

# Understanding Grief

## Distinguishing between Primary and Secondary Loss

Have you ever seen thousands of dominos fall over? Someone spends many hours setting up a complex series of dominos: round and round, up ramps, over obstacles in a complex web. Each domino is strategically placed close enough to the next to be able to hit it as it falls over. At the appropriate moment the first one in the sequence tips over, and that sets off a chain reaction. As soon as the first domino falls, it cascades over into the second one, and so it goes, one after the other until all have tumbled over.

In a strange way, that familiar scene is similar to a grief process. Someone dies. But that loss often sets off a chain reaction. The death of someone we care about often leads to many subsequent losses that occur as a direct result of that first loss. When someone experiences significant loss, it often produces many other losses, such that the person might say, “I feel like I am losing *everything*.”

Whether or not they are losing everything may be debatable, but it *feels* like they have. To argue whether or not they HAVE lost everything misses the point. They FEEL LIKE everything is being lost, and that is often because we lose many different things as a result of a death. There can be many losses connected to a death. And it is important for us to recognize the many losses associated with the death and grieve each one.

The initial loss is often referred to as the *Primary Loss*, and the losses that follow are identified as *Secondary Losses*. It is not that secondary losses are any less important, intense or difficult; it is just that they emerge out of, or are a consequence of, the primary loss. They are the subsequent dominoes that fall as a result of the initial circumstance.

For example, my Dad got sick with Parkinson’s disease. That loss of health was the primary loss. But that actually triggered many other losses, which came about as a result of that initial loss of health, such as loss of his mobility, loss of his ability to function, loss of his business, all of which came as a result of that primary loss. Dad had many losses and so did his family and friends.

Where the death of someone you cared about is the primary loss, there might be a whole series of different secondary losses, such as the loss of companionship, the loss of the role of being a couple, the loss of hopes and dreams of growing old together, traveling, or living happily ever after.

All these losses bring grief. It is important to acknowledge that whether a person lives or dies, there are losses in the past that have already taken place, losses in the present that are currently taking place, losses in the future that will take place. ***And these losses are real, regardless of the outcome.*** Someone may survive an illness, yet the loss of health and all the related losses connected to the situation have to be acknowledged, grieved and reconciled. It is most difficult to grieve that which has been, is being, or may yet be lost, and not to lose hope that the person may yet survive this life-threatening challenge.

But many of you reading this have experienced the death of someone you loved. That is your primary loss. Yet it is important to ask ourselves this question about each individual situation.

***“What has been lost?”***

Yes, someone has died. Nothing we are saying here takes away from, minimizes or detracts from the devastating impact of that loss. But that is the primary loss. And in addition to that loss, there may be many other, just as significant and painfully difficult secondary losses.

What are some of the possible secondary losses? Let me suggest a few, and leave you to fill in others that apply to your specific situation. Please note carefully: I am not saying that these losses are worse than, or even to be compared to, the possible death of a loved one. I am suggesting that these losses may be ***part*** of the overall situation, but inasmuch as each one in themselves cause grief, each needs to be individually mourned.

### **Loss of Relationship**

- What are the lonely times when you miss the person the most?
- What are the things you used to do together?
- What are the specific opportunities and activities you miss most?
- What are the things you did that you wish you could do again?
- What are some of the special memories you share?

### **Loss of Material Things**

- Is there a loss of financial security?
- How has your financial situation changed?
- How has your lifestyle had to change in these circumstances?
- What about the vacations, trips or special events you were hoping to share?

## Loss of Functional Ability

How has this situation affected you *the caregiver* in terms of your ability to function as before?

Are there tasks you miss doing for the person?

Are there tasks and responsibilities you have had to **assume** because of the death?

How has your life changed as a result of the death?

Is there, or will there be, a loss of mobility or independence?

## Loss of Role

How has this situation affected your role in other circumstances?

In the Home:

Has the loss of the person meant that roles have changed in the home?

In the family:

Are there roles and responsibilities in the family that have had to change; tasks that had to be relinquished or new ones that had to be assumed?

Are there fears and concerns that children have expressed which need to be addressed?

At work:

Has your ability to work been affected by these circumstances?  
How much support or understanding have you had in the workplace?

Among friends:

Have friends been supportive and helpful, or has your experience been disappointing? In what ways? What could be done to get friends on board?

In the community:

Have you been able to draw on community resources? Who could you call to help you find out what resources may be out there for you in this situation? For example:

hospital chaplain

social worker

community care access liason

grief support program

someone who has been through a similar situation

## Loss of Support Systems

How has “the system” worked for you? Do you in any way feel let down by “the system”? What organizations or resources have been helpful?

How have you been treated by the health care system or medical resources?

What has been your experience with your GP, or with emergency or regular hospital care, home help, nursing care.

How were you treated by the funeral home?

What about assistance that should be available from government, community, church, social services or many other agencies?

Have you been please or disappointed by the way you have been treated, or the way “the system” has worked for you?

## Loss of Hopes and Dreams, and Expectations

In a more symbolic kind of loss, we often struggle to come to terms with the loss of our hopes and dreams for the future, and our expectations of the way we thought life was going to be. Although not physical losses, they are nonetheless real and difficult.

What are some of the hopes and dreams that you feel are changed?

In what ways does this situation change “the script”, or the way you thought your life was going to go?

Has this situation affected or challenged or changed your beliefs in God, or your beliefs about life, or about people.

It must be difficult to see much meaning or purpose in all this. Any thoughts? What are some of the things you feel are “unfinished” in your life?

What *has* been meaningful about your life, and even about these circumstances?

What has been a “blessing in the darkness” of this situation?

For *most people*, all losses will not occur at once. For some, all these losses may tumble in one on another; in another situation, it may be a gradual process of one loss after another. Regardless, it is vitally important that caregivers, family and friends alike acknowledge this important process. We need to relate to the person in an appropriate way and help them deal with the losses that have been experienced, are being experienced, and will (or could) be experienced.

When we are faced with a loss, or by multiple losses, it feels like we are on an emotional roller coaster. One lady put it this way.

*“Death is the least of my worries. I feel like I am losing another part of myself every day.”*

There can be a succession of physical and symbolic losses:

- The loss of energy to function well as a spouse, family member, friend or colleague.
- The loss of strength to work, or pursue activities you once enjoyed.
- The loss of “friends” who have distanced themselves.

Each of these losses causes grief and has to be mourned. Mourning is often defined as the external expression of grief, which is itself the internal meaning given to the experience of loss. Both are normal, healthy responses to loss. The grief process helps us survive all kinds of life losses and challenges, so that we can make the necessary adjustments to change. It is usually easier to mourn for another than for ourselves. Some may feel mourning one’s *own* losses borders on the self indulgent. Yet doing so can be a healing experience.

The only guideline is to find a way to mourn that makes sense to you, and ultimately provides a sense of comfort.