



Origins of Complicated Grief

Understanding why
some people suffer grief
more profoundly than
others may.

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How is it that some people end up in a wilderness of grief that is more rugged and perilous than the others? Why are some grief terrains more treacherous? In other words, how do some people's grief journeys get extra complicated?

In this article, we'll take a look at those naturally complex life and loss circumstances, which range from cultural contributors to circumstances of the death, the griever's relationship with the person who died, influences of family systems, the funeral experience and many others. These are the variables that – alone or, more often, in combination with one another – commonly result in complicated grief.

As we go over each of the influences on complicated grief, let's remember that "normal" grief and complicated grief are not truly distinct responses. Rather, we have agreed to understand complicated grief as normal grief – which, by its very nature, is always complicated – that has somehow gotten *extra* complicated. It's a matter of degree, feature prominence, functional impact and, sometimes, duration.

INFLUENCES AND RISK FACTORS

Please keep in mind that the grief influences and risk factors listed do not *necessarily* result in complicated grief. For ex-

ample, multiple concurrent stressors is one of the influences that may contribute to complicated grief, but for various reasons, not everyone in seemingly high-stress circumstances will end up becoming lost or stuck in that wilderness.

1. SOCIETAL CONTRIBUTORS

In America, we live in a culture that doesn't "do" death and grief. And when death and grief are taboo, our normal and necessary mourning is often stigmatized and suppressed. Our grief is, as Lutheran minister and gerontology professor Dr. Kenneth Doka coined, "disenfranchised." In other words, our natural impulse to grieve and mourn is taken away from us.

2. CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE DEATH

As you are well aware, certain loss circumstances tend to be exceptionally and understandably challenging and complicated, making the experience of complicated grief more likely, including:

- Sudden, unexpected death
- Before-time death (death of a young person)
- Out-of-order death (e.g., death of a child before a parent)
- Means of death (e.g., SIDS, homicide, suicide)
- Uncertainty surrounding the death (unclear cause/circumstances)

- Physical distance from the death (death occurred far away)
- Self-blame for the death (guilt surrounding having contributed to the death in some way).

3. THE GRIEVER'S UNIQUE PERSONALITY

Grievors with any of these issues are more likely to come to you with complicated grief:

- Mental health issues
- Physical health issues
- Addiction
- Challenges caring for self
- History of conflicted or abusive relationships.

4. THE GRIEVER'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DECEASED

The stronger the griever's attachment to the person who died, typically the more challenging and painful their grief. Also, the more complex the attachment, such as in conflicted, abusive or disenfranchised relationships, the more complicated the grief journey may be.

5. THE GRIEVER'S LOSS HISTORY

Each new grief experience is built on all former grief experiences. The complicated grievors who come to you for support have a loss history that is just as important as a patient's medical history is to a physician. They are experienc-



ing complicated grief in the present, yes, but their current complicated grief is always, at least to some degree, affected by loss, grief and mourning experiences in the past.

6. THE GRIEVER'S ACCESS TO AND USE OF SUPPORT

Does the griever have close friends and family members who provide assistance and regular contact? Is the griever engaged in social, community and/or spiritual groups? Does the griever have at least one other reliable, compassionate person to spend time with and open up to? Has support continued beyond the first month or two after the death? Unless the answer to all four questions is yes, the griever's support may be insufficient, increasing the likelihood of complicated grief.

7. CONCURRENT STRESSORS IN THE GRIEVER'S LIFE

Sometimes the concurrent stressors are multiple deaths within a relatively short period of time. When several loved ones die in quick succession, there's no time to acknowledge, embrace and express one grief before the next one arrives uninvited. This is also called loss overload and is a common cause of complicated grief.

Whether they are secondary losses that directly stem from the primary loss or concurrent but technically unrelated challenges, other significant chang-

es during a time of intense grief can have the same effect. Job loss, relocation, life-altering or life-threatening health challenges, financial upsets, family upheavals such as discord, unintended pregnancy or addiction – any such turmoil during a time of intense grief understandably compounds stress, distracts from mourning and delays healing.

8. THE GRIEVER'S CULTURAL/ETHNIC BACKGROUND

When it comes to complicated grief, you may need to dig deeper to understand any cultural or ethnic influences that may be contributing. The question is not so much what any culture or ethnicity dictates but what this unique griever finds

important, meaningful or possibly unhelpful when it comes to his culture's grief norms.

9. THE GRIEVER'S RELIGIOUS/SPIRITUAL/PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

Grievors who are significantly conflicted about their faith and their grief and mourning will experience this as a complication in their grief journey. You will need them to teach you about what this experience is like for them, and they will need you to listen, bear witness, encourage and be a sounding board for any problem-solving ideas they may have.

10. THE GRIEVER'S FAMILY SYSTEMS INFLUENCES

Grievors raised in a closed family system often lack self-awareness, emotionality and communication skills. They may have been taught that death and grief are inappropriate to discuss, let alone express feelings about, and that it's best just to "get over it" and "move on." They may also believe that seeking the help of a counselor means admitting "weakness." Such conditions make complicated grief more likely.

11. THE GRIEVER'S PARTICIPATION IN MEANINGFUL CEREMONIES

The funeral ritual and other ceremonies that honor the loss and remember the person who died can have a major influence on a griever's grief journey. In my

estimation, this risk factor for complicated grief is often underestimated.

Contrary to popular belief, the funeral is not a rite of closure but a rite of initiation. A full, personalized, inclusive, timely funeral that provides ample opportunities to dose those in attendance with the six needs of mourning helps put the griever who may be at risk for complicated grief on a healthy path to healing.

No funeral, on the other hand, or a cookie-cutter service, does not give mourners a good start. Rushed ceremonies and those that are long delayed are usually insufficient as well. The trend toward party-style memorial services is also detrimental, as these parties typically do not help grievors acknowledge the reality of the death and encounter the pain of the loss. By educating about, advocating for and helping plan full funeral ceremonies, you are giving complicated grievors the best possible start to their naturally challenging grief journeys.

I hope this list of risk factors for complicated grief helps you understand why some grievors who come to you at a time of death seem particularly challenged by the loss. As you see, the cause of death is not the only contributing factor. Indeed, there may be many reasons why some grievors need extra understanding and support.

In the next article in this series, we'll look at the common symptoms and behaviors of complicated grief. When you see family members exhibiting these, you will be alerted to the probability of complicated grief and be better prepared to provide them with the special support and referrals they both need and deserve. ☰

Editor's note: This article is excerpted from *When Grief Is Complicated: A Model for Therapists to Understand, Identify and Companion Grievors Lost in the Wilderness of Complicated Grief*. To order, visit centerforloss.com.

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