



Finding  
Refuge In Grief



This booklet was originally created for the bereaved patients of Enso House; a home for the terminally ill which is affiliated with the Tahoma One Drop Zen Monastery on Whidbey Island. I drew the content primarily from my four years experience as a grief counselor for Hospice of Seattle. However, through my years at hospice and broader life experiences, I have learned that any *change* results in loss. Consequently, normal grief responses can occur in the midst, or the wake, of any significant change. Regardless of the nature of change or loss in your life, you may find the information here helpful as it will normalize your experiences and provide some ideas for coping and self care.



This begins a very new stage of your relationship with the person who has died. He or she will no longer be present with you physically. She will not call on the phone, or be there to receive calls. You will no longer be

able to see or smell or touch him. You are now in the process of discovering your own personal way of continuing that relationship in his or her absence.

After a significant loss, many people experience physical sensations, changes in behavior, and emotional responses that they haven't before. Without any reference point, such changes can be alarming. This booklet is designed to be supportive and provide some basic information appropriate at any time. You may find it helpful in the weeks immediately after the death. You may find value in rereading sections after six months, a year, or approaching a special day or anniversary.

Unfortunately, death is not something that is talked about in this culture very openly, and grieving a death is even more taboo. It is surprising, considering that at some point in our lives, we will all experience the death of someone who is important to us. I hope this booklet will support you in turning toward and honoring your own experience of grief.

*There is no one right way to do this.*

## ○ NO TIME TO GRIEVE ○

In the initial days and weeks after a death, depending on your relationship to the person who died, you may be overwhelmed by the logistical arrangements for which you are responsible. These can include preparation for a funeral or memorial service, sorting through his or her possessions, being the executor of a will, having to send copies of the death certificate to bring closure to a variety of legal or financial arrangements. Some people articulate anxiety during this time, feeling so burdened by tasks that they have no time to attend to the needs of their heart and mind in ‘grieving’ the death. Some people express, “I haven’t cried yet. I’ve been so busy I haven’t been able to cry. I have no time to grieve.”

Just because someone doesn’t cry does not mean that grief is not present. In the very process of opening an envelope addressed to the deceased, canceling a subscription, looking at a photograph, holding an item of his or her clothing that still carries their smell...each of these acts carries with it the reminder *he or she is dead*.

You may have returned quickly to work and the structured routine of your life; you may not have a choice. It may be difficult to follow through and complete some of the tasks mentioned above. It may seem surreal to readapt to the routine of life. For some people, having such tasks or structure to return to is supportive and offers something to focus on when focus itself may be evasive. Opening up to the very raw emotions that can arise in response to a death can be frightening, even immobilizing. Regardless of how you find yourself feeling inside or responding outside, know that grief is present. You do not need to go through a box of tissues each morning to prove that.

Be it in our minds, our hearts, or in the very cells of our body, we carry grief with us after a death, regardless of whether or not we can easily recognize it. Everyone’s experience is unique. You do not need to escalate your anxiety level by wondering whether or not you are grieving correctly or experiencing the right emotion at the right time. There is *no right emotion* and *no right time*. There is no equation for this process or any set timeline. You will do this in your own way.

As you assess your own response to this death and the comments of others, the following pages may prove helpful in letting you know what others have experienced. There are also some suggestions about ways to care for yourself. During this period, you will end up piecing together information and support that will work for you, be it from this booklet, from your family, community, and your own life experience.

## ○ DIFFICULT EMOTIONS ○

Following a death, many people experience emotions in different ways or more acutely than they ever have. Below, you will find some of the emotions that other people have found most common, some very challenging to deal with. It can be valuable to talk about these emotions with someone you trust to receive validation about your experience. If any particular emotion arises repeatedly over a long period of time, it may be beneficial to seek out a professional counselor or someone from your spiritual tradition who you trust to offer guidance. A professional or spiritual counselor

may be able to normalize your experience or support you to probe the root of your emotional response.

There are times when our own family and friends are unable to support us in the ways we need. This may be because they themselves are grieving, or because simply witnessing our pain is too difficult for them. They may have a compulsion to ‘fix’ something that doesn’t need to be fixed. Grief is something to be experienced, not fixed.

### *ANGER*

Some people feel a lot of anger. It can be directed in many ways, some more rational, some very difficult to explain. For some people anger arises...

- directed at the person who died, that he or she didn’t try harder or pursue more treatment that could have prolonged his or her life
- because the deceased has left one alone
- at those responsible for diagnosis and treatment of the deceased’s illness

- at members of one's family or friends for doing or not doing certain things
- at one's God or source of meaning religiously or spiritually
- regarding the very nature of their relationship or history with the person who died.

### ***DENIAL***

Many people believe that denial is an innately bad thing indicating an inability to *be in touch* with reality. Denial can be a tool. In trying to accept and understand the reality of this death, you may need time to assess what support you have around you. This may be internal support (your own coping mechanisms or belief systems) or external support (friends and family, support of your spiritual community, the support needed to care for your family/children and basic needs). Denying the reality of a situation can offer you the space and time you need to assess available support. It may also give you time to make necessary adjustments to your life to assure you have certain things in place before allowing yourself to feel things fully.

### ***GUILT***

Guilt is a difficult emotion for many people. For those who have been providing care to someone for a long period, relief can be further intertwined with guilt for feeling the sense of relief. Regardless of your involvement in their care, you may find yourself asking what else you might have done to prolong the person's life or make them more comfortable.

You may find yourself reviewing conversations or experiences again and again wondering what could have been done differently, what was left unsaid. This may not just pertain to the end of their life, but your history together. You may find yourself thinking about patterns or dynamics in your relationship that feel unresolved.

### ***NUMBNESS***

Numbness, a sense of immobility or not being able to grasp the reality of the death are all common experiences. You may find it difficult to focus or accomplish anything. The thought may come, "why am I not crying?" You may feel 'unable to feel' anything at all.

## **RELIEF**

For people who have cared for someone with a disease for a long time, death can bring a sense of relief. The relief may be that the person is no longer struggling or suffering. The relief may also be that you, yourself, will now be able to move forward and engage in parts of your life or relationships which may have been neglected.

## ○ NORMAL GRIEF RESPONSES ○

- **Physical Sensations**

Tightness in the throat

Shortness of breath

Heaviness in the chest

Change of appetite

Fatigue

Restlessness

Experiencing symptoms of the  
deceased person's disease

- **Changes in Behavior**

Increased anxiety

Inability to concentrate or focus

Difficulty in follow-through

Change of sleeping patterns

Social withdrawal

Difficulty in making decisions

Increased dependence on others

Wandering aimlessly

Disorientation

Change in relationship to one's spiritual tradition

(ex. anger at God, discontinuing  
attendance at church, temple, meditation,  
more zealous pursuit of spiritual practice.)

- **Emotional Responses**

Relief                      Numbness                      Helplessness

Anger                      Wistfulness                      Mood swings

Sadness                      Crying                      Fear

Confusion                      Guilt                      Shame

Bitterness                      Anxiety                      Vulnerability

Difficulty accepting the reality of death

Each person has his or her own way of coping with difficult emotions. Consider some of the following options

- **Express creatively** - Consider giving yourself space and time in the woodshop, the painting studio, the garden, time working on your car.
- **Laugh** - We do not have the stamina to do any one thing, without pause, for a prolonged period of time. Consider this in terms of emotions. Give yourself space to be distracted or removed from the intensity of your emotions if it feels right. Go to or rent a movie or do something else you've found enjoyable in the past. It may not feel as good or funny as you might hope, but it may lighten your heart or give you a bit of breathing space.
- **Vent** - Find ways to vent or express emotions. This could be finding a safe place to yell, beat on a pillow, or some project in your house that will

offer you a safe outlet to express anger, confusion, or despair. This could also be doing vigorous exercise (running, hiking, kickboxing or another martial art).

- **Write** – Some people find keeping a journal very valuable. It can be a safe place to express oneself honestly. In a journal there is no need to self-edit, or be anxious about someone judging your words. Keeping a journal can also be a record. As the weeks and months go by, you may feel no *movement* in your grief. By writing what you are experiencing now, you will be able to review your writing over time and witness changes that have occurred in that reflection. Alternately, one can compose letters or other writing to be ritually shredded or burned. In this way, feelings and thoughts can be expressed and then released.

In addition to the emotions and changes of behavior noted above, you may hear the voice of the deceased, or 'see' them in a crowd of people. You may

have vivid dreams about the person who died. By contrast, you may wish you would have vivid dreams or feel a sense of closeness, and instead feel only their palpable absence. You may find a desire to tell and retell stories about them. You may find yourself alternately avoiding or being drawn to places where you spent time together. All of these can be part of a normal, human grief experience.

### ○ CARING FOR YOUR NEEDS ○

As you continually assess your own needs in this more fragile time, consider the following suggestions. In the end, you alone are the only one who can decide what will work for you. Reflect on times of loss or difficulty in the past and where you have found strength and refuge during those periods.

### ○ ATTEND TO YOUR BODY ○

**Food** - Try to pay attention to what your body needs right now. If you find it difficult to eat full meals, snack lightly during the day. If you find yourself overeating, make sure you have access to foods at home and work that will fill your desire to snack without turning strictly to junk foods.

How we nourish ourselves directly impacts our physical, mental and emotional state. Eating healthy and whole foods with a reasonable balance of protein, vegetables and carbohydrates will support you during this time.

(See *Food as Medicine* on the Educational Links Page

~ [www.amydarling.com](http://www.amydarling.com))

**Rest** - You may find your sleeping patterns disturbed. If possible, give yourself permission to rest during the day even if you are not able to fall asleep. You may also find a desire to do nothing but sleep. If either extreme persists for a matter of months, modalities ranging from Cranial Sacral therapy to Oriental Medicine can help with disturbed sleeping patterns. Consult with friends or

trusted practitioners for referral to qualified practitioners in your area.

**Exercise** - Exercise, of even a very gentle variety, assists in regulating mood, energy, sleep and appetite. It can reduce lethargy and depression, while increasing energy and buoying your spirits. If finding motivation is difficult, consider attending a regular class or pairing up with a friend and making an exercise date.

**Intoxicants** - During painful times, it can be very easy and consoling to turn to substances or activities that numb or dull our emotions. This may be drugs or alcohol. It could also be excessive television or food. Be attentive to what you are taking in to your body. Repeatedly numbing the pain with drugs or diverting attention from your emotions, will suspend or prolong the natural emotional work of grieving.

**Movement**- We carry emotions and experiences in our bodies. *Sequestered emotions* can manifest in back & joint pain, muscle tightness, and digestive distress etc..

Consider ways that you can facilitate movement in your body. For some this might be aerobic exercise or a practice like yoga or T'aiji. For others, massage, acupuncture, or some other form of body work may be the best way to keep things moving.

In the first couple months after a death, consider checking in with your primary health care provider to discuss how you're doing. If your physician recommends an anti-depressant, consider the wide variety of options presented in this booklet as alternatives.

## ○ SOCIAL ACTIVITY ○

Some people find it very difficult to engage in relationships or activities as they were accustomed to before the death. This does not necessarily mean that your experience of being with others is permanently changed. During this time, it may be valuable to assess carefully what your energy level is and feel comfortable saying no to invitations that you just don't feel up for.

Find a balance between trusting your intuition about what feels right and paying attention to family and friends' concerns that you remain *engaged*. It's perfectly okay **not** to 'keep busy' all the time, but rather to have this be a more internal time for you.

### ○ TALK OPENLY ○

Try to identify people you feel comfortable talking with openly. Those people may have changed. Many people remark on change in friendships during illness or following a death. People you may have felt very supported by at other times in your life may not be comfortable just sitting with you as you speak openly about how you think or feel right now.

In the wake of a death, many people feel awkward or uncomfortable about 'what to say' and as a result say things that may be unhelpful, inappropriate, or outright painful. Learn to take care of yourself in situations in which you might encounter such comments.

There may be neighbors, family or acquaintances you have not been particularly close to before, but who

may have experienced a significant loss in their lives. Or perhaps they are an inexplicably comforting presence for reasons you can't identify. Open yourself up to support from these people as it is offered and feels safe or comfortable. They may be able to be more present and available to you than many of those you have been closest to in the past.

You may find it beneficial to seek out others who have experienced a loss, either informally or in the context of a grief support group. Loneliness and a sense of isolation are present for many who have experienced a death. Coming together with others can enable you to see the unique qualities of your own journey, and also the emotions and experiences which are common or shared. In this kind of sharing, you may find a certain permission to feel what you are feeling without guilt or a desire to control it.

### ○ BELIEFS AND COMMUNITY ○

In the wake of a significant loss or any major change, some people find concurrent changes in

important beliefs. These could be beliefs in a specific faith tradition, or broader questions about illness, death, one's place in this life and after this life. It is very natural for loss to raise such questions.

This may be both a time of confusion and a time of openness for you. It may be a time of anger directed toward divine force(s) you see as responsible for the person's death. This may be a time to recommit to or find renewed nourishment in a system of beliefs that has proven supportive and valuable throughout your life. This may be a time when you struggle to find a connection to yourself and the world spiritually; a time when you do not feel you can maintain your discipline of meditation, yoga, attending prayer meeting or mass or temple. This may be a time when you reevaluate your relationship to your own spirituality or religious practice and find new questions or concerns.

However this manifests for you individually, seek out people with whom you can speak openly. You may be interested to seek out support from someone identified as a priest or teacher in your own tradition or a tradition you are interested in exploring. You may find it

supportive to reach out toward community (church, temple, meeting house) or you may feel more comfort in solitary practice, worship or prayer.

## ○ SIGNIFICANT DECISIONS ○

If it is possible, postpone making major decisions just following a death. You may need to consider selling a home or dealing with the possessions of the person who died. Try to give yourself space and permission not to make any decisions immediately. You may encounter pressure from family or friends to deal with certain decisions on their time line. Remember that it is theirs and not yours, even if the decisions you make will have an impact on them. Ask for what you need. If it is possible for you to communicate with them honestly, let them know you are simply not ready and are doing the best you can to deal with things one day at a time.

If you must make an important decision early on, solicit the counsel of those you trust in that process. Also, take care of your needs in those discussions and be

honest when you simply cannot discuss the matter any further at a particular moment.

### ○ SPECIAL DAYS & RITUAL ○

Everyone has days that bring forward powerful memories of the person who has died. This could be a formal holiday, an anniversary be it of a wedding, a diagnoses, a completed project, a birthday, or any special day on your calendar which you look ahead to, wondering how it will feel in their absence.

Some people find it valuable to plan ahead. For an anniversary or a birthday, you may want to spend the time with friends either to celebrate and honor the deceased or to avoid the pain of being alone. You may alternately be interested to designate that as very sacred, quiet time for yourself to look through photos, or visit some place that was special to you together, or write a letter to the person who has died. You may want to simply do whatever feels spontaneously comfortable or supportive when the day or time comes.

Some people find great meaning and comfort in including ritual in marking important days. This may be simply keeping a candle lit all day long. It might be going to a bridge and casting flowers into the water. It could be visiting the grave or where the ashes of the deceased were interred or scattered. It could be setting an empty place for the deceased at your table and raising a toast or saying a prayer for their life and wellbeing. There is no blueprint for how to approach these days. On a first anniversary, it may simply be a question of enduring as best you can. On other occasions, you may find a desire and ability to truly honor and celebrate their life.

### ○ REMEMBER YOUR TOOL BAG ○

As you reflect on things that have been supportive to you during tough times in the past, it may be helpful to make a list. This could be a list of strengths you identify in yourself or your life that will help you through this. This could be a list of activities that are in some way supportive, healing, fun, or nourishing to you. This could be a list of people who have encouraged you

to reach out to them if you need something. Sometimes we forget about the tools in our very own tool bag when we need them most. Find a way that works for you to remember the activities, strengths, things and people that can be supportive to you right now. Use the space on the opposite page to make any notes which might be helpful in reminding you of the contents of your *tool bag*.

### ○ YOUR UNIQUE WAY ○

You are the one with the clearest connection to your own heart, mind and body. There will be many people who have suggestions about how they survived a death or how you *should* cope. You will need to develop a certain level of trust in yourself and your unique way of putting one foot in front of the other during this time.

Trust what your gut tells you you can and cannot do right now. Trust who it feels right to spend your time with. Balance your sense of obligation to work, family, friends and commitments with the reality of your energy level. Forgive yourself for not being able to do or be all the things you may have identified with before the death.

Know that what you are experiencing will change. You will not always feel the way you feel at this moment. One day, one breath at a time, there is no right way to do this other than your way.

*Use this space to begin a list as outlined on the opposite page.*