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Study guide

Grief with no warning

By Robert C. Blezard

Death and transition are universal human experiences. Acknowledging our common mortality, some anonymous plainspoken philosopher coined the phrase: “Nobody gets out alive.” But that realization doesn’t lessen the pain that comes from the loss of a loved one, especially when the loss is unexpected or swift. How can we better love and support our sisters and brothers in their grief?

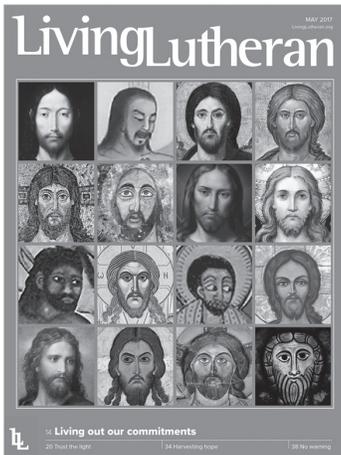
Exercise 1: Your grief

- Can you share about a time when you experienced grief? What happened? How did you feel? How did you cope?
- What were your sources of support? What were your sources of strength?
- How did your faith community support and accompany you? What was especially helpful about your community’s response and what could have been better?
- How did you get through? How did the experience shape who you are today?

Exercise 2: Grieving 101

Grieving is ritualized in the Jewish tradition. For a period of seven days following the burial of a loved one, immediate family members “sit shiva,” with customs designed to help them grieve well. The customs encourage mourners *not* to return to life as normal, but to stay home from work, refrain from extensive bathing, refrain from wearing flashy or fancy clothing, sit on low chairs and other measures. The mirrors in the house are covered during this time, and friends are expected to respect and support the family in sitting shiva.

- What do you think about the “sitting shiva” customs for grieving? Discussing each one, how might it assist a family in letting go of a loved one? How might community and family expectations and traditions help comfort and support grieving people?
- What spoken or unspoken customs accompany your family or community grief?
- Would a formal set of customs and expectations help people to grieve better?



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Exercise 3: Helpful support

Preparing a meal for a grieving family goes a long way in showing support and love. List as many helpful gestures of kindness that you can think of for a faith community to support and love a grieving family. Are any of these formalized in a congregational program or statement of guidance? Would it be helpful if they were?

Exercise 4: Unhelpful comments

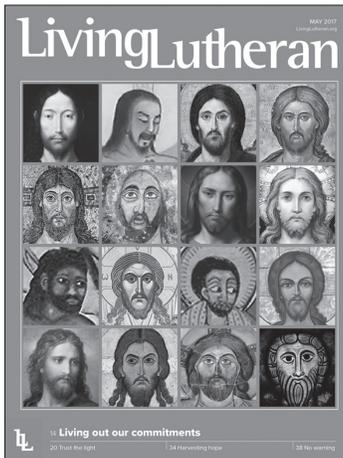
Because people just don't know what to say, they can sometimes thoughtlessly utter unkind or unhelpful comments to those experiencing grief. Look at the following comments and explore why they might be unhelpful:

- She's in a better place now.
- I know just what you're going through.
- Life goes on.
- I guess God needed another angel.
- Time heals all wounds.
- He's looking down from heaven.
- Everything happens for a reason.
- God took him.
- I guess God had a plan.
- You'll get over it.

Can you think of any other unhelpful comments?

By contrast, how might these comments be helpful?

- I'm sorry for your loss.
- I don't know what to say.
- Nobody knows why these things happen.
- She will be missed. I will miss her too.
- I can't imagine what you're going through.
- I'll pray for you.
- How can I support you?
- He was a great person.



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Exercise 5: The grieving process

In her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross talked about five stages of grief: shock, denial, anger, bargaining and acceptance. Though everyone's grieving process is unique and people grieve in their own ways, her ideas provide a general pattern.

- From your experience of grief and accompanying others in their grief, does Kübler-Ross' model ring true? Can you explain?
- How can understanding patterns for grieving help us better to love and support people who have faced loss? How can it help us better to grieve too?

Exercise 6: Congregational plan

For action, come up with a congregational plan to love and support families in their grief. It could include a tip sheet of "dos and don'ts" for parishioners to accompany one another in their grief. It might include a plan for care and follow-up including meals for the grieving, a schedule for phone calls and visits, and cards.

Grief with no warning

By Jennifer Ohman-Rodriguez

In October 2000, my father died after struggling for two years with a rare form of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Prior to diagnosis, he was a robust, intelligent and loving man of 66 who thought he just had a bad case of eczema.

We who loved him watched him decline rapidly after diagnosis, suffering from painful, uncomfortable symptoms and the impact of medications that both helped and brought on new symptoms.

During the two years of his illness, he suffered immensely, coming close to death several times. But he rallied to take care of all the loose ends life and death bring, including more time for closure. Dad planned his funeral, wrote a genealogy book and shored up the finances. In short, he took care of all of us as he always had, leaving the work of his last two years as parting gifts.

When he did die, he gave us another gift. Dad allowed his family, pastor and beloved cat to bear witness to his final breaths. His was a beautiful death supported with such love by our pastor that it solidified my return to the faith of my childhood, and without which I doubt I would be in seminary.

Two and a half months prior to my father's expected death, my aunt Linda lost her husband suddenly. I knew after my dad died that, while my emotions were raw and my head easily confused and overwhelmed, my grief was buffeted with the

blessing of having time with my dying loved one—something my aunt and cousins didn't have.

Sixteen years and two days after my uncle's death, my husband of 21 years, Tony, accidentally drowned while on a family vacation. Tony's death left our family stunned, and a people suffering from the impact of trauma and addictions were left without him as their therapist.

Many of my memories from that day contain fuzz and static. But I clearly remember wanting Aunt Linda as soon as possible because I knew she understood how to shepherd me through the early days of this very different grief.

How sudden grievers grieve

In *Transforming Traumatic Grief: Six Steps to Move from Grief to Peace After the Sudden or Violent Death of a Loved One*, traumatic grief expert Courtney Armstrong explains that sudden, unexpected and at times violent death sends its griever quickly and with great force into a state of shock that is the brain's beautiful mechanism for survival in times of fear and trauma.

Shock, which is protective at first, is referred to as a freezing reaction and is a precursor to "fight or flight." This stage of grief may last for weeks, if not months, and develop into traumatic grief over time if proven interventions aren't part of the healing journey.



Shock makes thinking difficult for the suddenly bereaved at a time when many decisions regarding funeral, burial and future fly quickly in their face. Add to these decisions the real possibilities and accompanying stress of funeral delay due to autopsy and/or police involvement. Sudden death is full of unforeseen obstacles requiring quick decisions of bereaved brains moving in slow motion.

Shock makes thinking difficult for the suddenly bereaved at a time when many decisions regarding funeral, burial and future fly quickly in their face.

Kathleen Gleeson, a licensed master social worker in Iowa City, Iowa, said, “The main difference between grieving a sudden loss versus an anticipated one is that in a sudden loss, the bereaved often has a trauma response. The shock ... overwhelms the person’s ability to cope with the loss. Sometimes shock and numbness may last for many months, impairing the person’s memory and concentration.”

How to love suddenly well

Sudden death calls congregations to put love into action quickly.

Linda Lund, visitation pastor at House of Prayer Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Minn., lost her husband suddenly. “Pastors are ill-equipped to deal with this type of death [which means] congregations are also,” she said. “[Pastors and congregations] try very hard to make the pain go away [when] they can be much more helpful by walking beside the grieving person as he or she takes the journey.”

Here’s what walking alongside a suddenly bereaved person or family can look like:

- **Offer a gatekeeper.** If the bereaved lack someone monitoring the phone calls, texts, emails and door ringers, find someone from the congregation to take on this role. Make sure it’s someone who knows how to stay in the background.
- **Visit less, unless invited.** The first few weeks after a sudden death aren’t the time for everyone to visit. That’s what the visitation and funeral are for and why the sympathy card industry is alive and well. Appoint one person from the congregation besides the pastor to interface with the bereaved or their gatekeeper. This point person sets up a meal sign-up, makes the deliveries of supplies and food, and cues congregants as to whether visits are welcome or not.

- **Care for the caregivers.** Congregants need space to grieve or process sudden death too, but not with the bereaved family. Organize a time after or before worship with grief counselors or chaplains who can help the congregation process their feelings.
- **Listen and listen again.** For Gracia Blanchard and the caring and wellness committee at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Iowa City, Iowa, support means listening above all else while avoiding sharing personal stories of grief with the bereaved.
- **Squash worn-out words.** Common yet overused statements such as, “God has a plan” or “Everything happens for a reason,” are often heard by the suddenly bereaved as pain, not comfort. “Actions and behaviors that perpetuate grieving come from pastors and people who try to make you better or try to fix you by using words and Scripture that only make the hurting worse,” Lund said. Consider talking less with the suddenly bereaved and listening while sitting in discomfort more.
- **Develop a caring timeline.** Caring for the suddenly bereaved is a yearlong commitment. Paperwork, carpool and handyman help are all possible needs of the bereaved family. Periodic invitations to social events also support this complicated healing process.
- **Support using experts.** Time does not heal all wounds. Support those experiencing sudden loss in seeking professional counseling. Lowell Michelson, pastor of Lord of Life Lutheran Church, West Chester, Ohio, remembers seeking out professional help when he needed it: “When I found myself in ... unexpected sorrow following a murder in the narthex of a [church] I was serving, I knew that I needed professional help to lead me, [my] family and the congregation through the valley of the shadow of death.”
- **Be Easter people.** Easter people embrace that after death there is life with all the saints for the deceased. At the same time, Easter people can hold high life after death for those still living on earth by being mirrors of love, resilience and hope.

Easter people embrace that after death there is life with all the saints for the deceased.

- **Walking beside and prepared.** Sudden death occurs. It has been, is and will be part of living life together as Christians. Taking time to hear from people who have experienced sudden grief combined with expert advice helps pastors and congregations understand what actions are truly helpful, healing and loving, while minimizing the inevitable chaos that comes in the wake of sudden death. Preparation is a congregational gift worth cultivating ahead of time for the unexpected and suddenly bereaved. 

Download a study guide by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab at livinglutheran.org.

SUGGESTED READING

- *Transforming Traumatic Grief: Six Steps to Move from Grief to Peace After the Sudden or Violent Death of a Loved One* by Courtney Armstrong (Artemecia Press, 2011).
- *Healing Trauma: A Pioneering Program for Restoring the Wisdom of Your Body* by Peter A. Levine (Sounds True, 2008).
- *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by Bessel van der Kolk (Viking, 2014).



Jennifer Ohman-Rodriguez is a writer, early childhood development specialist and student at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn. She and her two sons are healing from the sudden loss of her husband, Anthony D. Rodriguez, a certified trauma expert, in 2016. Jennifer attends Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Iowa City, Iowa, and blogs about life at jenniferohmanrodriguez.com.

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