

# PROXY GRIEF

## Feeling the grief of those we love

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I have a question for you.

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Following the death of your loved one,  
who have you been most worried about?

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Say the name now in your mind. See this person's face as they first responded to the loss. Now, think about how this person has been continuing to react (or not seeming to react) to the death. If you are like most people, simply focusing on this right now is causing you some discomfort. Stay with me as we look at this.

How does it feel knowing that, day after day, you cannot fix the pain this person is in? I call this grief that comes from watching another person grieve Proxy Grief. Let's look at some common reactions:

1. **Helplessness.** You watch this person in grief and you can do little about it. You see how this person's life has forever been changed and it hurts to know that you cannot turn back the clock to a happier time.
2. **Sadness.** On top of your own sadness about the death, you have additional sorrow as you watch this person struggle with the finality of the loss day after day, month after month and beyond.
3. **Guilt.** Perhaps you feel that there is something you could or should have done so this person would not be experiencing the grief in its present intensity.
4. **Anger.** You might feel anger at the situation that brought on the death and has turned your life and the life of this person upside down.
5. **Avoidance.** One of the ways to cope with uncomfortable issues is to avoid talking about it. Perhaps you have decided it is best not to discuss the death because it is just too painful to watch this person hurt all over again.
6. **Anxiety.** Each day you wonder what is going to happen to this person. Will she ever smile again? Will he ever be able to move on with his life and not have grief define who he is? And, your worry continues.



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If any of these sounds familiar, you are experiencing proxy grief. Perhaps there are some things that you can do about it. Take out a piece of paper and answer the following.

By the way, you may not like what I'm going to say next: If you don't wish to do the writing exercise that follows, I suggest you quit reading this article . . .

Are you still reading? Get ready to write. Am I being too pushy here? Yes, because simply reading is not enough to work on this type of grief.

Okay, have I bugged you enough? Great, now let's get started. Do you have your pen in hand?

- If you could control the manner in which this person copes with the death, what exactly would you like to see this person doing? Not doing?
- Regarding crying, do you feel this person is crying: too much, too little, or just right?
- Is there anything you should write to this person? Should you send a text, an email, or even a letter that says something that might help?
- Is there an article, a book, a website, or a video that might help a little?
- The next time you get together what should you say to this person regarding their present grief-related reactions?
- Whenever you begin to experience the frustration, sadness, anger, guilt, and anxiety related to Proxy Grief, can you say the following to yourself:

I am doing all that I can to help this person. Can I begin to let go of the need to reduce this person's grief and let him or her be in pain and trust that this level of pain will not last forever?

This last suggestion is likely the hardest. Each time you see this person, your job has been and will continue to be: Allow this person to grieve in his or her own way.

As you read this, you might be saying, "Of course. I know that." Or, "Yeah, yeah, I know, everyone grieves differently."

You also know that the death of a loved one changes us forever. You and the person you've been thinking about are different people now.

**In coping with proxy grief, there are three important steps:**

1. Continue to do whatever you can to help this person cope with the death. Perhaps one of the suggestions from the list above could help.
2. Continue to find ways to cope with your own pain as you continue to see this person in the depths of their own grief. Reading this article is one of those ways.
3. Trust that, as the weeks turn into months and years, the pain of grief will gradually diminish not only for you, but for this person as well. It may not seem like it now, but it will.

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In my bereavement work over the past 30 years I have met thousands of bereaved parents, siblings, grandparents, and widowed people whose grief was additionally burdened with seemingly endless worry about how their family members would cope with the loss. And, when I met some of these same people years later, they all acknowledged the same thing:

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Although they could not control their proxy grief, through time and caring, their worry, their concern, and their anxiety about how their loved ones grieved gradually diminished.

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As you sit reading this article wondering what will happen to this person about whom you have had much to worry, I can make you a promise: Even though it doesn't seem like it now, it will get better.

It will.