

# The Issue of Student Grief: Perceptions and Realities

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## Perception

Grief is **not** common among college students

## Reality

- When we consider **ONLY parent loss**, we know that 5% of all American children, before reaching age 18, will have had at least one parent die  
(~ 75 students out of every incoming class of 1500)
- Still more will lose a parent **during** their four years of college.
- The **frequency of parent loss** for college students only continues to increase as the age at which people are becoming parents continues to increase

When we consider students who have lost a grandparent, sibling, another close family member, or a close friend, the number of grieving students is considerably higher

**Current research estimates that one-third to one-half of college students are within two years of having experienced a significant loss**

There are many **other students** who have a close friend or family member who is facing a **life-threatening illness**...often of a deteriorating and protracted nature. Students in this situation are in a process of **anticipatory grief**.

## Perception

The amount or intensity of grieving is based on the “title,” and/or “rank order” of the relationship (parent, sibling, grandparent, friend)

## Reality

We know that grief is based on the “nature” of the relationship (close, troubled, or complicated)

It is often assumed by others that, for example, the death of a relative may be more difficult than the death of a friend; or that a

parent's death may be more difficult than a grandparent's death; or that a grandparent's death cannot be a significant loss...because it is more common

## **Perception**

The most intense/difficult part of grief occurs in the first few weeks following a loss

## **Reality**

Research tells us that the most intense/difficult part of grief peaks at about seven months following the loss. It often peaks again, just prior to the first anniversary, and begins to level out after the first-year anniversary

## **Reasons for this**

- 1) In the first few months, the shock/newness of the event prevents full comprehension of the depth and meaning of the loss
- 2) There are usually a lot of social supports and tasks that need immediate attention; these serve to temporarily distract the griever

Observers often erroneously conclude that the griever is not terribly affected by the loss and/or that he/she is "handling it well" and therefore will not need further support beyond the first few months. Ironically then, support is often withdrawn just at the time when the griever needs it most.

For college students, this usually means they are facing the most difficult period of their grief during a semester...when they are also away from the comfort of their own homes, their surviving family members and their communities. At the same time, faculty, administrators, campus friends/roommates/classmates expect they are beyond their grief and should be functioning optimally.

Comments made by others, usually meant to motivate the student, instead cause additional stress and sense of isolation.

## **Perception**

Grief has an endpoint; a time at which grief disappears and is never again disruptive or painful...especially if it has been some length of time since the loss occurred

## Reality

Grief is lifelong...the acute pain can/does subside, but there are many events and reminders, throughout a lifetime, that can re-stimulate strong feelings of the loss. **For college students who have had a significant loss, this can be very disconcerting. Some examples of these “re-stimulating events” for college students are:** commencement, recitals, award dinners, a particular class assignment or discussion, seeing other students with “intact” families, anniversary dates, etc.

## Some Additional Realities of how/why grief can be particularly difficult for college students...

- 1) The academic calendar moves **very quickly** and stops for nothing or no one. A semester is a relatively short period of time; even **minor** disruptions can wreak havoc
- 2) Students are away from their usual support system and others who are grieving for the same loss. Some feel guilty for being away from others in their family who may need support following the loss
- 3) Students can have difficulty finding privacy and/or time to grieve
- 4) Students may be adjusting to many other changes/losses at the same time. It is not unusual to find a student who has had multiple, significant losses
- 5) Significant losses are often accompanied by other major losses that are secondary to the death
- 6) There may be very few others who know of the loss and who can/will provide support
- 7) Students often are reluctant to “spoil others’ fun” by showing/ sharing their grief with their peers. They often perceive that they are alone and/or different; that they may be the **only one** of their peers experiencing such a life-changing event
- 8) When students experience a **significant loss for the first time**, **they** may not understand that their reactions are normal (albeit very painful) and secretly worry that they are “going crazy”
- 9) Good students often feel ashamed and blame themselves when their school work begins to suffer

- 10) Students often struggle to find meaning in a loss, or struggle to hold on to what was once meaningful...before the loss occurred
- 11) Some students develop unhealthy means for coping with, or avoiding, the strong emotions that often accompany a significant loss

## **What Can Faculty, Administrators and Staff Do to Help?**

- 1) Listen to, and believe the student
- 2) Show support and/or understanding by saying:
  - “I know you are going through a difficult time right now”
  - “I understand this may not represent your best work”
  - “See how much you can get done, and let me know how you are progressing”
- 3) Learn more about the topic so you are well-versed and comfortable with it
- 4) Insert discussions about loss where it's appropriate
- 5) Let students know you are available and how to make appointments to meet with you

## **“Aspiration-al” Changes to the Bigger Picture**

- 1) Increase level of knowledge and confidence for responding to student grief for **all** college personnel
- 2) Improve college's “absence/attendance” policy  
Example: change wording from “death of a family member” to “bereavement”
- 3) Identify a “point of contact person/office” that students/families can **easily identify and contact** in the event of a personal emergency such as a death, accident or serious illness
- 4) Continue to develop appropriate college traditions that provide opportunity for acknowledgement of losses...such as at commencement, reunions, recitals, etc.