakness. [It is] the price you pay for love."

Three Levels of Grief

We tend to think of grief as a set of feelings, particularly sadness. Actually, grief is more than a feeling. Grief can strike people on three levels:

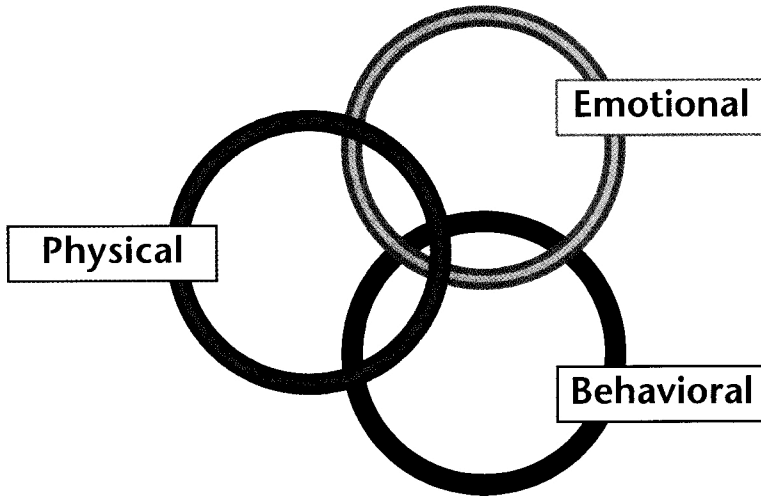
- Physically—grief appears in our bodies
- Emotionally—grief appears in our feelings
- Behaviorally—grief appears in our actions

Physical Signs of Grief

People who are grieving may suffer from a range of physical symptoms, including stomachaches, chest pains, dry mouth, nausea, and digestive problems. Usually, these ailments are caused by grief-related stress. Stress is our body's response to change or danger. When we're under pressure, our bodies go on alert. Stress hormones pour into the bloodstream, preparing us for action. Our pupils get larger and our muscles tense. Breathing becomes rapid. Our heart speeds up. Our blood pressure rises as blood rushes to the brain and muscles. We sweat to cool down our straining bodies.

Stress that persists over a long period of time creates chronic fatigue, muscle aches, digestive difficulties, breathing problems, headaches, back pain, and sleep problems. Stress also weakens the immune system and makes people vulnerable to colds, flu, and other illnesses.

THE SIGNS OF GRIEF



Grief can strike people on three levels. Problems in one area may also affect the others.

One of the top causes of stress is grief. In 1967, stress experts Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe developed a Stress Scale for Youth, ranking forty-nine stressful events experienced by young people. The death of a parent or friend was rated as the number-one source of stress.

For a person new to grief, the physical reactions brought on by stress can be alarming. As grief subsides, however, these signs usually lift and the body returns to normal.

Emotional Responses to Grief

Interestingly, many people's first emotional response to

loss is to shut down and feel nothing. This numbness helps people protect themselves from feelings that are too difficult to absorb right away.

After the first days of shock and disbelief, grief can generate a whole new set of feelings. In 1996, psychologist J. William Worden studied 125 children aged six to seventeen, all of whom had lost a parent. His research, called the Harvard Child Bereavement Study (HCBS), was the first that involved speaking with the children themselves, rather than their parents or teachers. The HCBS was also longitudinal, which means that the children were studied for a two-year period, starting at the time their parent died. This approach provided information about how their grief changed over time. Based on his research, Worden reported that grieving children experience four common emotions: sadness, anxiety, guilt, and anger.

Sadness. In the HCBS, children who had lost a parent reacted with sadness and tears when they learned of their parent's death, and two-thirds cried again sometime during the first few weeks. One year later, 13 percent of the children were still crying daily or weekly. Worden reports that crying and sadness could be sparked by seeing others cry or by missing activities shared with the deceased parent.

Anxiety. The HCBS revealed that bereaved young people experience great anxiety—especially, in the case of

a parental loss, about the safety of their remaining parent. Anxiety and worry are a normal part of grieving. For young people, fears may include:

- How will I survive without the deceased (the person who has died)?
- Who will be there for me?
- How will my life change?
- How can I go on with my life?

Guilt. Many of Worden's subjects admitted feeling guilty following the death of a parent. Guilt tended to focus on time not spent together or on words not spoken. One boy in Worden's study, who was eleven when his mother died, felt guilty that he talked back to his mother when she was alive. Two years later, he was still tormented by guilt. "I never said 'I love you' to her. Now, I wish she could be back and I could say it. Maybe when she died, she didn't know."

Anger. Many of Worden's subjects, particularly boys, also felt anger, most often about a year after a death. The young people in Worden's study expressed anger at God for letting their parent die or at the parent for dying. Anger is a normal response to death.

In addition to the four major feelings of sadness, anxiety, guilt, and anger, people experience other feelings, too. Grieving people may experience mood swings, helplessness, loneliness, and apathy. Sometimes, if the person who died

was suffering or had been abusive to the deceased, the grieving person may feel relief.

Behaviors of Grief

Joe's beloved basketball coach was killed in a hit-and-run car accident while driving home from practice one night. When his best friend called with the news, Joe was devastated. But at the funeral, Joe didn't cry. He felt, instead, a tightness in his chest and a heaviness in his legs.

Joe took a week off from school and stayed in his room, most of the time listening to music. He picked fights with his younger brothers and sisters. Once, he threw a lamp against the wall. When he returned to school, Joe was edgy. Usually polite, he was now sarcastic to his friends and rude to his teachers. He even got into a fistfight in the bus line.

People who are grieving often act in ways that are different from how they usually behave. At home, young people may cry endlessly, have angry outbursts, or withdraw from their families. In school, young people show problems with concentration, restlessness, and poor academic performance. Sometimes, they revert back to behaviors characteristic of younger children, such as temper tantrums or stuttering.

Grieving people may also dream intensely about the deceased, call out to the deceased, talk to the deceased, or find themselves searching for the deceased in shared or familiar

places. Grief experts call these kinds of behaviors “searching and calling out” activities. The behaviors associated with grief usually correct themselves as grieving proceeds.

Grief Journal Exercise: To clarify your grief reaction, list the ways you are responding to your loss emotionally, physically, and behaviorally. Use this exercise as a springboard to other writing about your grief.

Grief Is Unique

Consider your fingerprint. It is unique and different from everyone else’s fingerprint. Grief is the same way. With each loss, we have our own special “grief print.” Grief is shaped by many factors, including the quality of your relationship with the deceased, the nature of the death, your personal style of coping with stress, and the extent of your support system.

Other factors, such as your age, can influence your grief. Young children under five, for instance, do not understand that death is final. They often have trouble eating, sleeping, and controlling bodily functions. Children aged six through nine are curious and confused about death. They may become afraid of school, have learning problems, develop aggressive behaviors, or express concern about their own health.

ANIMALS GRIEVE, TOO

Studies have shown that animals are capable of experiencing some of the same feelings that humans do, including grief. In 1996, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals conducted a Companion Animal Mourning Project. The study revealed that 66 percent of dogs that had lost a dog companion exhibited behavioral changes, including eating changes, sleep disturbances, and clinging behaviors. Eleven percent stopped eating altogether.

But it's not just dogs that grieve. World-renowned animal researcher Jane Goodall spent years studying a group of chimpanzees in Tanzania. In 1972, one of the chimps, a mother named Flo, died. After her death, Goodall reported that Flint, Flo's eight-year-old son, sat over Flo's body for hours. He tugged at his mother's hand. He climbed a tree and stared at the nest where he and his mother had slept. Flint became increasingly listless and died in less than a month.

Cynthia Moss, who studies wild African elephants, reports that mothers who have lost a calf trail behind the rest of the elephant family. Elephants also linger over the bones of deceased family members, picking them up and carrying them some distance. Behaviorists speculate that the elephants are somehow remembering those who have died.

By age ten, young people grasp the finality of death. They may experience guilt, anger, and shame, as well as increased anxiety over their own death. Changes in eating habits as well as a loss of interest in outside activities are common. Teenagers may fear that their grief will make them different from their peers, and think that relying on adults for comfort will prevent them from growing up.

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Gender Differences

Your gender can also shape how you grieve. Women and girls are generally more open with their emotions, including those of grief. They may, however, have difficulty verbalizing anger. Men, on the other hand, can deny their feelings and may have trouble expressing their grief.

Grief, then, is a natural response to loss. Newly bereaved people are relieved to learn that their responses—emotional, physical, and behavioral—are all a normal part of grief. Reassured, they can proceed with the grieving itself.

Grief Journal Exercise: List or describe the factors that make your grief special and unique to you. Write about your relationship with the deceased.