

Grief Notes

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Valentine's Day Mourning by Jane Cornman, Bereavement Coordinator

Valentine's Day can be a cruel holiday for those who are grieving. It is a day when everyone around you is celebrating the love and connectedness they experience in their most cherished relationships. Regardless of whether the relationship you had with your loved one was romantic or not, this day is likely to highlight one of the biggest challenges in grief: loneliness.

The most obvious form of loneliness in grief is missing the loved one you lost. Those moments of aching absence, provoked by any number of unexpected triggers or memories, are the daily burden of every griever. But another, less obvious form of loneliness is being misunderstood by the people you thought would be your strongest support.

There are all sorts of sayings about grief being the price we pay for love, but instead of embracing the bittersweet truth of this, most people want to avoid thinking about it. Just when we need our friends the most, we may discover that we are being avoided because we serve as a disturbing reminder that this could happen to them, too. Or, our most engaged and well-meaning friends may hurt us by trying to "fix" our grief with insensitive platitudes and suggestions. The failure of our loved ones to understand our grief and provide true comfort can bring its own searing pain and loneliness.

What's a lonely griever to do? **First**, this is a time to set aside your fear of being "weak" and be honest about your pain and difficulty. If you hide your feelings, nobody will know how much you need their support and understanding. Grief may be carried alone, and society may pressure us to do so, but this is done to the great detriment of the griever. Being open to receiving care from others helps us create healthy new connections which will see us into the future without our loved one.

Second, it's important to communicate honestly. Tell your friends and loved ones what helps and what doesn't. Through their reactions, you will quickly discover who you can trust to walk this journey with you. The friends who cause pain may be perfectly good for normal times, but you may need to reduce time spent with them for a while.

Third, this is an opportunity to make some new friends. The best ones will be people who are going through a similar experience, and the best way to meet them is in a grief support group. The thought of gathering with a group of strangers to discuss intimate details of your loss may seem intimidating, but we run these groups because they work. Strangers become friends and the group becomes a source of great comfort and companionship.

Fourth, be discerning about who you let in, because loneliness can make us vulnerable to unhealthy relationships. Look for people who listen well and help you to feel seen and understood, no strings attached.

Many grievers would say that loneliness is the hardest part of grief. Sadly, there are no quick fixes or easy cures, but most grievers report that over time it does get better. Be assured that as hopeless as your loneliness may feel, there are people in this world who care. You may already know some of them, and others are waiting to be discovered. And if this feels like more than you can handle, please reach out to a hospice bereavement coordinator, or look for a therapist who specializes in grief. You deserve to be heard, cared for, and loved. Even after the death of your loved one, please know that this is possible.