

# Living With Loss

## Unfinished Business

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Most of us are hoping for a Hollywood ending. Maybe we would not want the violent deaths; the shootouts, car crashes, or the ones where the hero saves the day but still dies in the end. I am thinking of the type of movie endings where the devoted family gathers to receive a final bedside benediction, confession or a just-in-the-nick-of-time reconciliation. We hope for death scenes that are, if not happy, at least peaceful and neat.

Unfortunately, in real life, those types of final scenes seldom occur. More often than not a drama of a different sort unfolds. Scattered family and friends may not get there in time and the person dies alone. Medication used to manage pain and other symptoms often makes a patient sleepy, limiting the possibility of meaningful communication. Sometimes mistakes are made that have dire consequences. During stressful times longstanding conflicts between family members occasionally boil to the surface and those unresolved relationship issues remain unresolved.

Under normal circumstances it is hard to say how long grief is supposed to last; some say six months to a year, others three to five years and still other believe it takes a lifetime to absorb the full extent of a loss. While a certain degree of yearning will remain throughout life, within a year or so most people seem to be past the really rough spots and are at least tentatively on the way to adapting to a life without the deceased. Some people however, seem to get mired in grief and are unable to find comfort without help. Bereavement professionals define these situations as “complicated grief.”

Grief can be complicated by any number of issues including: multiple losses, addictions or pre-existing mental health concerns. Complicated grief can also be caused by a traumatic or sudden death, a lack of social support and personal problems, such as employment, financial or health concerns. Any one or combination of these stressors can become the proverbial straw that breaks the camel’s back.

Another category of complicated grief, *Unfinished Business*, is usually related to relationship problems that were never addressed or resolved. If you find yourself making statements that begin with; “I wish I had...,” “I never got the chance to...,” “He/she never told me...,” “I wonder why...,” or “If only...,” you probably already know a lot about unfinished business. Perhaps there was a longstanding conflict and you did not have the chance to express how you really felt. Perhaps a parent was absent or abusive and never asked for your forgiveness. Occasionally a surviving spouse discovers evidence of an extramarital affair or an adult child finds incriminating evidence that destroys their image of their parent. Maybe your loved one died before an important self-disclosure was possible. Maybe an offer of affection was rebuffed or an attempt at reconciliation was rejected. Sometimes dreams are never realized and promises are not kept. Maybe you simply have mixed feelings regarding the deceased and don’t know what to do with those feelings now that they are gone. All of these murky relational issues leave an already grieving person with additional feelings of confusion, anger, guilt, regret, and no clearly identifiable way to resolve them.

You may be wondering, “So what can be done? After all, they’re dead and buried!” At first glance, it would seem that the possibility of resolving these relationship issues is lost. However, I would like to offer the hope that these stuck feelings can shift, soften and even be resolved. The key is to develop a

slightly different perspective about the finality of physical death. I have come to the conclusion that when a person dies, relationships are changed not ended. Admittedly, conventional channels of communication will not work, you cannot call your deceased loved one on the phone or hold their hand. Still, the deceased remains present in a number of significant and tangible ways. For example, they exist in the genetic and behavioral characteristics that are passed down from generation to generation. Linking objects, such as an old pocket watch, the smell of her perfume, or even the sight of their favorite restaurant can instantaneously bring an absent person to mind. We can even learn new information about a deceased person through the stories that other people share. Insight into their character and interesting facts are revealed when we read diaries or old letters. Depending on your belief system, the possibility also exists that their spirit remains present in some way. Some believe we can communicate with them through prayers, dreams, channeling or other forms of spiritual communication.

Counselors speak of another way to communicate with the dead, through the *internalized other*. This works in much the same way as it does with long married couples who are able to finish each other's sentences. You know how your deceased loved one would respond to any number of questions; you can even imagine their tone of voice. It is possible to have an entire internal dialogue with a dead person because their feelings on any given subject are so predictable or because you just knew them that well. If you can open a dialog with this "internalized" version of the deceased, you may be able to remove the obstacles that keep you mired in frustration or anger, allowing the healing to begin. Consider actually writing out this dialogue as if it were a movie script. Tell them exactly how you feel! When you have expressed all you need to say, sit in silence expecting a response. You may be surprised at what bubbles to the surface. In the end, maybe he or she does not even need to respond; perhaps the release you are looking for is in giving voice to YOUR deeply held emotions. There are many other strategies to address unresolved relationship issues that help you find some peace of mind. If you are not able to find some relief, I encourage you to speak with a professional grief counselor to explore some of these other options.

For some reason, some people still seem to be unable to reach out for help. They tell themselves, "Get over it," and they try to push the unfinished business out of their minds. Sadly, this strategy for coping seldom works. Before long, the internal conflict spills over into other aspects of life; it either manifest in other relationship conflicts or it reeks havoc on your health. These issues are bound to resurface when you are faced with the death of another significant person.

Unfortunately there are no Hollywood endings in real life, and given the perspective that can only come with time, most people discover that the scripts written by others are never quite as interesting as the lives we actually lived. The good news is that your ending has not yet been written. Just because it is called "unfinished business" does not mean it has to always remain that way.