



Disenfranchised Grief

A disenfranchised loss is one in which the person is being denied the right to grieve appropriately by other people or society. Therefore, it cannot be openly acknowledged, socially supported, or publicly mourned. The relationship or loss may be considered as unimportant, replaceable, or stigmatized. People either openly ignore, openly reject, or disapprove of the person's mourning responses. Therefore, the griever is either openly or covertly denied the right to grieve, denied support that is very important in overcoming the loss, or denied validation in order to heal. There are several reasons and types of disenfranchised losses, which are listed below. It is important to recognize that when a death or loss is disenfranchised there is a greater chance of the person's grieving process to become complicated. There are five categories of disenfranchised losses:

1. The relationship is not recognized – The relationship is not kin-based. Examples include colleagues, neighbors, foster parents, caregivers, and gay and lesbian relationships.
2. The loss is not even recognized – Examples include pets, miscarriages or abortions, and losses that are not deaths such as a job, marriage, terminal or chronic illness, injury, or giving children up for adoption.
3. The griever is not recognized – The person is sheltered or the grief is minimized. This happens many times with children (who are assumed to “not understand” what is happening). For example, people who lose loved ones due to Alzheimer's and are placed in hospice and nursing homes are not often recognized as grievers because “the person is not dead.”
4. The circumstances of the death – The type of death or loss can be stigmatized such as suicide, AIDS, abortion, or risky behaviors like drug use.

5. How the individual grieves – Many people deny another person's grief because they do not understand the person's familial and societal culture. Different families express their emotions differently than others. So, for example, those who did not grow up in an emotionally expressive home or culture may disenfranchise those who are more open in the expression of their grief.

The reactions of others are the problem in disenfranchised losses. These reactions can be:

1. Avoiding contact
2. Discouraging communication or expression of emotions
3. Giving unsolicited advice
4. Making rude or insensitive comments
5. Expressing inappropriate expectations about the person's mourning response

Disenfranchisement aggravates grief by:

1. Intensifying the emotional response
2. Creating the crisis of no support or recognition on top of the grief
3. Rituals and other things that help the person mourn are not given
4. No social support which makes the person feel alone and lonely
5. Makes the person grieve privately

How can someone help a griever?

1. Do not make rude or insensitive comments, or give unsolicited advice such as the comments below:

When things like this happen, all you can do is give it time and wait it out.

Eventually you will get over this.

The best thing you can do is put it behind you and get back to normal as soon as possible. The best thing to do is try to forget.

Face reality. She is dead. You need to move on to another relationship.

If you are going to mourn, you have to let go completely. If you do not let go, you are stuck in the past.

Remembering just adds to your pain and suffering. Try not to think or talk about it.

Don't keep talking about her. You should be more focused on who is still here.

Don't talk to your family (or others who had a relationship with the deceased) because it will just upset them and you.

2. Let the person talk about his or her feelings without trying to fix them
3. Understand that grieving is *not a linear process*. We do not just go from one stage or phase to another. People will fluctuate in their feelings. Let them do this without judgment. If they do not experience a feeling you think they should feel (e.g., anger), it does not necessarily mean they are grieving incorrectly
4. If another person's mourning is upsetting to you, find a way to talk to another person or work through your own sense of discomfort
5. Do not reject the person either in words or actions
6. Validate their feelings
7. Do not expect them to grieve the way you do or would
8. Understand that even if a lot of time has passed, it does not mean the survivors are not dealing with the loss. Grieving may take years, if not a lifetime. It may not be as intense as in the beginning, but you may see anniversary reactions. This means that he or she may be sad, anxious, isolating, angry, or "touchy" around the holidays, birthdays, and the day the person died or when the loss occurred. This is normal.
9. Be careful in assuming you know how long a person "should" grieve. Sometimes the second year is harder than the first. Sometimes it is not.