

Grief & the Holidays



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by

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Introduction

We want to thank you for taking the time to pick up this booklet, *Grief and the Holidays*. We know that this is a difficult topic and your willingness to pick up the book reveals a need in your life or in the life of someone you love. Grief is something that we never desire to talk about, though we will all experience it at some point in our lifetime. We have all been affected by the loss of a loved one., and the reality is that no one is immune from experiencing loss, though we wish we were.

This booklet is prepared as a result of my studies in the field of Grief, as well as my ministry to the grieving throughout my life and ministry. I have served as a pastor for almost 25 years, and I've served as a hospice chaplain for over five years. As a pastor, I have lost some special people within our church families over the years and spent time with grieving families through tragedies and loss. As a hospice chaplain, I have lost many patients that I grew to love and cherish and had the privilege of ministering to over the years. As an individual, I have lost many friends and family members throughout my life, that still profoundly affects me. The loss of my father-in-law a few years ago has changed our family, and the holidays will never be the same. We continue to try to adapt to this loss, and the many other losses we have experienced.

It is out of my burden for the grieving that I compile this booklet, in hopes of ministering to the bereaved, as each person faces his/her grief during the holiday season. It is my goal to help comfort the bereaved, as Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted." It is my sincere hope that many of you that read this booklet will receive comfort from the knowledge you gain and the experience you have as you interact with this booklet.

In Christ,

Michael D. Baker

Grief

The primary purpose of this booklet is to help those who have suffered loss, that haven't dealt with their grief, to make it through the Holidays, and lighten their load just a little. I do want you to understand that whatever may be said here cannot restore that loss or end the pain you are enduring; but rather *it is an attempt to help us understand our loss, and hopefully realize that we are not alone*. This booklet is an attempt to help you prepare for the holidays by helping participants recognize their grief and learn coping skills that will assist participants in their grief journey.

Some of you have just started your journey, while others may have been on your grief journey for several months and maybe even years. **It is a journey of healing**. We are not trying to get you to leave your loved one behind. We are just trying to help you move forward. And, sometimes, moving forward is hard to do! **It is a journey of adapting**. We must adjust to living our lives without that special someone. It takes years to learn to love someone, and to adjust to their presence in your life. It also takes time to learn how to adjust to living *without* someone. **It is a journey that we do not want you to travel alone**. For the Christian, God's promise in Hebrews 13:5 is that "he will never leave you nor forsake you. We want to remind you that you are not alone, *though you may be lonely*."

The Story of the Diamond with the Scare, from *A Decembered Grief* by Harold Ivan Smith:

"Once upon a time a great king owned a beautiful diamond. But there was a problem. The diamond had a flaw – a scratch in the middle. It could never be given, worn, or admired. So, the king, who was used to having his subjects make him happy, sent word throughout his vast kingdom that great riches, position, and prestige would come to any individual who could take away the flaw. Well, they came, the best of jewelers and artists, even magicians – not just from that kingdom, but from across the mountains and the seas. But alas- no one could remove the scratch. The king despaired. Then one day a young man arrived, somewhat optimistic about his chances for doing what no one else had been able to do. Oh, he heard the doubters and the scoffers. But he asked for a quiet place to work where he would not be disturbed. Every day the king asked, "Well?" And the determined young man would answer, "Not yet." Days passed. Weeks passed. Then one afternoon the young man handed the diamond to the king. Slowly a smile spread across the king's face, and then a great "Yes!" ricocheted through the palace. The queen, the courtesans, and the knights crowded in for a closer look. The scratch was still there! But the young man had carved a rose around it, using the scratch for a stem."¹

¹ Smith, Harold Ivan, *A Decembered Grief*, (Kansas City, Kansas: Beacon Hill Press, 2011).

Like the diamond, the loss of a loved one leaves a deep scar on our lives. At the same time, the healing that comes through grieving can transform you. The scar will remain, but you will be changed.

What is Grief?

Though we use the term “grief” often, sometimes it may seem hard to define. In referring to grief, we often use the terms bereavement, grief, and mourning interchangeably. To help us with these terms, I want to break down the definitions. Bereavement is “a state caused by *loss* such as death.”² When a person loses a loved one, there will be a time of bereavement, in which a person mourns the loss of their loved one. At the same time, mourning is mourning is “the *outward expression* of grief and bereavement.”³ At this point, bereavement and mourning almost sound impersonal, as if we are looking on from outside, watching someone in a state of bereavement mourn the loss of a loved one. For our understanding, grief is much more personal, as grief is the “emotional *suffering* caused by death or another form of bereavement.”⁴

Grief is the “emotional suffering” caused by loss, in particularly for this study, the loss of a loved one. It is deeply personal, and every individual will experience it. “*Grief is as natural to every person as breathing. It is inevitable!*”⁵ We all have experienced loss, and most of us can remember the first experience we had with death. Think for a moment about your first experience of loss, and the things you associate with it. Now, think about your first, most significant loss? Now, think about your most recent loss. All of our losses have a significant effect on our lives and are a part of who we are. The reality is that no one is immune to grieving. We all will do our share of it, and it seems that many will do more than their fair share of it.

What is Grief Work?

Another reality we need to understand is that *grief is a process that requires every person to do their own grief work*. *Grief work* is “the activity(s) associated with thinking through the loss, facing its reality, expressing the feelings and emotions experienced, and becoming reinvolved in life.”⁶ Grief is a responsibility that cannot be given to another. I cannot grieve for you, nor can anyone else. As stated above, grief requires every person to do their own work.

² Wolfelt, Alan D. *Death and Grief: A Guide for Clergy*, (Muncie, IN: Accelerated Development Inc. Publishers, 1988.

³ IBID.

⁴ IBID.

⁵ Westberg, Granger E. *Good Grief*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press), 2011. 50th Edition.

⁶ Worden, J. William, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, LLC). 2009.

Various scholars have studied grief and developed theories about grief work that formats the various phases, stages, and tasks associated with grief work. For instance, most people are familiar with Elizabeth Kubler Ross's Five Stages of Grief. In her work she recognizes five stages of grief that she recognizes in her research. Her Five Stages of Grief⁷: 1) Denial and Isolation (shock), 2) Anger, 3) Bargaining, in which pleas are made to God. 4) Depression, and 5) Acceptance. Another prominent theorist in the field is J. William Worden's. Worden came up with his Four Tasks⁸: 1) To accept the reality of the loss. 2) To experience the pain of grief. 3) To adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing., and 4) To withdraw emotional energy and reinvest it in another relationship. There are other prominent scholars who have researched field and produced their own phases of grief. It is best to understand that grief is not always experienced in phases, stages, or tasks. Sometimes you go in and out of phases, and a person's grief varies from one person to another.

How Long Will My Grief Last?

With grief being work, a question that is frequently asked is, "How long is grieving supposed to last?" Though the question is normal, there is no definite answer. It really depends on the person, his or her past losses, and how resilient a person may be. The truth is- grief is *uniquely normal*! For instance, grief is unique for every individual. Like a thumb prints or snowflakes- no two are alike. Yet, at the same time grief is normal because grief has characteristics that may be common to all of us. Some people seem to move through the grief work quicker than others. Also, it seems that some people may get stuck in a phase, stage, or task; and have difficulty completing it.

One of the most prominent scholars in the field of grief is John Bowlby. He developed a theory of grief based on persons social attachments to other people. His theory is known as the Attachment Theory, and it explains that grief as *is often dependent on the emotional bond that exists between the griever and the person that has died*. Thus, the length of time it takes to grieve over a lost is dependent on the social attachment to that person. The stronger the bond, the greater the grief. The lesser the bond, the less the grief. More than likely you are reading this booklet because a person you were attached to has been removed from your life. In this loss, you have now become detached from them and that hurts. That is grief, and grief is "emotional suffering" that is a product of losing someone to whom you were attached. The greater the love, the greater the loss!

⁷ Rando, Theresa, Death, Dying and Grief, (Champaign, Illinois: Research Press Company). 1984.

⁸ Worden, J. William, Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy, (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, LLC). 2009.

Various Types of Grief

What you might not know is that there are various types of grief. Theresa Rando wrote of this reality in her book *Death, Dying and Grief*⁹

Absent grief – This is where grief does not occur as expected, and the mourner may not demonstrate the ability to grieve.

Delayed grief – This is where normal grief reactions may be delayed in the mourner for various reasons, and may resurface years later

Conflicted grief – This is where grief develops in such a way that there may be an exaggeration of one or more of the manifestations of normal grief, while other aspects are suppressed. An example would be that of extreme anger and extreme guilt. This grief reaction can make the grief process abnormally long.

Chronic Grief – This is where the mourner exhibits extreme grief reactions that would be appropriate for the early stages of loss.

Unanticipated Grief – This occurs after a sudden, unexpected loss and renders the griever unable to grasp the full implications of the loss. Their adaptive capabilities are seriously assaulted, and they suffer extreme feelings of bewilderment, anxiety, self-reproach, and depression. There is difficulty accepting the loss, despite understanding the reality of the death.

Abbreviated Grief – This is a short lived, normal form of grief. It may occur because of the immediate replacement of the lost person, such as by remarrying shortly after the loss. It may occur as a result of having an extended time to prepare for the death event with anticipatory grief.

Compound Grief – when you have more than one loss at a time, grief is compounded (stacked).

Disenfranchised Grief – When you have a loss that you cannot grieve publicly for, such as the loss of a boyfriend that was married to another woman.

What Does Normal Grief Look Like?

One of the difficulties of experiencing grief, is that grief is something we don't study for the most part. Because we refuse to acknowledge it, we don't try to learn anything about it. Unfortunately, grief cannot be avoided for long. It is a part of life. To live is to experience grief and loss. And because we will all experience it, we need to learn a little about it, just to be aware

⁹ Rando, Theresa, *Death, Dying and Grief*, (Champaign, Illinois: Research Press Company). 1984

of things that are common to grief experiences. The following information is included so that you may understand what “normal” grief looks like.

From J. William Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*¹⁰, Normal grief encompasses a broad range of feelings and behaviors that are common after a loss.

Feelings: Sadness, Anger, Guilt and Self-Reproach, Anxiety, Loneliness, Fatigue, Helplessness, Shock, Yearning, Emancipation – Freedom from the care person lost, Relief, and Numbness.

Physical Sensations: Hollowness in the stomach, Tightness in the chest, Tightness in the throat, Over sensitivity to noise, A sense of depersonalization: “I walk down the street, and nothing seems real to me.”, Breathlessness, feelings short of breath, Weakness in the muscles, Lack of energy, Dry mouth

Cognitions: Disbelief – “It didn’t happen. There must be some mistake.”, Confusion – Their thinking is confused, they can’t seem to order their thoughts, they have difficulty concentrating or they forget things., Preoccupation – obsessive thoughts about the deceased., Sense of presence – the griever may sense that the deceased is somehow still in the current area of time and space., and Hallucinations – illusionary experiences where you think you may have even seen the deceased.

Behaviors: Sleep disturbances – difficulty going to sleep or waking up too early., Appetite Disturbances – under-eating is most common., Absentminded Behavior, Social withdrawal – withdraw from other people., Dreams of the deceased, Avoiding reminders of the deceased, Searching and calling out, Sighing – is a behavior frequently noted among the bereaved. Restless Hyperactivity, Crying, Visiting Places or Carrying Objects that Remind the Survivor of the Deceased, Treasuring Objects that belonged to the Deceased.

These are common to grief. You are not going crazy, but rather you are grieving normally!

Will There Be an End to the grief?

You will never get your loved one back this side of heaven, but there is hope. Several Scripture passages that remind us of that hope are:

- Isaiah 60:20b, “the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of sorrow will end.

¹⁰ Worden, J. William, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, LLC). 2009.

- Psalm 30:5, “Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.”
- Psalm 34:18, “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in the spirit.”
- Lamentations 3:31-33, For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love for he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.”

What do you need to know about grief?

John W. James and Russell Friedman, in their book; *The Grief Recovery Method*¹¹

- *“Grief is normal and natural reaction to loss of any kind.”*
- While grief is normal and natural, and clearly *the most powerful of human emotions*, it is also the most neglected and misunderstood experience, often by both the griever and those around them.
- Grief is conflicting feelings caused by the end of, or change in, a familiar pattern.
- The death of a loved one produces emotions that can be described as the feeling of *reaching out for someone who has always been there, only to find that when we need them one more time, they are no longer there.*
- Compounding the problem: *many factors can compound our reactions to loss and limit our recovery.*
- Loss is inevitable. We are all liable to face several major losses in our lives. Sometimes loss is even predictable. In spite of these truths, we receive no formal training in how to respond to events that are guaranteed to happen and sure to cause pain and disruption.

Why do People Feel Helpless to Help us in the Grief Journey?

Because grief is not a popular topic, and most people have no desire to study it, most people are ill prepared to help us with loss. James and Friedman give us seven practical reasons for this: 1) *They don't know what to say.* 2) *They are afraid of our feelings.* 3) *They try to change the subject.* 4) *They intellectualize.* 5) *They don't hear us.* 6) *They don't want to talk about death.* 7) *They want us to keep our faith.*

You'll have to be patient with your friends and loved ones, while you want to them to minister to you, they often have to deal with their own frailties. Death is not a topic that most people want to achieve expertise.

¹¹ James, John W. and Russell Friedman, *The Grief Recovery Method*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, LLC), 2009.

Warning Signs of Unhealthy Grieving

James and Friedman bring attention to something they refer to as STERB's. STERB's are what they call Short-Term Energy Releasing Behaviors. These behaviors are products of stress that often come with grieving, as the grief sufferer tries to cope with their loss. Common problem areas that they identify as STERB's are: 1) Food- eating too much or too little, 2) Alcohol/Drugs, 3) Anger, 4) Cutting, 5) Exercise, 6) Fantasy (movies, TV, books), 7) Gambling, 8) Isolation, 9) Sex/Pornography, 10) Shopping (*Retail Therapy*), and 11) Workaholism. These are just a few of the behaviors that are negatively associated with grief suffering.

There are several problems related to these Short-Term Energy Releasing Behaviors. The three main problems with STERBS are: 1) *They appear to work*. They create an illusion of recovery by causing you to forget or bury emotions. 2) *They are short-term*. They do not last, and they do not deal with the true emotional issue. 3) *They do nothing to remove the cork that is jammed in the spout*. In fact, most people do not even realize that there is a cork in the spout. STERB's prolong the inevitable, at some point there will be a flood of tears as you deal with your own grief work.

What You Really Need to Know About Grief

One of my favorite writers about grief is H. Norman Wright. He has authored many books about grief and the deeply personal elements of grief. One of my favorite books that he has written on grief is *Reflections of a Grieving Spouse*.¹² From the book he includes a few points that people really want to know about grief:

- *Your grief will take longer than most people think.* (To recover from the loss of a spouse, whether through death or divorce, will likely take three to five years.)
- *Your grief will take more energy than you ever imagined.*
- *Your grief will involve many changes and will continue to develop.*
- *Your grief will show in all spheres of your life.*
- *Your grief will depend on how you perceive the loss.*
- *You will grieve for many things symbolic and tangible, not just for the death alone.*
- *You will grieve for what you have lost already, and for what you have lost for the future.*
- *Your grief will entail mourning, not only for the person you lost, but also for hopes, dreams, and unfulfilled expectations you held for and with that person and for the unmet needs because of death.*
- *Your grief will involve a wide variety of feelings and reactions more than just the general ones often depicted, such as depression and sadness.*
- *Your loss will resurrect old issues, feelings, and unresolved conflicts from the past.*

¹² Wright, H. Norman, *Reflections of a Grieving Spouse*, (Eugene, Oregon; Harvest House Publishing). 2009.

- *You may have a combination of anger and depression, exhibited as irritability, frustration, annoyance, and intolerance.*
- *You may feel some anger and guilt – or at least some manifestation of these emotions.*
- *You may experience **grief spasms** – acute upsurges of grief that occur without warning.*
- *You will have trouble thinking about memories, handling organizational tasks, intellectually processing information, and making decisions.*
- *You may feel like you are going crazy. Norman H. Wright says, “If you are experiencing intense grief, the ‘crazy feelings’ are actually a sane response!”*
- *You may be obsessed with the death and preoccupied with the deceased.*
- *Others will have unrealistic expectations about your mourning and may respond inappropriately.*

Another of my favorite authors on grief is Kenneth Doka. In his book, *Grief is a Journey*, Doka outlines several myths and realities he has discovered in his studies:

The Myths and Realities of Grief¹³

- **Myth 1: Grief is a Predictable Process. (IT’s NOT)**
 - Reality: Grief is individual- every loss we experience is unique.
- **Myth 2; There is a Timetable to Grief. (IT’s NOT)**
 - Reality: There simply is no timetable!
- **Myth 3: Grief is about letting go! (Not really)**
 - Reality: We retain a continuing bond with those we love.
- **Myth 4: After a loss, we need closure.**
 - Reality: There can never be complete closure.
- **Myth 5: We need to process the loss in order to reach resolution.**
 - Reality: We each process our loss in our own way.
- **Myth 6: Human Beings are Naturally Resilient to Loss**
 - Reality: Many individuals are resilient to experiencing loss, yet many may find grief difficult – even disabling.
- **Myth 7: It is easier to accept death after a prolonged illness.**
 - Reality: All deaths are difficult.

I’ve included the above information to give you some helpful tools to consider as you do your grief work. Hopefully, that has given you some encouragement as you have learned a little about grief.

Now I want to turn your attention to grief and the Holidays.

¹³ Doka, Kenneth, *Grief is a Journey*, (New York, NY: Atrial Books) 2016.

Grief and the Holidays

Some of the most difficult things to face after the loss of a loved one is the special days; birthdays, anniversaries, and the holidays – Thanksgiving and Christmas. *While you mourn your loss, the whole world seems to keep going.* I’m reminded of a movie called “The Shadowlands”, based on the book by C.S. Lewis called “A Grief Observed.” In the movie, a colleague of Lewis tries to encourage him to get on with his life and tells him that “Life must go on!” to which Lewis replies, “I’m not sure it has to, but it does.”¹⁴ Maybe you are not sure that life has to keep going, as you suffer in your grief; but as Lewis replies, “It sure does”.

Soon the holidays are upon you, and with the loss of your loved one, those special days you used to look forward to, you now dread. Happy memories are now dulled by the pain and sorrow you’ve experienced from your loss. At a time when the people around you are supposed to be happy and enjoying themselves you are possibly overwhelmed with feelings of sadness, loneliness, and you may be experiencing a form of mild depression. It’s as if, “They cannot seem to wait for that special day to arrive. You can’t wait for it to be over.”¹⁵ While everyone else is singing “Joy to the World, the Lord has come”, you feel like crawling in a hole somewhere and waking up on January 2nd.

What seems the hardest for you to face this Christmas?

1. _____ 2.
- _____ 3.
- _____ 4.
- _____ 5.
- _____ 6.
- _____

Harold Ivan Smith outlines a few thoughts for those grieving as the Holiday’s approach, in his book *A Decembered Grief*.¹⁶

- Holiday Traditions - Should you go through with them? Should you start some new ones?
- Anticipate the holidays – Too many decisions may shove the griever into emotional overload. Be proactive, and plan ahead.

¹⁴ The movie, “The Shadowlands”,

¹⁵ Klicker, Ralph L., *Grief and the Holidays*. (Acworth, GA: Guideline Publications, 2014).

¹⁶ Smith, Harold Ivan, *A Decembered Grief*, (Kansas City, MO; Beacon Hill Press). 1999.

- Your Church – Don’t hesitate to ask for prayer or help at Christmas.
- Celebrate Sensibly – Be responsible emotionally and financially.
- Excitement – You may not want to be around all the excitement at Christmas – give yourself permission to stay at home if needed.
- Cry if you want to – Be aware of “*Grief Ambush*” – The sneak attack of grief that surprises you and catches you unexpectedly.
- Do what you need to – set boundaries – to do everything others want you to do may compound your grief.
- Do something to memorialize your loved one – buy a gift for someone else in their honor, purchase a poinsettia at your church.
- Take one day at a time – don’t try to fast-forward to January 5th.
- Forgive – To rehash injustices is to drain you!
- Set boundaries – Grievers often get talked into buying stuff, eating stuff, and attending stuff because they have trouble telling people “*No.*”.
- Give grief a voice – Don’t sugar coat your loss. Its healthy to share your loss openly.
- Guard your heart – For those who have lost a spouse, you are vulnerable in your loneliness. Be careful not to jump into another emotional or even sexual relationship.
- Seek God’s help – “God, help me through this party (or open house). Help me to get through this event.”
- Journal your grief – A journal is a record of events that touch and transform us. Answer the following questions:
 - *1) When I think of Christmas without you, I feel....*
 - *2) I remember the Christmas we.....,*
 - *3) The best gift you ever gave me was....*
 - *4) The thing I’ll miss most this Christmas is...*
- Keep the future in mind – “This too shall pass” – God is always actively involved in creating a future and a hope for each of us.
- Let others in on your grief – You’re not the first person to wrestle with grief. Don’t isolate yourself from the world. You need someone to talk to!
- Nap – Sometimes a nap is the healthiest thing you can do! Grief is exhausting, and rest is necessary!
- Every griever needs three things: 1) *To find words for the loss*, 2) *To say the words out loud*, 3) *To know the words have been heard.*
- Organize your living environment – Do something every day to organize your environment.
- Prepare – Christmas always costs something- but it cost more not to celebrate.
- Remember realistically – Sometimes grievers idolize their loved ones and fail to remember them with their faults and failures.
- Rethink Shopping – A mall, at Christmas time, can be a most unfriendly place to a griever.
- Say your loved one’s name – Deliberately say their name.

- Unplug the Christmas machine – sometimes everything gets out of control and it's important to keep things under control. ‘
- Worship – one of the great joys of the Christmas season is the opportunity to worship.
- If we are still breathing, it is too early to tell the ultimate impact of any event in our lives.
- Remember the real reason for the season. *Jesus brought hope to us through the incarnation and his victory over death gives us the hope we have of seeing our loved one again.*