

Grieving when others do not acknowledge your loss



Grief is our normal response to loss. When we experience grief that is acknowledged by others, such as the death of a family member or friend, we are usually offered support and can attend funerals and other rituals to help with the healing process.

When someone can't share their grief with others or their loss is not acknowledged or validated by others, their grief can be felt even more intensely. This is often referred to as disenfranchised grief. Disenfranchised grief can leave the bereaved person feeling alone, isolated, unsupported or unable to share their experience. The world that once made sense has been disrupted and feels 'shattered'.

"I feel devastated; I've tried not to be, but I have gone from being something to become absolutely nothing, it's like I never existed, wiped from a life. It's very weird."

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it a sense of anxiety, ambiguity and confusion. Each day brings new information that adds another layer of uncertainty. For some people, this may mean that their grief feels insignificant or unimportant as the world faces more significant issues, and large numbers of people are unwell or dying.

No matter what the circumstances, everyone has a right to grieve.

Examples of disenfranchised grief:

Unrecognised relationships

If you felt a need to keep a relationship private, you may not know how to share or express your sadness when that person dies. People may struggle to understand when you mourn someone you never knew, or when the relationship is not legally recognised. This might include:

- » LGBTQI people who may feel their grieving for the loss of a partner is not recognised.
- » The death of a casual relationship or ex-partner.
- » The death of someone you never knew, like an unknown sibling, absent parent or a celebrity.
- » Loss of a stepfamily member, for example a grandparent or grandchild.

Losses that are stigmatised

Some people may not know how to respond to grief related to something not often discussed, such as bereavement resulting from suicide, drug overdose, voluntary assisted dying, abortion or miscarriage.

Exclusion from mourning

If you experience the death of someone who was not a partner or part of your immediate family, you may face the assumption that you have less right to mourn them or possibly experience exclusion from attending the funeral. It is normal to grieve the loss of anyone you have a meaningful relationship with.

People also sometimes assume certain groups lack the capacity to mourn, including; children or people with cognitive impairment, loss of function, developmental disabilities or who have a serious mental health condition.

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How it feels to have a loss dismissed by others

People who don't expect you to grieve potentially won't understand your need for support as you process the loss. This can make it hard to take needed time off from work or school. When others dismiss your grief or suggest you shouldn't feel "that sad," you may start to wonder if they're right. By internalising these messages, you effectively may disenfranchise your own grief, which can lead to: doubt and guilt around your "inappropriate" reaction, increased difficulty working through distress and difficulty coping with future losses.

Here are some things that may help:

Acknowledge your loss

- » No matter the circumstances that surround you, your loss is real, and the grief that you feel valid.
- » Allow yourself the time to feel, think, remember and honour the person who has died in your own way. Rituals, memorials and talking about the person who has died can be an excellent way to do this.
- » Try not to think about your loss as being on a hierarchy, or who has 'the greatest right' to grieve. Grief is an individual and personal experience that should never be compared to the losses of others.

Give yourself time and space to grieve

- » Don't apologise for grieving, nor let others dictate whether or not you have a right to 'feel' your emotions.
- » Try to free yourself from expectations and permit yourself to grieve in your way and in your own time.

Take care of yourself

- » Put together a self-care plan that supports you in your interests, allows for rest and daily social connection.
- » Think about what you need each day and what has helped you get through tough times in the past.
- » With the physical distancing guidelines in place, try to get outside to exercise in the fresh air each day, prepare for sleep and eat nutritious food.

Seek support

- » Seek support from people in your life who understand. Avoid those who don't validate or support your feelings.
- » Seek out friends and family who knew about your relationship with the person/companion animal that you lost.
- » Seek out people who are in a similar situation to you and people who are more likely to be compassionate and understanding of your loss.
- » Keep in contact with people in ways that support physical distancing guidelines. You can use the phone, email, social media, send a text, or online using Skype or Zoom.

Seek professional help

- » Don't be afraid to seek professional support from a bereavement counsellor, psychologist, general practitioner or other health professionals (many practitioners are offering phone and online help).
- » Phone a helpline like Lifeline, Beyond Blue or Friendline if you feel isolated, need support or someone to talk to.

Download the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement's *MyGrief App* for immediate information about how to receive bereavement support or how to support someone who is grieving. is available at <http://bit.ly/mygrief> for both Apple and Android smartphone platforms.