

Grief Overload

I had a sobering experience the other day. I was looking for an obituary so I got online and searched our local paper. I did not know when the person had died so I went back a year and read through all the names, I found that within a twelve month period of time 18 people that I have known well or worked with had died. Additionally I have known 7 people who died of covid-19 and in the last three years I have lost four of my own siblings. It is not a wonder that there are days that I may feel weighed down.

Loss and unwanted change are unavoidable parts of everyone's life, but sometimes people experience a disproportionate number or degree of bad things. Sometimes the losses stack too high, creating a sorrow that seems too great to bear.

In the face of too much loss, it's normal to feel devastated, exhausted, or hopeless. It's normal to feel paralyzed and overburdened. Rest assured that the overwhelming nature of your grief is a normal reaction. What is abnormal is the unusually challenging life situation you find yourself in right now.

Yet there is so much hope. By making yourself aware of some basic principles of grief, you are taking a big step toward healing. You see, grief responds to awareness. When you educate yourself about grief and mourning, you are making the experience more understandable and bearable. It becomes something you can work on rather than something that simply happens to you.

I have been a grief counselor and educator for more than thirty years now. In my work, and in my own life, I have encountered a great deal of loss. It might help you to know that grief overload is a fairly common, though indeed painful and grueling, circumstance. At one point or another in their lives, many people find themselves dragged under by too much loss.

In fact, I have noticed that more and more of us are becoming grief overloaded because, thanks to medical advances, people are living longer. Where death used to be an everyday occurrence, now it's common for us to live into our 40s or 50s before someone close to us dies—and then, all too often, loved ones start getting sick and dying one after another.

But the overburdened grievers I've learned from have also taught me this: Over time and through active mourning, they came through. And so will you.

What Is Grief Overload?

Grief overload is what you feel when you experience too many significant losses all at once or in a relatively short period of time.

The grief of loss overload is different from typical grief because it emanates from more than one loss and because it is jumbled. Our minds and hearts have enough trouble coping with

one loss at a time, but when they have to deal with multiple losses simultaneously, the grief often seems especially chaotic and defeating. Before you can mourn one loss, here comes another loss. Even if you have coped with grief effectively in the past, you may be finding that this time it's different. This time it may feel like you're struggling to survive.

Causes of Grief Overload

Tragic incidents

Unfortunately, sometimes several people die in a single incident. Natural disasters, car accidents, and acts of violence can cause the deaths of multiple people you care about all at once. Such traumatic circumstances naturally give rise to grief overload. If you have suffered this type of loss, it is likely you are in particular need of extra support and care.

Traumatic loss and grief overload

All significant losses feel traumatic, but here I want to talk specifically about losses caused by sudden and often violent events. Murder, suicide, and death by a traumatic accident or natural disaster all fall into this category. So do events that cause severe injuries instead of death and/or significant damage to homes and property, such as fires.

Multiple people may die in a traumatic incident, or one person might die and others may be seriously injured. Or no one might die, but several people—including you, perhaps—might be hurt, or maybe your home, belongings, and financial stability might be destroyed. Sometimes national or international disasters contribute to our grief overload, like a sense of overwhelming grief that everything around us is bad or the feeling of loss that so many families may have as we identify with their hurts

If you have suffered a traumatic loss of any kind, you are at risk for your grief overload being influenced by what is called "traumatic grief." Traumatic grief is grief that has an added component of intense fear and other challenging symptoms caused by the violent nature of the incident itself.

If flashbacks, memory gaps, persistent negative or intrusive thoughts, low self-esteem, hyper-vigilance or anxiety, personality change, and/or an inability to handle the tasks of daily living are part of your grief overload experience, I urge you to see your primary-care physician and a trained grief counselor. You will need—and you deserve—extra support and care.

Back-to-back losses

Other times, a number of people you love may die of unrelated causes but in quick succession. If a close friend dies of cancer, then a parent dies of natural causes in old age, and then a sibling is killed in an accident, for example, you are certain to feel overwhelmed by too much loss all at once.

These deaths might happen within days or weeks of each other or within months or a few years. But it's also important to note that there are no hard-and-fast deadlines that define grief overload caused by successive loss. If you feel overloaded by grief, no matter how spread out in time the losses have been, you are experiencing grief overload.

Losses other than death

And it's not only death loss that causes grief overload. Other types of significant loss are also common contributors. Whenever you lose something you are or have been attached to, you naturally grieve the change or separation. This means that job loss often causes grief. Divorce causes grief. Health problems cause grief. Estrangement from loved ones causes grief. A move away from a beloved home or location causes grief. When you experience a number of such significant losses in a period of time, in addition to or even in lieu of death losses, you may well find yourself suffering grief overload.

Secondary losses

Secondary losses are also intrinsic components of grief overload. That's because each significant loss in our lives gives rise to a number of related losses, like ripples in a pond after a stone is dropped in.

For example, if a spouse or partner dies, we don't only suffer the loss of that important relationship and unique individual. We also experience related losses, such as the loss of our self-identity as half of a twosome, the loss of our hoped-for future, the potential loss of financial security, and many more. Even everyday life changes resulting from a major loss—such as no longer having a companion to prepare and eat dinner with each night—fall into this category of secondary loss. Secondary losses can make it feel like loss is permeating every aspect of our lives. Everywhere we turn, there's nothing but loss.

Cumulative losses

Losses that cumulate over our lifetime can also lead to or be a factor in grief overload. Throughout our lives, we all experience loss, of course. From the time we are young, pets die, friendships break, and other hardships present themselves year after year after year. But what you may not realize is that if you don't fully grieve and mourn each loss as it arises, you end up carrying unreconciled grief. Eventually that carried grief can add up and become an unsustainably weighty burden. If you suspect that long-ago losses might be part of your grief overload right now, you're probably right.

Grief overload in the elderly

Finally, older people often find themselves experiencing grief overload for a combination of reasons mentioned above. Increasingly, their friends and peers begin to die in faster succession, their health often deteriorates, and they may have also accumulated a great deal of carried grief over the course of their lives. I am in my sixties as I write this, and I want you to know that while I understand that loss overload in our final decades is a very real challenge, we can continue to live and love meaningfully as long as we also continue to actively grieve our losses.

Caregiver grief overload

Professional caregivers of all kinds are at risk for grief overload. If your job, career, or dedicated volunteer role involves helping others who are experiencing trauma or loss of any kind, grief overload is both something to be aware of and something to proactively anticipate and address in your self-care plan. It is important that we recognize caring for others well, means that we pursue healthy self care in our lives. Whether you work in a hospice, funeral home, hospital, or school, whether you are a counselor, medical professional, a family caregiver, ceo responsible for others, or another type of caregiver altogether, we all are in

need of being able to recharge our caring batteries. *We will never get recharged where we got empty.*

I am a person who loves what he does, but without healthy self care, hobbies or interests outside of what I do, erosion of mind, spirit and body can take place without even realizing it. A beach or shoreline erodes one grain of sand at a time without anyone noticing, until one day we stand at the shore and ask where did it go? what happened here? The same is true with us without practicing good self care, we can begin to feel the erosion of grief overload. Others begin to notice it first, they ask, "are you all right? You seem a little down or a little more irritated. Many times your spouse or family will notice it first, when you are less engaged or your mood has changed more than a temporary bad day.

So what do we do for grief overload?

Take a step back, acknowledge the losses in our life. Be willing to identify the emotions we have surrounding them including being able to feel the pain of loss. Acknowledge the significance of those we have lost, their impact on our lives, lessons we have learned, how they have helped to shape in some ways who we are. Be willing to learn about grief and our journey through it, one book I really like is by Martha W. Hickman, *Healing After Loss*, it includes a short daily reading (meditation) for working through grief. Be willing to talk to someone, a grief counselor, or participate in a grief support group in your area. Learn for you what healthy self care is and practice it everyday.

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