



Grief and Relief

By Brenda Rabalais, Ph.D.

When someone we love dies, there is often a boiling pot of emotions; shock, sadness, fear, anger, a loss of a sense of safety, guilt, shame, etc... Those emotions may all come at once, or some may come at different times, but there are sure to be varying emotions and they can be so intense as to render one unable to speak about them or even recognize what they are. Deaths such as suicide, murder, or unexplained deaths can add yet another layer of complicated emotions which may leave one with questions that will never be answered, making the grief that much more difficult to bear.

There are also times when a sense of relief follows the death of a loved one which can be very confusing and disconcerting, maybe even resulting in a sense of guilt or shame which complicates grief. I would like to offer you several different scenarios where it is common to respond to a death with a sense of relief. This relief isn't so much a response to your loved one dying, as it is to the alleviation of vigilance, suffering and often exhaustion. In some cases it can appear like a very logical response to have, as in situations where there have been many months or years of caretaking a sick family member. But that doesn't mean the grief and sadness are not there as well, they are just mixed in with the relief from their loved one suffering, exhaustion and worry.

At Lee's Place we have seen children as clients who were struggling with guilt and the seemingly incongruent sense of freedom and relief because they had a parent who died who was addicted to alcohol or drugs, or who had a mental illness. This relationship may have been very difficult and complex, with the child yearning to feel safe with this parent, while simultaneously wishing that his/her parent would just go away so there could be peace. If someone had been abusive or cruel to the child, feeling relief that he/she was gone would certainly be understandable, but if the abuse was a secret, then a child might keep his/her relief a

secret as well, especially if the abuse was at the hands of an authority or family member.

Another situation where relief may show up may be a family who has a member who keeps them in debt, is continually getting in trouble with the law, steals from them, or who is volatile and unpredictable, and then dies. In all these cases there is a sudden release of vigilance and worry, and that is where the sense of relief comes in. It does not reflect on how much you loved the person who died, but rather the level of tension that is no longer present. When that sense of relief is understood for what it is, then guilt about feeling relieved need not be added to the weight of the grief following a death.

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