

# Grief Notes

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## Grieving Difficult Relationships by Jane Cornman, Bereavement Coordinator

When we hear that someone else is grieving, it's natural to assume that the relationship was a healthy one and the grief is that classic formula of "love with no place to go." But the hard truth is that not all relationships are healthy, and the end that comes with death does not necessarily fix what was broken.

I remember working with a woman whose father had died. As her story unfolded, I was horrified to hear the many ways he had abused her, physically, emotionally, and financially, throughout her life. She was in her sixties when he died, but despite decades of therapy – in which she developed some of the strongest emotional maturity I've ever encountered – her father's death was still incredibly hard for her. As someone who had not experienced what she had, I could not fathom how his death could be anything but a relief. She helped me understand that despite her father's abuse, she had never stopped hoping that someday he would step up and become the father she wanted, loving her unconditionally. His death, rather than being a relief, ended the possibility of ever having the kind of father she'd wished for. She had to grieve the end

of that hope and face the finality of his indifference.

Another challenge people sometimes face is what we describe as "unfinished business." This happens when someone dies before a dispute can be resolved. Suddenly the reconciliation that was vaguely expected to happen sometime in the future becomes impossible, and the dispute takes on larger significance for the survivor. Even when the survivor knows that reconciliation would have happened, the fact that it didn't colors their memory and leaves them struggling with guilt and remorse.

Closely related is an issue called disenfranchised grief. This is what happens when other people don't recognize the significance of someone's loss. Just as I made wrong assumptions about how the above woman would feel when her abusive father died, people sometimes assume that the death shouldn't be a big problem for the griever. Some examples include "less significant" deaths like the loss of friends, co-workers, and pets. This lack of recognition can leave the griever feeling alone, isolated, and misunderstood.

There is no way that a short article like this can spell out simple solutions to such complicated situations. The most important thing to know is that if you are grieving a difficult relationship or experiencing unfinished business or disenfranchised grief, you are definitely not alone. Although these situations can feel terrible, they are actually very common, and with help, it is possible to recover and move on in a healthy way. If you are struggling, please take advantage of your hospice grief benefit and reach out to your bereavement coordinator. We can help you process these difficult situations and find more help if needed.

