



THE UNIQUE
GRIEF OF
POLICE,
MILITARY &
FIRST-
RESPONDERS

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“No person was ever honored for what he received.
Honor has been the reward for what he gave.”

~Calvin Coolidge, 30th President of the United States (1872-1933)

To Live a Life of Service

We choose to live a life of service. For some this means living a life of devotion in a religious or spiritual sense. For others, it means living their life purpose by being of service to others. For police, military, and first-responders, it means to live a devoted life to serving and protecting.

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The men and women serving in the capacity of police, military, or first-responder (e.g. search and rescue, peace officers, firefighters, paramedics, park rangers, and emergency medical technicians) commit to a job which is both rewarding and conflicting. No mom or dad wants to miss their child's birthday or Christmas; however, it is the norm in these jobs. Therefore, it is a life the entire family chooses and accepts.

The remuneration is not over the top by any means. In fact, the income is a living wage and not reflective of the daily risks faced on the job or the value given. The personal reward of serving must outweigh the often dismal conditions, long hours, precious time away from family, and average wage.

Grief for Police, Military, and First-Responders is Unique

The grief journey in these communities is unique because people die on the job. Soldiers killed in action, police officers shot and killed on duty, and first-responders dying in work-related incidents happen. Their colleagues impacted by the event are responsible for carrying out protocols and family notifications, but they must also remain at work. For example, when a policer officer is shot and killed, the shooter may be at large and those on duty must find and arrest the suspect. Likewise, if a firefighter is killed...his or her colleagues may still be dealing with a fire and all the aftermath that goes with it. Soldiers killed in the line of duty are part of ongoing casualties; the conflict does not stop because they died.

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The funeral for is generally a beautiful tribute to the member. There is protocol to follow, flags are flown half-mast, and venues are filled to overflow with uniformed personnel and family and friends. The funeral or memorial is a moment in time for everyone to come together and remember the person who died. It is important because it activates a natural support system by bringing everyone together. It also brings the reality of the person's death into full view. There is no escaping the fact they are not coming back. However, the funeral or memorial service is only a moment in time for those left behind. For the deceased person's colleagues, it truly is only a moment in time because the next day (if not that same day) the majority of them return to work and carry out their duties as expected. There will be no room for their grief on shift. They will be expected to make decisions and respond to situations as they have been trained. Period. In the course of duty it won't matter that they buried a friend, a brother, a sister, or a respected colleague only hours before.

When the Gatekeeper Dies

The person who died is the family's "gatekeeper" to an exclusive community (i.e. military community). After their death, the inclusion to this community wanes and may even be denied. It isn't that the colleagues of their loved one don't want to include them. The relationship takes on different parameters and the unintended, but natural consequence of the person's death, is that the deceased person's family no longer fits within that structure. This isn't to say that personal friendships won't remain intact. They do. It does mean the day-to-day connections, social functions, and camaraderie is no longer available to them. This may result in feelings of disappointment, abandonment, anger, and profound sadness for the family.

By normalizing the experience, survivors can understand the changes in the relationship with their love one's work community and not take it personally.

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Where the Healing Begins

Although we pay great honor to those who die in service, the pain of losing a loved one lingers beyond the funeral and public dedication. For years to come, the families and friends left behind travel a long and unpredictable grief journey. They seek comfort in their precious memories and struggle to make sense of why their love one's death happened when it did and in the way it did.

There is immense pride knowing that your loved one died while serving his or her community and country. However, the wound of losing a father or mother, son or daughter, sister or brother, is deep and not easy to heal. This is where the bereaved person struggles. Why? Why us? Why him? Why now? And... how am I going to go on without him?

The question why actually facilitates the search for meaning. You don't have to answer this question. They need to ask the question and they need to search for their own answers. It is in searching for the answers that the work of mourning and healing takes place. The person will adopt the answer that is most meaningful and makes sense to them.

How to Provide Support

It is important to understand how the journey of grief unfolds and what it means to do the work of mourning and healing. First of all, there is no cookie-cutter approach to supporting an individual in grief. Loss impacts everyone differently and while our response and supports may have a common theme, the process is as individual and unique as the person who died.

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Most people are familiar with the work of Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' a Swiss American psychiatrist. She was a pioneer in near-death studies and wrote the ground-breaking book *On Death and Dying*. Her model, commonly referred to as the Five Stages of Grief or DABDA (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance), was a godsend to professionals. At the time it could be equated to giving water to the parched. Social workers, clergy, doctors and nurses were desperate to find a way to open communication with the dying. Kübler-Ross did just that.

The problem with her model was that it was interpreted as being linear, meaning the stages occurred in the order given. This left professionals and their clients believing that one must go from denial to anger to bargaining and so forth or the person was doing the work of grieving incorrectly.

Before Dr. Kübler-Ross died, she declared that the stages were meant to be a list of potential grief responses and not to be misconstrued as having to go from 1 to 2 to 3 to 4 to 5. Not only did this validate what the bereaved knew to be true, which is that grief responses are vast and not predictable or orderly, but it also gave permission to grieve in a more realistic way.

There is no denying that Dr. Kübler-Ross pioneered the field of bereavement. Without her work, the voices of the bereaved would remain unheard and their emotions grossly misunderstood.

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The death of a loved one unleashes an excess of feelings. Some won't believe they are capable of having such intense emotions, which can be explosive. As previously stated, these reactions are not predictable or easily categorized in a logical fashion. There are no stages or phases to successfully pass through. The journey is not a beautiful walk; it is more like the evil roller coaster ride from hell! There are times when all one can do is to white knuckle it through the day and hope to get to the end of it. Some bereaved individuals even have fleeting thoughts of the roller coaster disappearing into a dark hole. This isn't because they want to die, it's because they are desperate for relief.

Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Director of The Centre for Life Loss & Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado, devised an expansive list of potential grief responses which includes: Shock, numbness, disbelief, disorganization, confusion, searching for meaning, anxiety, panic, fear, loss, emptiness, sadness and more. This immense list resonates readily with people who are in or have experienced grief. It is a list that I believe Dr. Kübler-Ross would also agree with.

Here are some ways to provide the best support to a grieving person:

~Ensure the person has both short-term and long-term supports. There is a great deal of attention and activity around the family in the early days, weeks, and months. This is short-term support. However, as time goes on those supports tend to wane and this leaves the family feeling vulnerable and alone. Make a point of being in touch with them at milestones times of 3, 6, 9, 12, and 18 months. Send a text, email, or make a phone call. Your efforts will mean more than you can imagine.

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- Don't expect them to 'get over' what has happened. You never get over losing a loved one. You learn to live with the loss and integrate it into your life.
- Don't be afraid to say the name of the person who died. You won't upset the family. In fact, you will bring them comfort and peace. They don't want to forget their loved one and they don't want anyone else to either.
- Allow the person to cry without apologizing to them. As soon as the tears begin to fall, the supporters often say, "Oh, I am sorry. I didn't mean to make you cry." Believe me you didn't make them cry. What you did was give them permission to let go of the pain and bring some relief to their mind, body, and spirit. When we cannot think of what to say or how to let go of the pain, tears are a natural way for us to release the stress and sorrow.
- Don't try to fix it. You can't. Just be with them and allow the person to feel what they need to feel for however long they need to feel it without offering advice or attempting to persuade or dissuade them in any way.
- Allow for anger and grief bursts. Anger is a normal part of the process. The person will feel it and needs to be allowed to express it. Grief bursts are just that... a burst of grief that raises its head when the person is seemingly having a relatively normal day and then is suddenly triggered by something they saw, read or heard. It happens to everyone and the best thing you can do is normalize it for them.
- Take care of yourself. If you want to go the distance and truly support someone for however long they need you, then it is imperative that you eat well, get plenty of rest, have some fun, and give yourself permission to step aside for brief breaks. If you have unresolved grief, then now is the time to deal with it so you can be there for the other person.

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- Prepare for grief in the workplace. There may be twenty people impacted by one person's death and the majority of them could handle it well. There will be some who struggle because of their personal connection with the person and/or because the loss of this person triggers unreconciled grief from past losses. Employers and supervisors should educate themselves on what to look for and how to best get the conversation started at work. It will benefit everyone to bring in an expert who can discuss the journey with the staff/members and provide them with practical strategies on taking care of their own grief and supporting others.

Janelle Breese Biagioni is a Registered Professional Counsellor. She was widowed at the age of 34 when her husband, a 17 year veteran in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, died from a duty-related injury. Their daughters were 12 and 10 years old at the time. Janelle resides in Victoria, BC and has dedicated over two decades to helping those in grief to reconcile their loss and redesign their life.