

8 Faces of Grief

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I have had a number of different professions over the course of my life experience, and one of them was a funeral celebrant. I agree that it is not one of the more ‘popular’ career choices — you rarely expect your child to come home and announce that he or she wants to make a career of ‘burying dead people’ (and if he or she did, you might be a little anxious about your child’s mental health!)

Being a funeral celebrant was not my life ambition either, but being a minister of religion was. The two roles frequently go hand in hand. (Not that I contemplated that part when I announced at 12 years of age ‘what I wanted to be when I grow up.’)

In my training, I chose to forgo the opportunity to ‘look at a dead body’ during the mandatory visit to a funeral home in Melbourne. The first funeral I conducted, I led the service, played the piano, presented the eulogy and spoke the words of committal at the graveside. All of this was, as one would say, ‘a walk in the park.’ My greatest fear was that the casket would be open during the service. It wasn’t, and I have happily conducted many funerals since.

One of the most significant lessons I learned as I performed this role for people was that grief has many differing faces. Pain, suffering, relief, stoicism, distraction, sobbing, or a blank look — there is no ‘one way to grieve’ because our grief is as unique as our pain.

Some of the ‘faces of grief’ have been defined by professionals as a way of helping people to understand what it is they are witnessing in another or experiencing in themselves. The way you express your grief is your way – there is no right or wrong way to ‘do’ grief. Grief just is.

Here are 8 faces of grief:

1. **Abbreviated**

Abbreviated or short-lived grief occurs when a person finds it necessary to ‘move on’ swiftly due to, for instance, a remarriage where the now ‘absent partner’ is replaced and a new relationship is established. Grief might be shortened because the attachment or connection to the deceased was not particularly strong.

2. **Absent**

Sometimes a person shows no evidence of grief because they have put aside their own need to grieve. For instance, an adult male whose father has died may have absent grief because he is preoccupied by his mother’s needs.

3. **Ambiguous**

Sometimes a loss may not appear to be valid to others, making it difficult to express one's grief. For example, it may be the 'mistress' who sits quietly at the back of a chapel, alone and unacknowledged in her grief; or the estranged child who was never acknowledged by his or her parent.

4. **Anticipatory**

When a person has suffered a prolonged period of illness, such as cancer or other disease, their loved ones frequently grieve in anticipation of their death.

5. **Chronic**

For some individuals, their grief continues to feel as intense over time as it did in the first weeks. People may be able to return to normal daily functioning; however, time does not dissipate their grief's pain or intensity.

6. **Complicated and Traumatic**

In complicated and traumatic grief, a person's ability to cope with daily life diminishes over time. Their ongoing grief is so painful and overwhelming that they become debilitated, experiencing prolonged agitation, suicidal thoughts or numbness.

7. **Delayed**

Delayed grief is grief postponed. For instance, a mother might delay her grief to care for her children; however, it is only for a time. Delayed grief eventually will be expressed.

8. **Disenfranchised**

In most experiences of grief, others acknowledge your loss, giving you a sense of comfort and support. Disenfranchised grief goes unnoticed and unacknowledged by others, making it an even more isolating experience. This includes experiences such as people undergoing in vitro fertilization waiting to get pregnant, miscarriage, abortion, or having the HIV virus.

Whatever your own experience of grief is, it is important that you find ways to express it so that you don't become stuck. Journaling, drawing and talking about your experience are just some ways of processing grief. If you find yourself stuck, and your physical or mental health is declining, it is important to seek out a counselor who can help you process your experience.