

# Disenfranchised Grief

Grief is defined as the emotional response to any type of loss. Loss of a loved one, loss of a relationship through divorce or illness, and change in life-style generated by a geographical or occupational move are all types of losses that create grief. Grief is characterized by feelings of sadness, hopelessness, depression, numbness, anger and guilt. The saying, "time heals all wounds" is somewhat true. In fact, as time goes by, the emotional responses associated with the grief tend to subside or lessen in intensity. On the other hand, disenfranchised grief hinders grief resolution causing the feelings associated with grief to persist for a very long time.

Disenfranchised grief is generally grief that is not usually openly acknowledged, socially accepted or publicly mourned. Examples of disenfranchised grief include loss of a pet, perinatal losses, elective abortions, loss of a body part, loss of a personality from dementia, and loss of a loved one who is not "blood related" (i.e. a boyfriend/girlfriend, extra-marital lover, in-laws). Society disenfranchises grief and mourners by not recognizing one or more of the following: the relationship between the deceased and a survivor, the importance of the loss, or the need to be a griever. Society also attempts to regulate how, when, and how long people may grieve by placing terms such as complicated grief on those who seem to be grieving longer than they should. Grief and sadness make people uncomfortable. Therefore, we often try to make people feel better or we simply ignore or minimize their grief as something that they need to "get over." Establishing definitions of proper and improper mourning techniques is another way of excluding certain individuals, thereby disenfranchising them and their grief.

The goal in successful grief resolution is to reestablish emotional equilibrium. The four characteristics for successful grief resolution include: accepting the

reality of the loss, experiencing the pain of grief and all the emotions that follow, adjusting to the new environment without the person or situation and, finally, withdrawing emotional energy and reinvesting it in another relationship. When grief is considered acceptable there are rituals that surround and ease the pain of the bereaved, however this is usually not the case for those experiencing disenfranchised grief. There is often no extra bereavement leave from work or sympathy cards found to validate loss that society does not feel warrants sympathy. Dismissive and hurtful comments such as, "You're still young, you can have another baby," "Be glad you're still alive," or "It was only a dog!" demonstrate how unimportant these losses are to most people.

Disenfranchised grief can have multiple effects such as depression, emotional disturbances, withdrawal from society, psychosomatic illnesses and low self-esteem. Compared to those with more socially accepted types of grief, many of those dealing with disenfranchised grief tend to abuse substances and have difficulty in forming healthy relationships. Moreover, people with disenfranchised grief often have trouble in coping with subsequent losses.

When we withhold affirmation of the person's grief, memory of the relationship, the importance of the loss, or the needs of the griever do not simply go away. Rather, it causes bereaved individuals to cut off sources of support, forcing them to suppress their grief, and causing their problems to magnify. Therefore, people need to accept the fact that others may grieve and have intense emotional reactions to things which we may see as silly or unimportant. In accepting the fact that others may have these grief reactions, we can better prepare ourselves for the role of the supporter.

More information is available at these three websites:

<http://www.grief.net/>

<http://griefnet.org/>

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Reference:

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