

Disen-whaaaat?? Understanding Disenfranchised Grief

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Posted July 8, 2013

Disenfranchised grief: you may have heard this term thrown around and wondered what it is all about. Disenfranchised grief is an example of a very common grief experience that can sound very abstract and academic.

It has a crazy name and is often talked about in academic articles rather than in real-life settings, but we find that knowing what disenfranchised grief is actually very helpful for people who are grieving. Even if it doesn't relate to you specifically, it may make you a better friend or support to another griever.

Okay, so what is this crazy term all about? If one is disenfranchised they have been deprived the right to something. So 'disenfranchised grief' would imply that anyone experiencing this type of grief has been denied the right to grieve

Intuitively (if you have never suffered this sort of loss) it may seem strange to imagine how one could be deprived the right to grieve. Grief is personal, right? We say that all the time. So, who could possibly deprive me my right to do something so personal?

Society, that's who!

Just like society dictates rules for how to act, dress, speak and operate in the world, society also dictates rules around grief and these rules can be subtle or explicit. Typically, it isn't until a person experiences the death of a loved one that they are even completely aware of the attitudes and expectations. For example, expectations to grieve a certain way, for a certain length of time, the pressure to get over it, to stop talking about it, etc.

Disenfranchised grief takes "grief rules" to another level by dictating who is entitled to grieve and, in turn, who receives support, acknowledgment, and validation in their grief. The stinging pain of these societal expectations can feel excruciating when your relationship with someone significant is not acknowledged or the impact of their death is minimized.

Grief becomes disenfranchised when you don't have societal validation of our loss and subsequent grieving process. Society says you shouldn't be grieving, so you feel like you can't talk about it. You can't find support. You feel alone. You think your feelings are wrong.

You may be thinking, who cares what society says! People should just say “screw you” to societal expectations and embrace their grief.

If only it were that easy . . . These rules, though they may sound exclusively external, are things that people internalize every day. When everyone is saying you have no right to grieve or you are grieving wrong, it is hard not to believe it on some level.



And if you don't have support from those closest to you, it becomes even more difficult to adjust to life after a death. You may constantly feel the need to hide your grief for fear of making others uncomfortable or being alienated. You may feel no one understands you. It is starting to sound like a pretty lonely place, eh?

This is an incredibly complex topic and if you want to explore it further, Kenneth Doka is the guy to start with. He is the person that gave this experience a name back in the mid-1980s. [His book on this topic is the foundation for much of the further theory and discussion of disenfranchised grief.](#)

Today we are keeping it to the basics that a griever should understand, which is basically that disenfranchised grief can arise anytime a person feels that society has denied their “need, right, role, or capacity to grieve” (Doka, 1989). This happens for all sorts of reasons and in all sorts of ways, but here are some basics:

Society says the relationship isn't important, so grief is not acknowledged

This often happens when your relationship to the deceased is one that society interprets as more distant and not worthy of grief. Societal rules often dictate that we grieve “blood” relatives and as we get beyond that circle we find lesser acknowledgement of the impact of a death. It would be impossible to imagine an exhaustive list, but some disenfranchised losses that fall into this category may be:

- Death of an ex-spouse
- Death of a co-worker
- Death of a pet
- Death of an online friend (cyber loss)

- Death of a same-sex partner
- Miscarriage or stillbirth
- Death of a step-child/step-parent
- Death of a foster child/foster parent
- Death of other non-blood relationships (friends, boyfriend/girlfriend in-laws, neighbors, etc.)

The death is stigmatized by society.

Sometimes the cause of death may make it difficult for the griever to talk about the loss, due to stigma. These can involve guilt, shame, blame, and countless other feelings that allow a griever to hide their grief, feeling the death is not worthy of the same grief based on societal rules. Again, just some examples are:

- Death by suicide
- Death by accidental drug overdose
- Death by child abuse
- Death to HIV/AIDS
- Abortion
- Death due to drunk driving
- Death of a family member in prison

The relationship is stigmatized by society.

Though this can overlap with the two categories above, there are times that the relationship during life was a stigmatized relationship. This can lead to similar feelings after a death, with the griever feeling society will not acknowledge the impact of the loss, or they must continue to hide the relationship. This can include:

- Death of partner from an extramarital affair
- Death of a same-sex partner
- Death of a gang member
- Death of high-risk/stigmatized peer group (“drinking buddy”, drug abuser)

The loss itself isn’t recognized as a grief-worthy because it is not a death

These are often cases of losses that are grieved, but are not necessarily a death. Again, this is far from an exhaustive list, but may include:

- Dementia
- TBI
- Mental illness
- Infertility

- Substance Abuse
- Loss of function
- Adoption
- Religious conversion (to or away from a religion)

Okay, great, so we made a big list. But how does this help regular old griever? Well, for starters, understanding that grief can be more complicated and difficult when is disenfranchised can help a person feel a little more normal if they are experiencing it.

Perhaps a loss you experienced that falls into one of the above categories is feeling uniquely difficult compared to past losses or other people's losses. Knowing a loss you have suffered falls into one of the above categories may mean you are more likely to feel unable to share your grief or to receive effective support. Sometimes it is just nice to know there is a name for what you are experiencing, other people experience it too, and you are not crazy! And remember, comparing grief in general is problematic. [We've got a post about that here.](#)

That being said, some people experience losses that fall into one of the categories listed above but do not experience disenfranchisement. That is to say, if your loss falls into a category above and you aren't feeling disenfranchised – great! This doesn't make you abnormal. Some people are lucky to have a support system that acknowledges the depth of the loss and allows them permission to grieve that loss, even in a circumstance that is usually disenfranchised.

On the flip side, you may have a loss that doesn't fit exactly in one of the categories above, and yet for other reasons your community may make you feel you don't have the right to grieve. Recognizing this dynamic can help to understand how your external environment may be impacting your grief.

I know, all you doers out there are wondering, "*What can I DO about this?*" You fit into one of these categories, you are feeling the disenfranchisement from the community around you, and now you want to know what action you can take to make things a little bit easier.

For starters...

This is one of those moments when it is important to acknowledge that some of the dynamics with disenfranchised grief are internal- in how you internalize and experience this failure of society to support your "need, right, role, or capacity to grieve". And some of it is external – which you have less control over.

As much as we want to, we can't change society's grief rules overnight. Let's all acknowledge that together and say a quick round of the serenity prayer (either the traditional or secular version):

"God grant me [I strive for] the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference."

Ok, now that we've done that, let's think about the areas where you might be able to have an impact. A good place to start is by looking at your own attitudes about grief and your specific loss.

1. Acknowledge your love for that person was true and significant and your loss is no less valid. Love is love. Loss is loss. Your love was real and valid; your grief is real and valid.

2. Remind yourself that you are worthy of time and space to grieve, be it the death of a friend, co-worker, four-legged companion, or any other loss. You may even want to write it on a card in your wallet, put it in a note in your phone, or put that message wherever you can easily access it. When someone says something dumb (oh and they will!) that makes you feel you are not worthy of your grief experience, pull that message out, read it over, and let go of the comment they have made.

3. Remind yourself that you are not alone. It is easy to fall in to isolation when you are finding no acknowledgement or support of your grief. What can be helpful is seeking the experience of others who have experienced similar losses. With the growth of the internet and a growing support for grievers, you may be able to find others who have experienced a similar loss, and hence some of the same challenges of a loss that is not recognized. More and more groups are popping up for survivors of suicide, overdose deaths, stillbirths, etc.

4. Create your own ritual. There are many times that, due to the nature of these losses, that you are not able to take part in a funeral or closure ritual in the way you would have wanted. Perhaps due to the nature of the relationship, you were not welcome at the funeral so you felt awkward, or you didn't attend at all. Perhaps you did not feel comfortable having a memorial, worrying people would think it was weird, as happens often in cases of miscarriage or pet loss.

Consider if it would be helpful to create your own ritual now. There is no reason you cannot do a small memorial or remembrance after the fact, if you did not at the time and you regret it. Consider if this is important to you and what may be appropriate. This doesn't have to be elaborated; it could be as simple as planting a tree or visiting a meaningful place.

5. Assess your support system. Though you may be feeling that none of your family or friends are supportive, be sure to really think this through before you write everyone off. Check out [our support system superlative activity](#) to really assess what different friends and family members offer you.

If all your “usual suspects” are not supportive, think of some people a little further outside your circle. Sometimes you find empathetic people in surprising places! This may be just the time to reach out to a distant friend who also lost a child to overdose, suffered a miscarriage, etc.

6. Seek personal ways to explore grief and express your emotions. Consider journaling, art, photography, and other personal expression. Though you may not have the external support you want, you can still find ways to explore your grief and emotions on your own.

7. Be a support to others experiencing disenfranchised grief. This is something you may not be ready for right away, but down the road, it can be healing to be a support to others. Be sensitive to acknowledge others who may be feeling their loss is not recognized. Remember that, just because you have a similar loss, this does not mean your experience will be similar. But you can acknowledge and validate their right to grieve, no matter how similar or dissimilar their experience is to your own.

Like all things in grief, there is no quick fix, there is no “normal”, and this will look different for everyone. These are just a few basic ideas, but if there are other experiences you have had or things that have made life just a tiny bit easier in your experience of disenfranchised grief, please leave a comment. This is how we learn from each other, support each other, and remember we are not alone!

It is true that we cannot change society’s grief rules overnight. But the good news is that society’s rules, norms, and expectations DO evolve over time and we as grievers play a very real part in that. We can speak up about these losses and how deeply they impact us. We can support others and give them the permission they need to grieve, no matter what. We can help others understand when their words are hurtful and minimize another’s grief. We can start sharing our experiences with our friends, family, and community, if and when we feel strong enough, because those are the things they will remember and cling to if they have the misfortune to suffer a similar loss. We can stand up for the fact that we are all worthy of our own grief.

Read the article [online](#).