



Search and Rescue

Companioning families through the
travails of complicated grief.

BY ALAN D. WOLFELT, PH.D.

Grieving families come to funeral directors from all walks of life and in all manner of circumstances that surround death. If you've been in funeral service awhile, you've likely companioned people in profound shock and traumatic grief over the most challenging types of loss – from infant death and violent accident to drug overdose, homicide and suicide.

Of course, death is always hard, but in particularly challenging circumstances, it can be unbearable. And yet it's your job to help families through the early days that follow these tragic losses. In part, their challenge becomes your challenge.

Thanatologists call what these families experience “complicated grief.” Effectively helping complicated grievers requires special understanding and compassionate care.

In this, the first of four articles, I'll share some background on complicated grief, along with ideas for helping these grievers during and after the funeral process.

COMPLICATED GRIEF: A DEFINITION

First, it's essential to understand that complicated grief is not a problem or disorder but simply a normal, necessary response in what is almost always an abnormally challenging loss situation. It's a matter of degree, feature prominence and sometimes duration.

Of course, all grief is complicated. Just as love is always complex and multifaceted, so, too, is grief. Whenever someone we love dies, we naturally have lots of different and changing thoughts and feelings about the death. Grief is often profoundly challenging and chaotic. In fact, it's common for grievers to feel like they're going crazy because their inner experience of loss is so different from their usual thoughts and feelings. The experience we will be calling “complicated grief” in this series is simply regular old complicated grief that has gotten *extra* complicated somehow.

That “somehow” is often the challenging causes of death I mentioned in the beginning, but there are also other risk factors for a complicated grief response, which I will be reviewing in the second installment of this series.

A VAST WILDERNESS

If we think of grief as an arduous journey through a vast, inhospitable, mountain forest, we capture some of the essence of the normal, necessary experience. Traversing grief is challenging. We don't always know where we're going, and it's easy to lose the trail. We sometimes feel the warmth of the sun and glimpse great beauty, but we often encounter obstacles and dangers we weren't expecting. We're not always as well-equipped as we thought or wished we were, and we definitely cannot control the forces swirling

around us. Understandably, we get tired. Along the way, it gets dark, stormy and slippery, and though we'd like to be able to fast-forward ourselves to the end of the trail, the only way out is through.

But while every significant grief journey is a challenging trek through the wilderness, complicated grief is an even more challenging odyssey.

Here in Colorado, we're privileged to be home to numerous 14,000-foot Rocky Mountain peaks, or “14ers.” Because of the terrain and topography, some of the 14ers are particularly difficult to summit. These remind me of complicated grief – rugged, relentless, vast.

Hikers often get lost or stranded on Colorado's mountain trails and peaks, and when this happens, we as a community take it quite seriously. After all, these travelers are often in mortal danger. Predators such as mountain lions lurk in the shadows, and the cold, wind, altitude and vertiginous drops make unassisted survival unlikely. The backcountry is unforgiving.

Fortunately for the lost or stranded, Colorado has teams of volunteers and professionals at the ready to locate and retrieve them. These search and rescuers are well-trained and well-equipped for the often perilous expeditions.

And, more often than not, the endangered hikers live to tell the tale. They are forever changed by their wilderness experience, but they are able to continue on

with their lives with gratitude and new perspective.

Companioning families through complicated grief is not unlike search and rescue. As trained volunteers and professionals, we are called on to assist when we are alerted that a griever is struggling in the wilderness. It is our job to join them, to meet them where they are and accompany them back to safety.

And while it is not the grief companion's role to carry, lead or find the way out, it is our responsibility to bear witness, provide shelter, offer sustenance, carry tools, safeguard vital signs and imbue hope. We are not rescuers in the savior or savior sense; rather, we are rescuers

in the "thank goodness you were there to help me" sense.

In short, some mourners get lost or trapped in the jeopardous wilderness of their naturally complicated grief. Funeral directors find them and help walk them back to safety. This ministry is nothing less than a search and rescue of the human soul.

AN ESSENTIAL ROLE

It is believed that as many as 10%-15% of the population may experience complicated grief. When you consider that complicated grief is more of a continuum than a yes-no and give thought to all the people affected by the risk factors we'll

be reviewing in the next article, it's easy to imagine that the true incidence could be much higher.

All grievers need the support of people who care about them, but complicated grievers usually need some professional support and guidance as well to help them get back on track. If they don't receive the help they need, they often become stuck in their misery, emptiness or harmful behavior. They remain lost in the wilderness. They die while they are alive.

Not only are these mourners lost in complicated grief unable to self-actualize, they often negatively affect others around them. Their partners and children can be hurt by their ongoing complicated grief, their colleagues and neighbors can suffer, and the potential they brought with them into this world may not be realized. In essence, their quandary sends out ripples into the world, as each person's life they touch affects the next person, and so on.

And so complicated grievers need you. They need you to effectively and compassionately companion them in the early days of their loss, primarily through creation of meaningful funerals. They also need your aftercare in the months that follow, as well as your support in connecting them to ongoing community resources. With education and good companioning skills, funeral directors can indeed help. ☰

*Editor's Note: This article is excerpted from *When Grief Is Complicated: A Model for Therapists to Understand, Identify and Companion Grievers Lost in the Wilderness of Complicated Grief*.*

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