

YOUR SECRET GRIEF

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So, this title caught your eye? Perhaps you saw it earlier but wanted to read it in secret. Because, if someone walked up to you right now, they might start asking you questions, “What are you reading?” “Oh, that’s an interesting title. Hmm, do you have some secrets about your grief?” You get the idea—no one wants to announce, “Hey everybody, I have secrets—but I’m not telling you.”

In his book *The Helper’s Journey*, Psychologist Dale Larson discusses the secrets of caregivers. In this article we are going to look at some of the secrets that people may carry in the midst of their grief. A word of caution: this article may not be pleasant to read. However, consider it a beginning step to deal with your grief-related secrets. I offer it to you because grief has many dimensions; and the secrets that we have can prove to be a significant challenge in our ability to cope with loss.

Since the death, your brain has had thousands of thoughts about this person. Thousands. Most of them are memories about things they did, places you went, words they said, their face, their eyes, their touch, their laugh. However, some of our thoughts about this person can be in the secret grief category. Let’s look:

1. THINGS I WISHED I HAD DONE OR SAID

Once a person dies, it is easy to look back on their life and have many thoughts of “What if?” Time is the great dictator. Because you had this person in your life day after day, month after month, year after year, you easily fell into the trap that you would have another day, more time to do what you wanted with or to this person, to say the things you wanted to say. But, like all of us, you were wrong. While you have shared some of these regrets with the people around you, there are certain things you wished you had done that you’ve kept secret, adding to the burden of your secret grief.

2. THINGS THIS PERSON DIDN’T DO

Some of your grief comes from your expectations that weren’t met from this person. While alive, you had hoped that this person would have done things for you or said things to you. You had wished for this person to come through for you. But, it didn’t happen. And, now it’s too late. So, part of your grief—the secret part—involves your thoughts and feelings about things that never were.

3. THINGS THIS PERSON DID

Get ready, this is a tough one: Perhaps this person hurt you. Hurt you in ways that you've told no one. You think back on this pain, whether it is physical, sexual, and/or emotional and you feel bad every time because your memory of this pain is intertwined with the memory of this person. You may have mixed emotions as you have both positive and negative memories. You don't want to think ill of the dead; but, in this case, you cannot help it. While other people who've not had pain from this person show their true grief at the loss, you have secret grief that you feel you must bear alone.

4. THINGS I DID TO THIS PERSON

Here's another difficult one: You did something to this person that, to this day, remains a secret. When you think about him or her, the memory of what you did is mixed with the other memories. With their death goes the secret of what you did. So, perhaps part of your grief involves a sense of relief. Relief that the fact of what you did to this person has now gone to the grave.



5. GRIEF REACTIONS I'D RATHER NOT ADMIT

As you cope with the loss, you look around and see a variety of grief reactions from the people around you. And, as you share in some of those reactions, you know that there are certain elements of your grief that you have not, and perhaps will not, share with others.

See if any of these sound familiar. Some of these grief reactions are the direct result of secrets we've just discussed.

- You are relieved this person is dead.
- You are angry with the person in ways that others would likely not understand.
- You feel guilt for things you did or didn't do to or with this person.
- You are fearful that information about you or this person will be revealed.
- You are punishing yourself in ways that others are not aware of.
- You have had disturbing dreams about this person.
- You have done things in memory of this person that you've not told others (visited the gravesite, cried frequently, spoken with the person, visited the scene of the death).
- You believe this person has contacted you in some way (seeing the person, hearing the person's voice, feeling the person's touch, visiting a medium/psychic).

6. GRIEF REACTIONS I DON'T HAVE

At some point after the death you began to notice that you did not feel much the same way as others. Your response to what you felt compared to others was to pretend that you indeed did have some of the feelings. You did this because you found that you did not want others to realize how you were really grieving. As a result, you feel somehow that hiding your true feelings is better than explaining to inquiring others what's really going on inside. You might have found that the attempt to monitor your feelings takes a great deal of energy as you attempt to display feelings that are not actually your own. You may have pretended to be angry, to cry or to be sad.

WHAT CAN I DO WITH MY SECRET GRIEF?

Clearly there are only a few choices here:

- ❑ **Continue to try to push it out of your mind.** This only works to a certain extent. It's like not thinking about a big, pink elephant sitting on your dining room table. Go ahead, don't think about it. You get the idea. It is certainly possible to go for a period of time not thinking about something; but, all of a sudden something triggers the secret and there we are again in the middle of it. Time appears to only have a small effect on the ability to bury a memory. With little effort, triggers have the ability to take us right back to the event. So, go ahead and let the secret somewhat fade with time. However, don't be surprised when a triggering event brings the secret right back to the present. Many people can live with this aspect of the secret. They feel they have no other choice. If this is you, then this may be the best you can do. The important thing to remember is that secrets are a normal part of the grieving process.
- ❑ **Find one person who can be a good listener without judgment.** If this sounds like a possibility then I want to ask you a few questions: First, who is this person? Think for a minute. Of course it is someone you would completely trust with your secret. Someone who will not try to talk you out of it, who will not say words such as: *you should, you must, you need to*. For some people this person is a close friend, for others it is God, and yet for others it is an acquaintance who is removed from the immediacy of your family and friends. Or perhaps it is a therapist or counselor whose job it is to help with your grief in a confidential setting. If you have someone in mind, then the next question is: What exact sentences should you say to this person? Perhaps you are ready to reveal only one secret or only a portion of a secret. Clearly, you do not want to regret having blurted something out in the emotion of the moment. Third, when and where should you do it? Forth, what do you hope to accomplish by doing this? Fifth, is there anything you might regret by doing this? Once you've clearly answered these questions, then you can decide to share your secret; or perhaps you realize keeping it to yourself is the best answer at this time.
- ❑ **Write it out. Get everything on paper. Do it in your own handwriting—not on a computer where it can be discovered.** Research is clear that, in dealing with traumatic events, secrets, worries, and other difficult life issues, writing it out can be a transformational experience. While it may not sound like much, there are hundreds of thousands of examples of people who took a pen

to paper and came out the other side feeling different in ways they could never have imagined. In hearing this suggestion, you might be thinking, “What do I say? How do I begin?” The answer: Just do it and see what happens. Perhaps you’ll still feel the same; but you have absolutely nothing to lose. After writing it, some people file it away in a hidden (secret) place and come back to it weeks or months later to read it again. Other people write it, read it once and shred it or burn it.

IT'S UP TO YOU

So, there it is. Whether I hit on one of your grief-related secrets or didn’t touch on it at all, the fact remains that you have three choices. Whatever you do, as you finish this article, take a moment to make a choice for yourself just for today. After all, it’s your secret, your grief, and most important of all, your life.