

WORST KIND OF LOSS

BY DR BILL WEBSTER

“This is the worst thing that could have happened”.

I struggled to maintain my professional composure as I listened, my heart going out to the young couple who sat crying uncontrollably in my office. The death of their 6 year old daughter, the result of a vehicle accident caused by someone driving under the influence of alcohol, was a devastating loss that touched us all deeply. Sudden and unexpected death is always complicated and difficult, and this couple felt like their life, with it's hopes and dreams, would never be the same, and they were probably right.

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Only a few hours later, a young woman sat on the same couch lamenting the death of her mother who had died only months after being diagnosed with cancer. The daughter had dedicated herself to caring for her mother, day and night, in the hopes that her vigilance would result in a cure or remission. But in spite of her best efforts, the mother had steadily deteriorated and had died. She felt like it was the end of the world

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It was the very next day I heard those familiar words again. The gentleman sitting before me had recently lost his wife of 53 years. Actually he had lost her some years before, not to death, but to Alzheimer's disease. He had cared for her at home for several years but, as the disease progressed, it became impossible, and she entered long term care. In the last year, she did not recognize him, and had become increasingly violent. Nonetheless, he struggled with guilt over the situation, and, when she finally died, where one might have expected a sense of relief, grief had overwhelmed him.

Three very different situations, all very difficult to cope with. So which of them was the worst kind of loss?

It is a question I am asked often. “Is it worse to lose a spouse, or to lose a child?” “Is it worse to lose someone suddenly and unexpectedly, or is it worse to see someone die after a long lingering illness?” “Is it easier if you have a chance to say

goodbye, or more complicated when there is not that opportunity?"

Good questions. No easy answers.

From a counsellor's perspective there are differences between sudden death and anticipated death. It can make a difference in the grieving process if there is an opportunity to say goodbye, or if there is unfinished business that was never reconciled.

But here is my viewpoint. *There is no such thing as more or less difficult.* Every loss is difficult, however different the situation. People, in an attempt to bring comfort, may say, "Others have it worse. At least you should be thankful that .." and then follow with a list of ways in which the situation *could* have been more nasty. Such comments, however well intentioned, are less than helpful. The grieving person could care less how badly others have it. As far as *they* are concerned, *this* is a disaster. They feel like *this is the worst thing* that could have happened, and that it has happened to them.

That is why, when I am asked about which is the worst kind of loss, I always reply in the same way.

The worst kind of loss is YOURS.

Whatever the loss, whatever the circumstances, the loss feels like the worst thing that could happen at this particular time to this particular person. Circumstances such as who the person was and the relationship that was shared, whether this was sudden or anticipated, disease, accident or natural causes are, of course, important factors in understanding what has been lost. These things make every situation different, but regardless of the circumstances, every situation is difficult.

Every time I meet a grieving person, I try to take the position that *THEIR* loss is the most difficult thing that they have ever had to deal with. They gain the impression that their loss is important to you, and that you are not diminishing it in any way. To you and I, this person's loss may not seem as difficult or challenging as someone else's. But to that individual, it feels like this is the worst thing that can happen.

Meet people on *this* ground, and they will feel you understand.