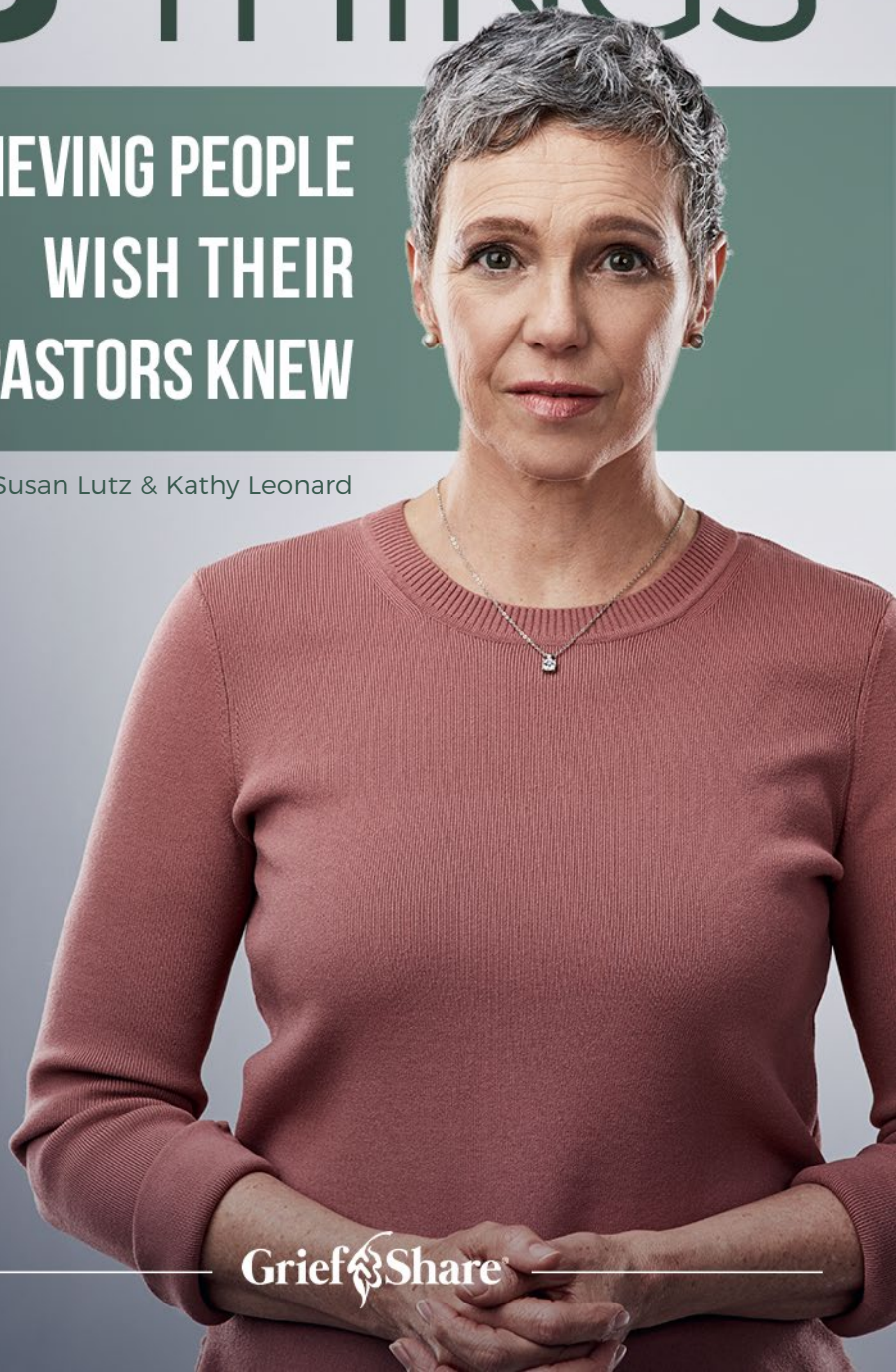


8 THINGS

GRIEVING PEOPLE WISH THEIR PASTORS KNEW

Susan Lutz & Kathy Leonard



Grief  Share



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8 THINGS

GRIEVING PEOPLE WISH THEIR PASTORS KNEW

INTRODUCTION

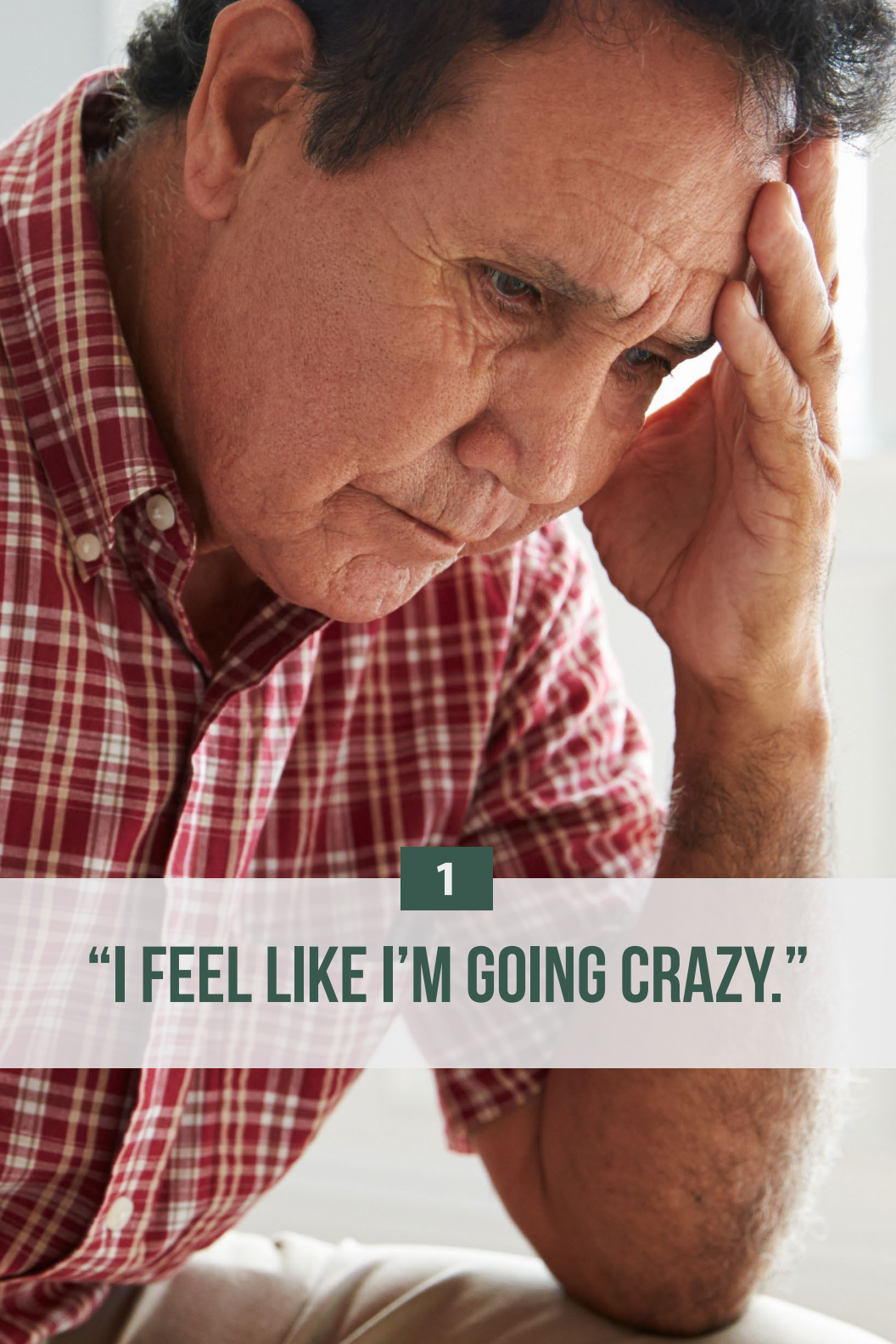
Caring for grieving people in your church can be challenging. People have different expectations as to the level and duration of care they should receive from a pastor. And if their expectations aren't met, they can become disgruntled or hurt. Some pastors who thought they did a good job ministering to a griever were surprised to learn later that the grieving person didn't agree! What makes things even more difficult is that many grievers struggle to understand, let alone articulate, what they're thinking and feeling as they attempt to process their grief.

At **GriefShare**, we've interviewed hundreds of people who've grieved the death of someone close to them, and multiple counselors, pastors, and Christian teachers who have faced grief themselves and/or have extensive knowledge of the grief experience.

In this ebook we'll share their insights as to what's going on in the minds of grieving people and how grievers interpret things around them. This will help keep you from offending, disappointing, or offering inadequate care to the bereaved.

Each chapter also contains practical suggestions so you can apply the information—things you can say and do to help a grieving person at different points in the grief process.

Are you ready to find out what grieving people are thinking (but are hesitant to admit) and what you can do to help?



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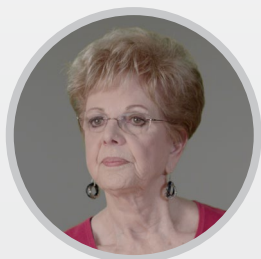
“I FEEL LIKE I’M GOING CRAZY.”

YOU SHOULD KNOW ...



"I'd have all of these different emotions flooding my mind. Some were good—joy and peace. At the same time, I was angry; I was upset. I was trying to figure out, 'Is this normal? Am I going crazy?'" ANNE

"I went to a wedding, and all of a sudden I almost could not breathe. The pain and grief were suffocating. After I went home, I bawled—the ugly-cry-type moment on my kitchen floor. I thought, 'Am I crazy? It's been nine months. I should be better.'" CINDY



"I was in the grocery store, and I couldn't find my glasses. I looked and looked and looked for them. Finally, a clerk came over and said, 'Can I help you with something?' I said, 'Yes. I can't find my glasses.' She looked at me and said, 'You're wearing them.' It was then that I realized my grief was affecting my mind." ELLIE

Why grieving feels like going crazy

Crying out of the blue, positive and negative emotions tangled together, out-of-character responses, decreased mental abilities—all these and more are normal parts of grief. But, as grief therapist H. Norman Wright observes, “We live in a culture that does not talk about loss or grief, so most people have to learn what it’s like at the most vulnerable and painful point of their life.”¹

Dr. Susan Zonnebelt-Smeenge, a psychologist in Grand Rapids, MI, notes that grief affects people in every dimension of life:

- **Emotionally** (irritability, fear, volatility, numbness, despair)
- **Behaviorally** (social withdrawal, disrupted sleep, restlessness, crying at unexpected times)
- **Cognitively** (forgetfulness, losing track of time, loss of concentration, “I don’t think I can do this,” distorted thinking patterns, “face in the crowd syndrome,” in which 80 percent of grieverers think they hear or glimpse their deceased loved one)
- **Physically** (more frequent illness, no appetite or even sense of taste, sleeping too much or too little)
- **Spiritually** (“Why has God abandoned me? Why isn’t my faith insulating me from such painful grief?”)²

It’s no wonder grieving people fear they are going crazy—especially when they do not know that what they’re experiencing is a normal part of grief.

¹ H. Norman Wright is a grief therapist, certified trauma specialist, and the author of over seventy books. He experienced the death of his wife and two children.

² Dr. Susan Zonnebelt-Smeenge is a licensed clinical psychologist whose first husband died of a brain tumor. Now remarried to Dr. Robert DeVries, they work together to help people in grief and are joint authors of many books on grieving.

What you can do

Show them a list: “When I talk with people,” says Wright, “I list these effects [physical, emotional, behavioral, etc.] on a piece of paper and ask, ‘Do you connect with any of these?’ More often than not, they say, ‘Yes, all of them.’ I usually answer, ‘Then you’re normal, because this is what we all experience in grief.’”

At the end of this book is a checklist of over 150 common emotions and responses associated with grieving a death. You could use this list to show to griever and to familiarize yourself with what a griever experiences.

Prepare them mentally to live with grief: “Grief,” says Judy Blore, former director of BASIS, a bereavement ministry, “is a chaos of emotion.”³ She tells grieving people to *expect* mental chaos to be part of their life for a while. She gives this example: “It’s helpful for griever to understand that in the first few months it may be very difficult to plan anything. They’ll think, ‘On Tuesday I’m going to the grocery store.’ And Tuesday, they can’t do it.” So encourage griever to do their best to plan and do what needs to be done, but to understand that it is okay right now if their mental chaos hinders or prevents the process. It won’t always be like this.

COLLEEN:

“I thought I was losing my mind.”

“If people know ahead of time, ‘This is grief; this is what to expect,’” says Wright, “then they can realize, ‘I’m not going crazy. I just have to go through this experience.’”

³ Judy Blore was the director of BASIS, a ministry of Handi*Vangelism, for over twenty-two years, providing help for bereaved parents and families in southeastern Pennsylvania. She experienced the death of her mother.

Direct them to a support group: Grievers find it vastly helpful to attend grief support groups. They are relieved and encouraged to hear from other people who “get” what they’re going through and who assure them that what they’re experiencing is normal.

Jenilee, who lost her father, says, “Being able to hear what people are going through reinforced for me, ‘Okay, I’m not crazy.’” And Anne, whose brother died, shares, “I saw that all these emotions coming together is normal. It was such a huge comfort and relief to me.”

Want to send your church members to a Christ-centered grief support group? **GriefShare** is a lay-led, biblically based grief support group program, which can be hosted in person or online. We’ve seen thousands of people find healing through meeting in support groups. It’s one of the best ways your church can serve grieving people!



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Offer hope
to the bereaved

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2

“IT’S SO HARD TO COME TO CHURCH.”

YOU SHOULD KNOW ...



“My husband had loved going to church and he loved the choir singing. When he died, I couldn’t enjoy the songs without him. When the choir started singing, I would just run out.”

MICHELE

“Going to church was the best of times and the worst of times. It’s where our closest friendships were. It’s where people would say, ‘How are you really?’ Then again, it was the worst of times because I had no emotional stamina for people to ask me, ‘How are you really?’ To start the service out by crying—that’s a rough Sunday morning, especially week after week.” **CARLA**



“After two months everybody sort of expects you to be done with grieving. There was sort of this underlying implication that if you really love God you’re not going to cry. I wanted to seem more like I had it together and that made church even more isolating.” **VANEETHA**

Why is going back to church so hard?

When your church has functioned as a community of love, support, encouragement, prayer, and practical help, it can be difficult to understand why a grieving church member finds it hard to return. But, as you can see, there are many reasons why it can be that way.

HEATHER:

“For about three months after my sister’s death, I’d get to the parking lot at church and I couldn’t get out of the car.”

- **Overwhelming care:** A grieving person is often socially isolated, so encountering the well-meaning and sincere questions of many people can be overwhelming.
- **Painfully aware of loved one’s absence:** Couples and families often attended church together, so the absence of the loved one is painfully obvious when grieving people return to services. They feel alone and incomplete.
- **Pressure to act a certain way spiritually:** Spiritual struggles and questions are hard to avoid in a church setting, and sometimes the pressures to resolve those struggles are inadvertently intensified.

What you can do

Most people’s struggles with returning to church can be addressed with some thoughtful planning. Here are five suggestions that can help grievers return gradually to church.

Suggest they have a friend come alongside them: Encourage grievers to ask a trusted friend in advance to stay by their side throughout the

service and to run interference as needed. Carla, whose husband died, recalls, “Our friends invited my children and me to sit with them. After the service, they would be aware as to when we’d had enough and would create an opportunity for us to leave. That was a great protection because we didn’t have a lot in the tank.”

Encourage grievers to arrive late:

For others, a simple solution is to arrive a little late, sit in the back row, and leave during the last song to limit the personal interactions. That way, grieving people can cross the threshold and rejoin the church community, but at a pace they can handle.

SHAY:

“It was hard to go to church. I’d think about my mom and I just couldn’t stop crying. I didn’t want people thinking negative things about me.”

Offer a private place in the building to recover: Suggest a place in the building where they can go to recover themselves if they get emotional and want privacy. Knowing that this is an option, and knowing that you understand the likelihood of weeping or tears, can be greatly comforting to a grieving person.

Teach your church members about the grief process: If your church members have a better understanding of what grief looks like, how long it lasts, the depth of the pain, and what the Bible says about grief and tears, that helps your church better come alongside a grieving person. And it lessens the pressure for grievers who feel like they’re not being strong in their faith or who feel they’re doing something wrong because they’re still crying or aren’t acting joyful or at peace.

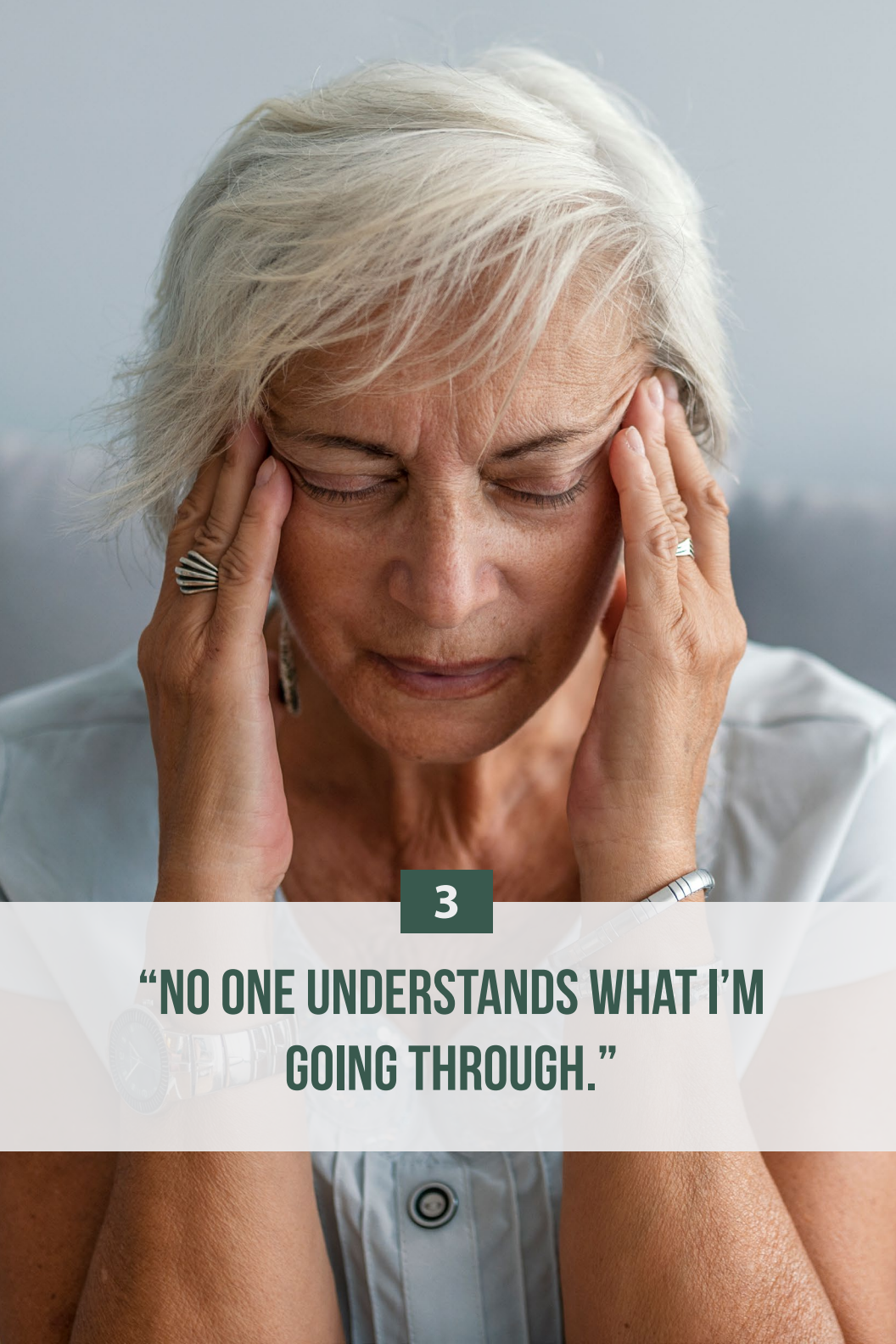
Find out their concerns about being at church: Be sure to ask grieving people about the particular struggles they're having with returning to church. This way, you'll be better positioned to offer viable help.



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3

**“NO ONE UNDERSTANDS WHAT I’M
GOING THROUGH.”**

YOU SHOULD KNOW ...



“Someone would ask me, ‘When did your sister pass?’ I’d say, ‘A year ago.’ And they would respond, ‘I know you’re over that by now.’ But if you still feel the emotions, you still feel them! I may feel *better*, like I’m coming out of that valley, but anything can trigger a landslide and have me slide back down.”

BERNARD

“On the outside, I was happy and cheerful, but on the inside I was very broken. And no one knew that.” **SHEILA**



“I was trying to tell a friend about getting Mother’s house ready to sell, but she didn’t want to hear about it. She felt that after two or three months, I needed to get over it and not let that consume my life. I began to think, ‘Maybe there’s something wrong with me, if I’m not moving on as fast as others think I should.’” **SUSAN**

The need to feel understood

People who have not grieved the death of someone close will struggle to truly understand the depth and duration of the emotional trials a griever faces. While friends may mean well and even think they're being helpful, they sometimes make insensitive or untimely comments that cause a grieving person to withdraw rather than be hurt again.

And it's important for the grieving person not to withdraw, because even though it may feel safer, it has dangers of its own: "If you keep it all bottled up inside," says Karen, whose husband died, "it has the potential to eat away at you with bitterness, anger, frustration, and worry."

MICHELE:

"Everybody had a pat answer."

Still, it takes grace and perspective to withstand the random comments that can upend a grieving person's attempts to move toward people. JoAnne, a widow, shares this advice: "I keep in mind that people who make insensitive remarks don't have a clue about what [a grieving person] is feeling. I try to be kind, because if they knew, they probably wouldn't say what they're saying. So, don't listen to those people, because they really are speaking out of ignorance. Listen to the people who have an understanding of your loss. Listen to God."

What you can do

Encourage grievers to find people who will walk alongside them:

It's important for grievers to find safe people (or a person) who will nurture them, listen to them, build them up, allow them to express their emotions. These are people not afraid of suffering, people who will pray for them and with them. These are friends who will kindly but persistently

encourage grievors to bring their pain and loss to the Lord.

Encourage grievors to connect with other grieving people: Remind them that God intends to lead them to people who can understand and help them. Give them direction as to the kind of people who are safe to open up to. Sheila's story is one example:

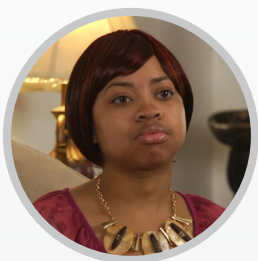
I had been praying, "God, lead me to a place where somebody can understand where I'm really coming from." After attending a Bible study, I came home to find that a lady from the group had sent me an email. She said she was thirty-seven when her spouse had passed away, and she had two small children. I thought, "Wow! She knows what I feel, because she's gone through the same exact thing."



4

**“I THOUGHT BEING A CHRISTIAN WOULD
PROTECT ME FROM THE PAIN.”**

YOU SHOULD KNOW ...



“People say, ‘God will not give you more than you can bear.’ I was like, ‘I can’t bear any more. I can’t take any more, God. It’s too much for me.’” **SHAY**

“You’re taught that when a loved one dies, they go to heaven, and you should be happy. I was *not* happy. I’ve seen people in the church who’ve gone through death and loss, and they seemed to be okay. So I was thinking, ‘Maybe something’s wrong with me.’”

MICHELE



“Your emotions take over and your brain stops working. You forget all the promises God’s made.”

MICHAEL

A relationship with God doesn't mean you'll live pain-free

Many times Christians have their own understanding of what it looks and feels like for believers to go through a trial. Even to the point where people think, as Christians, they'll be protected from intense emotional pain and feel joyful in trials.

"It's a mistake to think that if we're deeply spiritual Christian people, then trusting God and believing in Him means we are not going to hurt," says Dr. Larry Crabb. "Well, *Jesus hurt*. The love of God doesn't eliminate suffering, nor does it eliminate the emotional consequences of suffering."⁴

Grieving people in your church may be laboring under a needlessly heavy burden if they believe that faith leaves no room for pain or struggle in grief. That idea is a burden that God does not intend grieving people to carry. You can help clear up this misunderstanding and position grievers for an even deeper understanding of God's love and faithfulness in trials.

What you can do

Remind them that being a Christian doesn't reduce (or eliminate) suffering. When grievers wonder why their relationship with God hasn't kept the pain at bay, hasn't given them strength to "rise above" the worries of this world, it's important that you reiterate to them what it means to live as a believer in a sinful world.

Show them examples of Scripture that encourage lament. We've seen that Christ Himself wept in anguish at the tomb of his friend Lazarus,

⁴ Dr. Larry Crabb is a psychologist, speaker, Bible teacher, the author of numerous books, and the founder of New Way Ministries. He experienced the death of his brother.

despite the fact that He knew He would soon raise him from the dead (John 11). Ecclesiastes says that there is a time to mourn, and numerous biblical characters grieve deeply without a hint of divine disapproval. There are more psalms of lament than any other type of psalm, not to mention the expressions of grief in Old Testament books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other prophets.

It is through a clearer understanding of the gospel that people will better understand the relationship between suffering, pain, and Christianity.



5

**“I WANT TO GRIEVE LIKE A
‘GOOD CHRISTIAN.’”**

YOU SHOULD KNOW ...



“The hardest thing was that people had expectations of me: ‘You’re a strong Christian; you’ll get over it.’ It bugged me so much. I mean, how do you get over the death of your son? You don’t get over it.” **VANEETHA**

“I had a sense that ‘I am a Christian, I have the joy of the Lord, He’s always with me, I have all of His promises.’ And wham, now I’m hit with something that rocks my world. Do I still have the joy of the Lord? Are people going to see my struggle and think, ‘Well, that faith isn’t really real?’” **ANNE**



“When my mom died, other Christians would say, ‘I know she is in a better place.’ But why couldn’t Mom’s better place be right here with me, right now? I asked God, ‘Why?’ To some people, that might be a shock: ‘You’re a minister, how could you ask God why?’ Because that was my mom! That’s the person I had loved the most.” **PASTOR JEFFERY**

How do you grieve like a “good Christian”?

As if grieving were not hard enough, some believers—especially those who are leaders in the church or are looked to as examples of Christian maturity—feel the added pressure of being a “model Christian” to others as they grieve. Believers do want to honor the Lord and trust Him as they navigate through grief. And, similar to the issue discussed in the previous chapter, the problem comes when people believe this means a grieving person should never struggle, stumble, sorrow, or wrestle with God.

BETH:

“I didn’t want anybody to see that I wasn’t strong.”

There is no perfect way to grieve. And “for people to assign themselves the job of grieving perfectly, when they are so severely wounded, is an impossible assignment,” explains grief counselor Susan Lutz. “God would never expect that. On the contrary, He says, ‘I am with you in trouble.’”⁵

Anne, a mature believer whose brother died, shares, “I finally came to the realization that God deals with reality. And this reality of mine stunk. So learning how to live day to day with the ups and downs of emotion, with the joys and sorrows, became more important to me than trying to be this strong, joyful Christian.”

What you can do

As Christians we are, *at the same time*, a saint, a sinner, and a sufferer. And when we go through grief, we endure it as one with this three-part identity.

⁵ Susan Lutz served as a counselor at the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation in Glenside, PA, for over fifteen years and is the author of the booklet *Thankfulness: Even When It Hurts*. She has experienced the death of both parents.

Teach what it means to grieve as a Christian: Dr. Larry Crabb speaks to the way God uses the hard parts of grief to accomplish His work in us, explaining how as Christians we are, at the same time, a saint, a sinner, and a sufferer. And teaching your church members about a believer's three-point identity in Christ can help grieving believers become more transparent about their struggles in their grief. Whether from the pulpit, one-on-one, or in small groups, these are valuable truths for grieving Christians to learn:

- **Christians grieve as saints.** "In the middle of grief to remember that I'm a saint," explains Crabb, "is to believe very deeply that there is new life within me that no suffering can destroy. In the middle of whatever disappointment life throws at me, I am alive *in* Christ, I am alive *for* Christ, and I'm alive *to* Christ."
- **Christians grieve as sinners.** "To recognize that I am also a sinner gives me the opportunity to focus on God's forgiveness. It's good to face that you're a sinner in the middle of your suffering because you're not going to handle it perfectly. You're going to handle it badly at times. So to realize that you're a sinner is to celebrate grace and forgiveness."
- **Christians grieve as sufferers.** "To realize that you're a sufferer, at the same time that you're a saint and a sinner, points you to your need and your right to trust in the hope Christ offers. Suffering is not the bottom line for the believer, nor is it the final word for the sinner. Suffering rather becomes a God-given opportunity to gain an eternal perspective on life in the midst of our pain," concludes Crabb.

Model authentic grief: In light of that, "good Christians," including "good Christian leaders," can see their calling in the midst of grief very differently.

As Jeffery put it ...

As a minister, I used to believe that everyone was looking to me for strength. But I've come to learn that if you're hurting, people want to see who you are at that moment. They feel better about their situation if they're grieving. "There's a preacher up there, he's crying, he's in pain just like I am." So I think the key thing in Christian grief is to be transparent. It's a freeing thing to be able to talk about your loss.

Vaneetha shares, "I think one of the hardest things was saying, 'I have faith and I love God, but I'm going to cry, I'm going to yell, and I'm going to be frustrated and angry. And I can still love God at the same time.'"



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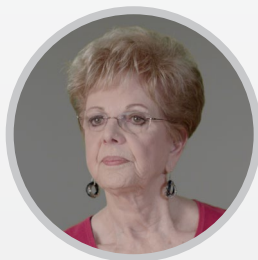
**“MY RELATIONSHIPS HAVE
GOTTEN WEIRD.”**

YOU SHOULD KNOW ...



“A girlfriend got very irritated with me because I forgot a lunch date. When people have high expectations of you and you’re in the middle of grief, they don’t understand that you cannot continue ‘normally’ any longer.” JODI

“I have discovered through the years that a widow can become a threat to a married woman of another couple. People get the wrong idea that because you’ve lost your spouse you’re going to be immediately looking for another one. Some of my friends absolutely avoided me. That was heartbreaking.” ELLIE



“I didn’t want to go out and do anything with friends anymore. My friends didn’t understand. They thought I was fine because I seemed fine on the outside. It strained relationships.” JEMMA

When relationships change

With the loss of someone close, grievors often find that other relational losses soon follow. Here are a few reasons why:

Friends faithful during the illness need to get back to their own lives.

“A lot of times people are there for you through the whole dying process,” shares Sheila, whose husband died. “But once the person passes, they get on with their lives.” Help grievors understand that this will likely happen and to be careful not to have unrealistic expectations of their friends.

The friendship was centered around the person who died. Sometimes the dynamics of friendships will change significantly, especially when they were people the griever had met through the deceased loved one. It can be hurtful and disappointing for grievors to realize that the relationships were mostly based on their loved one’s friendship with them. Grief counselor and widow Carol Cornish had this experience, and she gives the bereaved this advice: “God calls us to think the best that we can about people, and I give the credit to the Lord for giving me the grace not to become bitter, resentful, or critical of the fact that they faded into the background.”⁶

JEANNINE:

“Friends say they’ll call, and they don’t.”

New responsibilities leave no time for relationships that were easy to maintain before. Lois Rabey remembers a friend who became upset when Lois didn’t have time to do the fun things they used to do together. Lois’s advice to the griever is, “You have to be able to say, ‘I’d love to be able to do this, but I can’t. It doesn’t mean I don’t care about you or that

⁶ Carol Cornish is a counselor, teacher, and author of *The Undistracted Widow: Living for God After Losing Your Husband*.

I don't want to be with you, but my life is different now, and so I have to handle some things differently."⁷

The friendship was never a give-and-take relationship. After Gerri's husband died, she made some difficult discoveries about her friendships and had to adjust.

I'm a very caring person, always present for others. What I discovered in the grieving process is that [while my husband was still alive] I had surrounded myself with people who needed me. And when I was unavailable emotionally to them and I couldn't respond in the way I normally would, they had a great deal of resentment. They would say, "This has been a long time and you really need to be moving on with your life."

Friends expect the griever to quickly revert to the person they've always known. H. Norman Wright, who lost his wife and two children, advises, "When well-meaning friends want [their grieving friends] to be back to their 'old selves,' the grievers need to be very honest and say, 'I will never be back to my old self. I will become a new person; I will not be the same as you were used to.'"

What you can do

What should the grieving person do to navigate all these changes?

Grief letters to friends and family: Some relationships are too important to lose, so encourage people to write "grief letters" or emails to people around them who don't understand what they're going through. A grief letter is simply a note to a friend, relative, or coworker that explains how

⁷ Lois Rabey is a speaker, writer, and author of several books, including *When Your Soul Aches* and *Moments for Those Who Have Lost a Loved One*. Her husband died in a hot-air balloon accident.

the grieving person feels and what kind of love and support would mean most. Christina, after the death of her sister, wrote a grief email to her colleagues. She also wrote a special letter to her husband:

I wrote a grief letter to my husband. I let him know that I loved him for everything he was doing, but I explained to him that if I needed a minute by myself, it was not directed at him personally. He received it well, though he would have preferred for me to spend a lot of time with him. But he respected my request to take time to process my grief by myself.

Building of new friendships: New relationships can be beneficial in this new season of life, so gently guide the griever to people who have an idea of what he or she is going through. Sheila looks back on the early days of her widowhood and offers this advice: “If you have lost a loved one, find a group of friends that you really can let your guard down with and be yourself. You don’t have to pretend that life is okay, because life is not okay. Find two or three people that allow you to cry, weep, get on the floor, whatever you need to do.”

This is one reason people benefit from **GriefShare** support groups. People who’ve led and participated in these groups continue to attest to how helpful it is to have a friendly, nonjudgmental group of people who truly “get” what they’re going through. The friendships formed there become an important part of the healing process.



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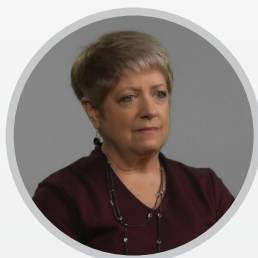
**“THE SECOND YEAR IS WORSE
THAN THE FIRST.”**

YOU SHOULD KNOW ...



"In my first year of grief, I was in a fog. It wasn't until the second year that this depression hit and this realization that 'He's not coming back. I'm in this for the long haul without him.' I fell into a depression and had anxiety about everything. Everything came crashing in on me that second year." **MARNE**

"Grief hurts in the beginning. And then it hurts more, because you're beginning to lose the numbness. The reality gets heavier and heavier. There's the whole first year of 'firsts.' Then the second year dawns, and you're not all of a sudden better. In a lot of ways, the second year is worse because you begin to realize, 'This is it. She is gone.' It's heavy in a whole new way." **JUDY**



"In the second year I was still questioning God. I was still angry. I was resentful. I was still jealous of my girlfriends who had their husbands." **JOANNE**

Why the second year is often worse

Sometimes the second year is worse than the first simply because grieving people feel so much external pressure to get through the grief. As counselor Sabrina D. Black notes, “Society really does not give us room to grieve.”⁸ So much of the first year is filled with details and decisions that need to be handled after the death, which in some ways distracts from the loss. Once those issues are resolved and the initial numbness wears off, reality sets in.

So, between the pressure from others who think you should be over it, the amount of time grief actually takes, and the hard-hitting reality of loss that comes when the busyness wears off—yes, the second year is often worse than the first.

This is why most grief experts advise thinking in terms of *years* of grief, not weeks or months. If more than one person died, this prolongs the grief process. After the death of a child, parents may take five to ten years to stabilize. A suicide or violent, tragic death almost always involves a longer recovery.

STEPHEN:

“The reality of the loss hits home the second year.”

What you can do

Let them know grieving is not an orderly, linear process: H. Norman Wright explains: “It can intensify at three months. It can intensify at the one-year anniversary. Significant holidays and important events will be triggers. The person can feel as if he is moving forward, and then all of a sudden it hits again. That is the normal process.”

⁸ Sabrina D. Black is an author, speaker, and the CEO and clinical director of Abundant Life Counseling Center. She has experienced the death of multiple close relatives and the miscarriage of her baby.

Reassure them they'll make it through: It's helpful for grieving people to understand that each person's grief is unique, that grief cannot be rushed, and the length of the grieving process is different for different people. So if grievors come to their second year and wonder what's wrong with them, you can assure them their emotions are normal and they *will* make it through.

Remind them the grief process takes time: That was Dr. Robert DeVries's experience:

After my wife died, I was golfing with a friend. I was really feeling the sadness and grief, and I said, "I wish this would go away. I wish God would just heal it." This friend turned, faced me, and said, "It took twenty-eight years for you and your wife to weave your life together. It's been torn apart, and there are all kinds of ragged edges. If it took twenty-eight years to grow together, it's going to take a little bit more time than you're giving it to mend those broken edges. But you will mend. It will happen."⁹

⁹ Dr. Robert DeVries is professor emeritus of church education at Calvin Theological Seminary. His first wife died of cancer. Now remarried to Dr. Susan Zonnebelt-Smeenge, they work together to help people in grief and are co-authors of many books, including *From We to Me* and *The Empty Chair: Handling Grief on Holidays and Special Occasions*.

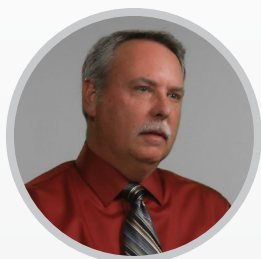


8

“GUILT IS EATING ME UP.”

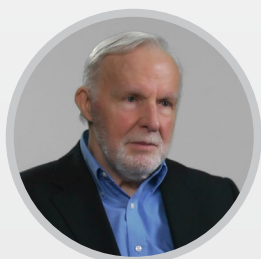


YOU SHOULD KNOW ...



“I should have done a better job of helping Michael. I should have done more research about his condition; maybe I would have been able to stop this. I should have done more.’ Guilt became a monster in my life. It consumed me. It tore me down.” **HOLLIS**

“With Melissa’s accident, we asked, ‘What if the driver had waited one more second? What if he had seen the other car?’ We had a house rule that our kids didn’t ride with somebody who was sixteen years old, but we’d made an exception because this young man was such a good driver. Another ‘what if?’ was we almost didn’t let Melissa go out that night.” **DAVE**



“My wife was unable to drive the last seven years of her life. After she died, I realized I didn’t have to do all the things I had been doing for her. And I felt relieved. But then I started feeling guilty about being relieved. I carried that guilt with me. I also felt guilty about not doing more homework on her rehab center and not getting her to the emergency room earlier. I blamed myself.” **WILLIS**

Countering guilt, control, and the what-ifs of grief

Struggles with the conscience and wrestling with one's faith in God's plan can vastly complicate grief. The griever often finds it hard to respond with anything but emotion, yet beneath the surface, questions are being asked, assumptions are being made, and conclusions are being drawn. How grieving people make their way through these struggles will have a big impact on their healing process and their relationship with the Lord.

What you can do

Here are some perspectives that grieving people have found helpful.

The difference between true guilt and false guilt: When people experience guilt, it is because they have violated an internalized standard. Violating God's Word can result in true guilt. But false guilt occurs when a person violates an extra-biblical, unrealistic standard that they've set for themselves. Distinguishing the two can be a little confusing since both types of guilt are unpleasant for a person to experience. First, lead them in a guided discussion to draw out the source of the standards they've violated. Then help them see whether those standards are consistent with Scripture.

Willis, who blamed himself for decisions surrounding his wife's death, learned, "If God has said it was not my fault, that's the ruling in God's court. But if I'm still blaming myself, I'm putting my court above God's court. Understanding that helped me to lift false guilt off my shoulders."

Leaving the "what-if" world behind: Dave Branon, whose daughter Melissa died, offers this advice: "If you live in the 'what if?' world, you never get anything resolved. My wife and I know there are situations where we

might have been able to make a different decision, but we didn't. And we didn't do anything wrong in not doing that. So we try to live in a 'what is' world and deal with it that way."¹⁰

Dealing with true regrets in the present, with God: There are times when regrets and guilt do *not* spring from a false sense of control and responsibility. Sometimes a person's final words or last encounter with the person who died are truly not what they should have been. "Maybe the grieving person said the wrong thing, or didn't apologize or ask forgiveness when they should have—or maybe the person who died failed in that way," says counselor Sabrina D. Black. "The person may feel guilty about that failure, wishing they had said and done something different. But living with guilt will hold them hostage. It won't move them forward or solve the problem with the one who died.

"Sometimes it helps to write it out," she advises. "They can ask themselves, 'If I had an opportunity to do it all over again, what would I say differently; how would I make amends; what would I want to do for restitution?' Write those things out and talk to God about it. The reality is, the person is gone and the grieving person can't say it to them in this life. So talk to God. He is present and He hears us."

Never underestimate the power of Christ's sacrificial death. If someone in your church has been negligent in ways that led to the death of another, that person is right to accept responsibility. But the gospel is meaningful in a situation like this. As counselor Julie Ganschow emphasizes, "Even if the griever's actions were negligent, it's important to understand that Christ is with us in the midst of every action that we take.

¹⁰ Dave Branon is an editor, author, and a contributor to *Our Daily Bread*. His seventeen-year-old daughter died in a car accident.

There is nothing that we as believers can do that He is not a part of. In His sacrificial death on the cross, He absorbed all of the sin and negligence that we have in our lives. In ways we don't understand, He knew this in eternity past, and already had determined beforehand to include this as part of His sacrifice on our behalf."¹¹

Dr. Crawford Loritts asks these follow-up questions:

Are you really saying that the death of Jesus is not sufficient for what you've done? That somehow what you've done is an exception to Calvary? That His blood didn't cover your mistakes? A person may not intend to be arrogant in what they are saying, but they are putting themselves in God's place and saying, "No, God. What You did is not sufficient for me." What we have to do when we have caused something awful to happen is run to the mercy seat and say, "Lord God, right now I'm lamenting, I'm regretting, I hate myself for doing this. Help me not to go to an unwholesome place. Cover me with Your blood, and I receive it by faith."

Loritts also recommends that you encourage such people to move toward community and away from isolation because they need the body of Christ to give them perspective and balance and to help them think right.

As Julie Ganschow paraphrases it, "Regardless of what I was a part of in the past, I shouldn't live life in the rearview mirror. I'm supposed to focus on the windshield of life in front of me and remind myself of what is true, what is real, what is lovely"—in short, the new life God promises to those who have received His forgiveness.

¹¹ Julie Ganschow is a counselor and teacher at Reigning Grace Counseling Center in Kansas City, MO. She has authored several books and maintains a daily blog on counseling issues. Julie experienced the loss of her parents.

CONCLUSION

Grief doesn't neatly come to an end after the funeral, or even a few months or a year later. It is a journey with many pitfalls, struggles, questions, disappointments, revelations, and opportunities to learn and grow.

Having an inside understanding of common questions, struggles, and misconceptions in grief will help inform your care, counseling, and prayers for the grieving people you serve. It will give you a basis to ask better questions and speak more directly to the heart of the person's struggle.

The counselors and pastors in this book are featured speakers in GriefShare's 13-week video-based support group program, and they share even more insights in the weekly seminars. And the individuals you've heard from in this book also share their stories of grief in the videos. Plus, many of them have found strength and hope through participating in a GriefShare group.

GriefShare can be an important part of your church's care and outreach ministries, offering extended, lay-led care to grieving people in your congregation and community.

To learn more about starting a GriefShare group in your church, visit **griefshare.org**, call **800-395-5755**, or email **info@griefshare.org**. Groups can be held in person and online.

Full-time GriefShare ministry coaches are available to answer questions and to lead a person step-by-step through starting, growing, and maintaining a grief recovery ministry. Talking to a ministry coach is free, and you can **schedule a call** at your convenience.

SUSAN:

“I never really healed down deep until I came to GriefShare at my church.”



GriefShare®

Offer hope
to the bereaved

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LIST OF COMMON GRIEVING EMOTIONS

Grieving people often experience many emotions at once. Grief emotions are not orderly, but are more like a tangled ball. And some of the emotions on this list are polar opposites! Note that this list is long, but not exhaustive.

Having an idea of what is normal in grief can be helpful for grievers. Show this list to grievers and have them check off the boxes of those responses that they've experienced.

This list also provides you with a good starting point for asking more focused questions and knowing what kind of care to offer.

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Abandoned | ☐ Can't pray |
| ☐ Afraid of facing emotions | ☐ Can't talk about loved one |
| ☐ Ambushed by grief | ☐ Change of priorities |
| ☐ Anger with others, self, loved one, and/or God | ☐ Comparing your grief to other people's |
| ☐ Anguish | ☐ Compassion |
| ☐ Annoyance | ☐ Complaining |
| ☐ Anxiety | ☐ Concerned about your family members |
| ☐ Apathy | ☐ Confusion |
| ☐ Avoiding church | ☐ Consumed by grief |
| ☐ Avoiding grief | ☐ Crisis of beliefs |
| ☐ Avoiding thinking about the death | ☐ Crying |
| ☐ Being harsh with others | ☐ Dazed |
| ☐ Betrayed | ☐ Denial |
| ☐ Bitterness | ☐ Depending on God |
| ☐ Blame | ☐ Depression |

- ☐ Desire for justice
- ☐ Despair
- ☐ Devastation
- ☐ Disappointment
- ☐ Disbelief
- ☐ Discontentment
- ☐ Discouragement
- ☐ Disorganized
- ☐ Disoriented
- ☐ Distracted
- ☐ Diving into work
- ☐ Don't want to go on
- ☐ Drained
- ☐ Drawing closer to God
- ☐ Dread
- ☐ Emotional wreck
- ☐ Emptiness
- ☐ Encouragement
- ☐ Envy
- ☐ Exhaustion/weakness
- ☐ Fatigue
- ☐ Fear of future
- ☐ Feeling judged
- ☐ Feeling like everything is in slow motion
- ☐ Feeling like everything is too hard
- ☐ Feeling like God isn't there
- ☐ Feeling like mush
- ☐ Feeling like something's missing
- ☐ Feeling like you're doing something wrong
- ☐ Feeling like you're losing your mind
- ☐ Feeling like your faith isn't working
- ☐ Feeling like your grief is marginalized
- ☐ Feeling out of control
- ☐ Feeling part of you is gone, ripped away
- ☐ Feeling rushed
- ☐ Feeling you're being a burden
- ☐ Financial worries
- ☐ Flashbacks
- ☐ Forgetfulness
- ☐ Frustration
- ☐ Full of questions
- ☐ Going through the motions
- ☐ Guilt
- ☐ Hallucinations
- ☐ Happy your loved one is no longer suffering
- ☐ Heartbroken
- ☐ Heightened emotions
- ☐ Helping everyone but yourself
- ☐ Helplessness
- ☐ Hiding grief
- ☐ Hope
- ☐ Hopelessness
- ☐ Hurt
- ☐ Impatience
- ☐ In a dark tunnel
- ☐ Inability to do things as well as you used to
- ☐ Inability to function
- ☐ Inadequacy
- ☐ Increased appetite
- ☐ Insomnia
- ☐ Internalizing grief
- ☐ Intrusive thoughts
- ☐ Irritable
- ☐ Isolating self
- ☐ Jealousy
- ☐ Lack of concentration
- ☐ Lack of focus
- ☐ Loneliness
- ☐ Loss of appetite

- ☐ Loss of identity
- ☐ Loss of purpose
- ☐ Making silly mistakes
- ☐ Memory loss
- ☐ Mental fog
- ☐ Missing loved one
- ☐ Nervous
- ☐ Nightmares
- ☐ No interest in doing things
- ☐ No sense of time
- ☐ Not allowing self to grieve
- ☐ Not enjoying what you used to enjoy
- ☐ Not trusting God
- ☐ Numbing pain
- ☐ Out of control
- ☐ Overwhelmed
- ☐ Panic attacks
- ☐ Peace
- ☐ Physical problems: stomach ache, headache, chest and heart hurting, nausea, hurting all over, migraines, shortness of breath
- ☐ Prayer
- ☐ Pretending you're okay
- ☐ Questioning your sanity
- ☐ Questions about heaven
- ☐ Rage
- ☐ Refusing joy
- ☐ Regret
- ☐ Rejection by friends
- ☐ Relief
- ☐ Roller coaster emotions
- ☐ Sadness
- ☐ Second-guessing
- ☐ Self-pity
- ☐ Shame
- ☐ Shock
- ☐ Shutting down
- ☐ Shutting people out
- ☐ Sleeping a lot
- ☐ Social and relational struggles
- ☐ Sorrow
- ☐ Squashed
- ☐ Staying busy
- ☐ Staying in bed
- ☐ Stress
- ☐ Stuffing down emotions
- ☐ Surprise
- ☐ Tangled emotions
- ☐ Thankfulness
- ☐ Tired
- ☐ Trying to take care of everything yourself
- ☐ Turning to God
- ☐ Unable to make decisions
- ☐ Uncomfortable with others
- ☐ Unproductive
- ☐ Unwilling to accept help
- ☐ Vindictiveness
- ☐ Vulnerable
- ☐ Wanting to rush through this
- ☐ Worry
- ☐ Other _____



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- teach grief recovery lessons

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Discover how Dr. Crawford Loritts uses GriefShare to care for the members of his church and grieving people in his community.

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–Jim Bates

"We're known in our community as a church that cares." **–Bob McCaskill**

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