

A Grief Intensified. A Grief Sidelined. A Grief Forgotten.

By Litsa Williams

Posted May 15, 2020

Like so many things in life, grief is both an internal and external event. Our internal experience of loss is constantly interfacing with the external world around us. Before the world changed several months ago, this might have meant a good day derailed by an intense reminder. It might have been a bad day turned around by a comforting mention of a loved one's name from a friend you didn't know was thinking of them. Maybe it was a complete meltdown triggered by [burning their favorite dish](#) or being unable to open a jar. Since the world changed, it means all of that and now much, much more.

Like so many things in grief, there are no universals. We have heard from so many of you via comments and emails and social media explaining how your grief is being impacted by the world in new ways. We have felt that ourselves – deeply. I have unexpectedly lost two good friends and a family member in the last three months. [I am the first to say there is no “normal” in grief](#). But even with that in mind, my grief feels even more unexpected and confusing than ever.

One comfort I have found are those comments and emails and social media messages about your own grief, reminding me I am not alone. Reminding me that I am not the only one feeling the impact of the external world on my internal grief in new and unexpected ways. I am not the only one feeling moments of grief intensified, grief sidelined, and grief forgotten.

From You, To Us, Back To You

Here at WYG, we feel lucky that we can serve as a bit of a megaphone. We are so grateful that you trust us with your experiences of loss and grief. And we are hopeful that, by seeing the themes and trends in what you share, that we can share them in return. We can amplify individual voices and experiences into a collective, reminding us all that we're not abnormal. [We're not crazy](#). We are not alone. We're just grieving.

These are not the only experiences that have been shared, but these are the most common experiences. They are the experiences that have been of comfort to me in these last few months, knowing I am not alone. They are the experiences that we imagine many of you, even if you haven't shared them or labeled them, can relate to. But we know there are many more, so please leave a comment to share others you have experienced and felt.

A Grief Intensified

We have talked about [cumulative grief](#) plenty of times before. It is often described as losses stacking on one another. Before you have had a chance to catch your breath, to process and integrate one loss, BOOM – another loss kicks you in the gut. Your brain starts spinning and suddenly you feel completely overwhelmed and debilitated. Each loss feels intensified with the pain of the previous loss. Many times when cumulative losses are talked about, it is in the context of multiple deaths in a short period of time. But cumulative grief isn't limited to [non-death losses](#). It can be any type of losses stacking together, making everything feel intensified.

In this moment, we have heard from many of you saying some variation of “Before this, my grief was devastating, but I was somehow managing. Now, I can barely function. It doesn't feel manageable anymore.” There is a good chance this is because you are now coping with additional losses stacking up on your existing loss. It may be anything from [disconnection from friends](#) to difficulty accessing your previous coping tools to loss of meaningful events. And if it doesn't feel like additional “losses” per se, it may just be the feeling that you had figured out ways to carry your grief in the world six months ago. Now it may feel like the world is turned on it's head; you don't know yet how to carry your grief in this new world.

A Grief Sidelined

We have heard from others of you who have felt not that your grief has been intensified. Rather, it has shifted to a new space in your life and in your mind. Many have reach out saying, “I have been so busy worrying about my kids and my finances and my safety, that my grief suddenly feels secondary.” For something that was so consuming just a few months before, this can feel unexpected and confusing. Some have said this has them feeling guilty, like it means you are forgetting your loved one (you're not!). Others have said it makes them worried that their grieving wrong now (nope, you're not doing that either!)

We often think that we are supposed to grieve, grieve, grieve, grieve, grieve, and then suddenly start grieving less, then back to “normal”. But that isn't how grief normally works. [Grief is often three steps forward, two steps back](#). There are often days we feel overwhelmed by grief emotions and others we don't. [The Dual Process Model](#), a grief theory we love, does a wonderful job explaining that in grief we are always oscillating between “loss-oriented” experiences and emotions and “restoration-oriented” experiences and emotions. They even explain that we engage in [avoidance of our grief, taking breaks that are healthy and adaptive](#)! But when we feel ourselves taking these breaks, if no one has warned us that they are normal and natural, sometimes we think we are grieving “wrong”.

The Dual Process Model of Coping With Bereavement

by Stroebe and Schut



So I'm not grieving wrong?

Nope! Not at all. In those “restoration-oriented” experiences, the very first on the list is attending to life changes. Those can be changes as a result of the death. And they may be other life changes. In this moment, many of us are coping with a laundry-list of changes in our lives that we need to adapt to and attend to. Our brain's way of helping us to do that is sometimes to focus on those “restoration-oriented” things. This means taking a break from some of those more “loss-oriented” feelings and emotions that we more traditionally think of as “grief”.

When your brain and world are feeling a bit more settled, you may feel those “loss-oriented” things creeping back in a bit more regularly. Either way, all of this is a part of your grief. Your grief is not just your pain – far from it. Your grief is learning to live in a world without your loved one, and it is learning to live in a world that is always changing.

A Grief Forgotten

Last but not least, some of you reached out and said some variation of “I feel like my grief has been lost or forgotten.” In a world where so many people are experiencing distress, confusion, loss, and chaos, this can happen for many reasons. The first is that people in your world may now have so many of their own stressors to cope with that

they are no longer checking on you as often. It may feel like they have forgotten that you are grieving. Others of you shared stories of people suddenly saying things that feel minimizing, like “At least John didn’t have to live through this.” Even if you believe that to be true, it can still feel like another person diminishing your grief.

Finally, you may feel like your loss is now just one in a sea of media stories and personal stories about grief. Some of you shared that you feel it is harder to talk with others about your loss. Some said you feel like your grief isn’t as important with so many other losses in the world. [It is important to remember that other people’s losses don’t detract from your loss. They don’t make your loss “less than.”](#) This is a time when you may feel unseen. So, it can be important to remind yourself that your grief is valid and worthy of sharing and support. If you need some reminders and reinforcement about that, we recommend this article [reminding us we all have a right to grieve](#).

Read the article [online](#).