

When Patrons Die: Coping with Grief in Outreach Services

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October 2018



Why?

No one ever talks about this.

Unless we are aware of a particular personal, religious or cultural reason for saying someone “passed,” I gently use the word, “died.” Here is my dilemma: sometimes staff will come aboard to report that someone “is gone” or “isn’t here anymore.” I have to ask if that means they have transferred to another facility or moved away or... actually died. So those words--- died, death, deceased --- are direct and true--- the “elephant in the room,” if you will. Making a mistaken assumption about whether someone is dead or alive is something I think we all agree we’d like to avoid.

Katherine Clipp, Harford County Public Library

What is grief?

Grief is the emotional reaction to a loss, in this case to death.



Most grief literature does not apply.

- Until preparing for this presentation, I hadn't read much about grief. I thought I was already an expert.
- The books I've read in the last six months haven't addressed many of the experiences we see while doing library outreach with seniors and the disabled.
- I've found the best advice online and through conversation with you, my peers.

My first patron, my first death

Alice.

She lived with her daughter. Alice was nearly deaf, grew up in Dayton, OH, and had been a teacher.

I visited her monthly, sharing coffee and cookies. We discussed her books, her earlier life... I loved the paintings on her walls of the countryside near where I went to college.

Alice died. Sudden illness. I choked. Said the usual pat phrases. "Sorry for your loss." "In a better place..."

No one offered even these words to me. Why would they think it mattered to me?



Grief comes in three.

- The family's grief.
- The friends' grief.
- Our grief.

Ways we help

We carry some materials about loss and grieving...these may address death (emotional and practical/financial ramifications) and caregiver challenges for debilitating conditions such as loss of mobility, hearing, eyesight. We have materials to support the profound losses for the family of one with dementia. We make these visible but do not push them unless someone asks. When they ask, we are ready with resources.

Katherine Clipp, Silver Reader

Sometimes part of the bookmobile driver's role is that of makeshift therapist, and I've had supportive conversations with a number of people about the deceased during their friends' and relatives' grieving. I even had a long conversation with a local Native American, a gentleman who often visits the bookmobile, who recently returned to Pine Ridge, South Dakota, for the funeral of his brother who was a veteran, an alcoholic, and for the last few years entirely homeless.

Ron Kelley, City of Flagstaff-Coconino County Bookmobile

Could Everybody Stop Trying to Pretty Up Death? It's Not Working.

Language that denies the mess of death also denies the grieving the chance to be messy.

Melanie Brooks, Modern Loss blog

The paradox of grief is that finding a way to live with the pain is what enables us to heal.

Julia Samuel, Grief Works

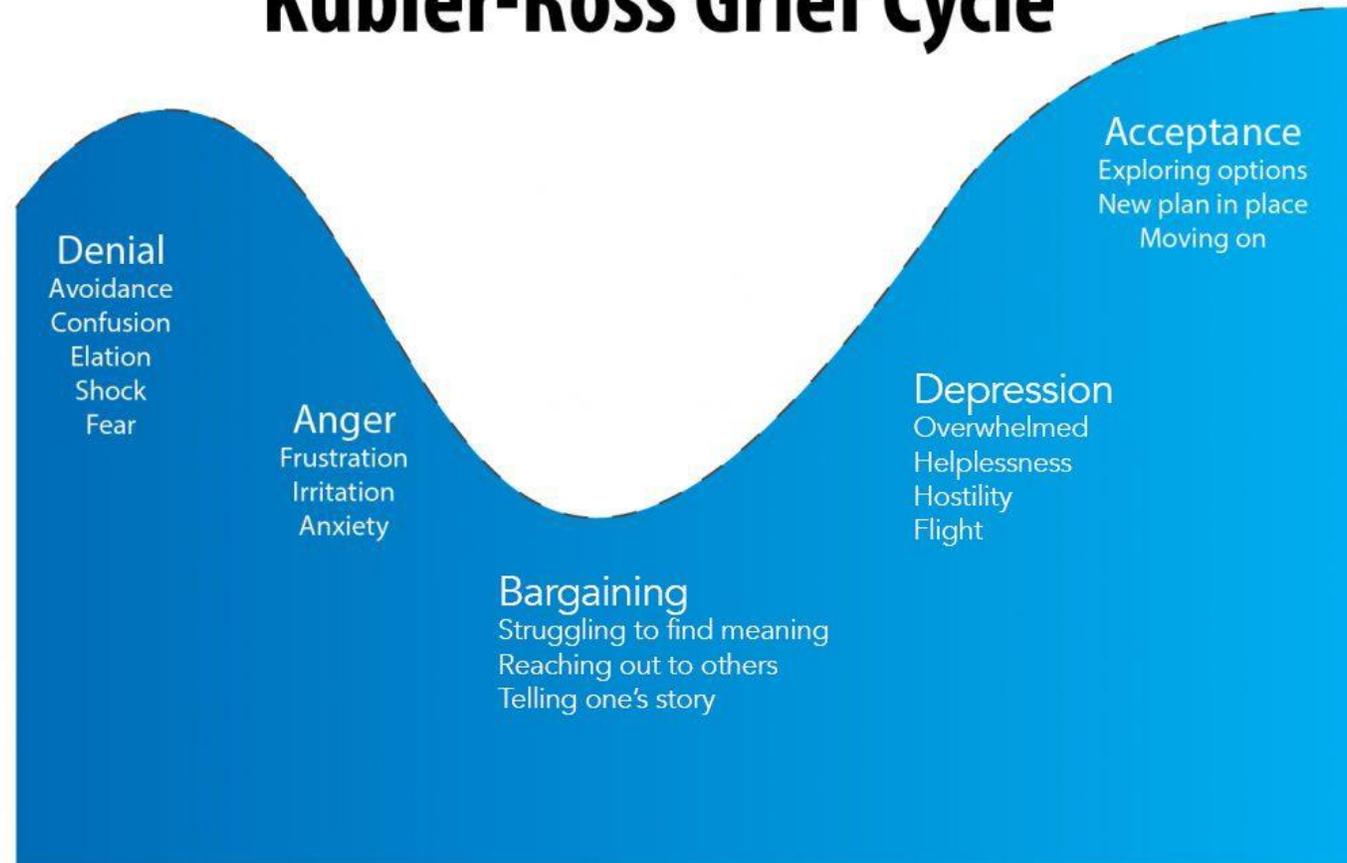
What is disenfranchised grief?

- Society says the relationship isn't important, so grief is not acknowledged
- The death is stigmatized by society.
- The relationship is stigmatized by society.
- The loss itself isn't recognized as a grief-worthy because it is not a death.



How do you experience this grief?

Kübler-Ross Grief Cycle



Information and
Communication

Emotional
Support

Guidance and
Direction

Expressing our grief

- Acknowledge your love for that person was true and significant and your loss is no less valid.
- Remind yourself that you are worthy of time and space to grieve, be it the death of a friend, co-worker, four-legged companion, or any other loss.
- Remind yourself that you are not alone.
- Create your own ritual.
- Assess your support system.
- Seek personal ways to explore grief and express your emotions.
- Be a support to others experiencing disenfranchised grief.

Adapted from whatsyourgrief.com

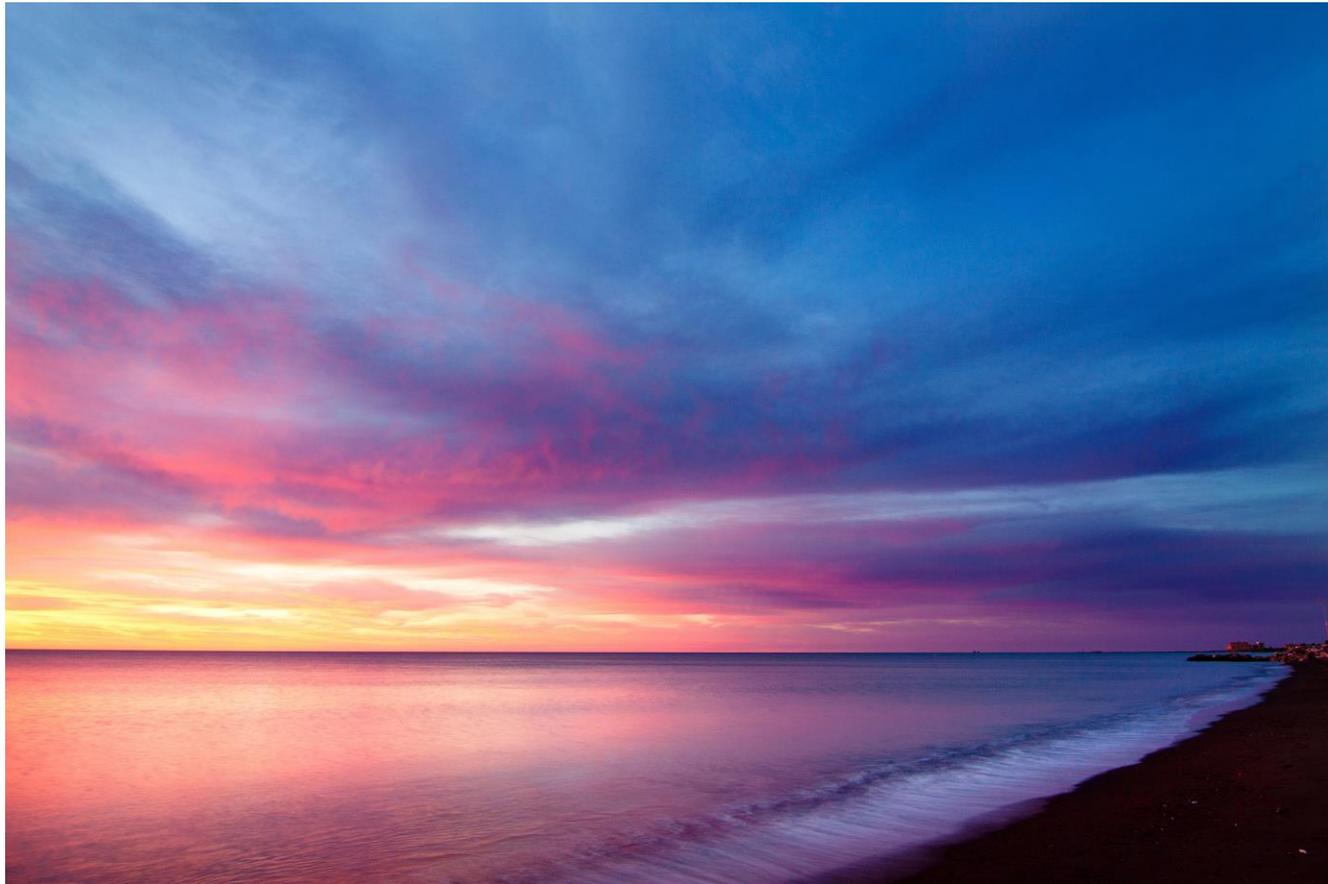


How we learn about a patron's death

I always look in the obituary section of the local paper but it is easy to miss some deaths in that manner. (It is pretty expensive to have an obit printed and some of our oldest folks just don't have that many friends left in the community so it isn't worth the expense). Also if someone is absent or I hear they are not well, I send a short hand-written note to them via one of their neighbors who visit the bookmobile.

Katherine Clipp, Silver Reader

Preparing for loss of a patron, but expecting the unexpected



*“They come and they go,”
became our motto. It was
our way of acknowledging
that death and loss was a
normal part of our work.*

Anne Juhasz, retired
from Massillon Public
Library

Most of my patrons are over 80, and many are older. They know their time is limited. What tends to happen is a slow decline, during which time I see them less and less, or they simply “disappear”, into a nursing home in another county, a relative’s home, or the hospital. The next time I hear of them they have passed away.

Diane Katz, Campbell County Public Library

For me, I usually see signs that end is near and begin to prepare myself. When someone significantly slows down in their reading, or gives away their collection as a donation to the library they are often preparing themselves – getting everything in order.

Michele Anderson, Meridian Library District

I guess the most important thing I have learned in over 30 years working with seniors is that often they are better prepared to look at reality and move on than we are. They are sometimes the ones who comfort us.

Anne Juhasz, retired from Massillon Public Library

A couple of years ago I dealt with what I believe were two overdose deaths, with women in their 50s. People tend think that opioid crisis is only affecting the young. Actually, there are a lot of older adults in the same situation.

Diane Katz, Campbell County Public Library

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Losing patrons to Alzheimer's

We know it is coming. How do you say goodbye? Or do you?

...with a home library patron who is sliding into forgetfulness I was able to recently look over a photograph album with her and ask questions that prompted her to recall stories from the early 1940s. I feel that this is a way for.. both of us to honor her life while still present. Similarly, when I am preparing to visit I think about the stories I know are important to her. I know that I'll hear the same themes from visit to visit, and often the same story. Telling those stories is obviously important or comforting to her, so I am prepared to hear them and sometimes the book choices prompt them. This patron loves dogs and cats. She often enjoys reading stories that involve them, so a conversation might be a little about the book and spread into a memory of her dog or cat from years back.

Celeste Bennett, Jefferson County Library Mobile Services Manager

...at least three regular bookmobile patrons have elderly partners who have fallen to dementia (none of these have yet died). In these cases, I have had long talks with the coping individuals, explaining my experience with that scourge in the case of my mother. Yes, I have provided books on the subject, but sometimes the greatest service I can provide is to listen to their stories and offer first-hand information at a very personal level.

Ron Kelley, City of Flagstaff-Coconino County Bookmobile

Ritual and Remembering



I've lost two home library patrons suddenly, without any warning. In both cases, I've been able to connect with friends or family to wrap up library business and to learn about memorial services. From one, I have a photograph and the coffee mug that she had set aside for me to use when I would visit. ("It makes me glad to know that you can have 'coffee with Liza' every morning," is how her friend who managed the estate described it when she gave it to me.)

Celeste Bennett

Jefferson County Library Mobile Services Manager

We do take pictures of some customers which we share internally or use in outreach displays or marketing materials. We have not, however, made a concerted effort to take everyone's pic. That having been said, a "memory board" somewhere in the vehicle would not be a bad idea. If no picture is available, a quote or observation by a peer might be posted for a time. (I might try this).

Katherine Clipp, Silver Reader

I think the way I cope best is to not forget them. I try to remember them everyday in some little way. Sometimes, that is simply moving on to the next resident. Starting a new relationship and making a difference. Knowing that "someday" will come again but it is our job to make a difference.

Cathy Zimmerman, Scott County Library

I once visited the deathbed of a bookmobile patron who had become a friend...Although Eve was unresponsive and died the next day, I read aloud a Rumi poem at her bedside. Knowing her world view, I'm certain she would have very much appreciated that. And, yes, although she couldn't respond to me, I presume that she actually absorbed the poem those moments in some way.

Eve's ashes were eventually tossed, by ceremony, into the Grand Canyon, where she once had worked and loved.

Ron Kelley, City of Flagstaff-Coconino County Bookmobile

Caring for Yourself in the Face of Difficult Work (ProQOL.org)

1. Get enough sleep.
2. Get enough to eat.
3. Do some light exercise.
4. Vary the work that you do.
5. Do something pleasurable.
6. Focus on what you did well.
7. Learn from your mistakes.
8. Share a private joke.
9. Pray, meditate or relax.
10. Support a colleague.

WHERE EVERYTHING IS MUSIC



We have fallen into the place
where everything is music.

The strumming and the flute notes
rise into the atmosphere,
and if the whole world's harp
should burn up,
there will still be hidden instruments
playing, playing

This singing art
is sea foam.
The graceful movements
come from a pearl
somewhere
on the ocean floor.

Rumi poem read to Eve by Ron Kelley

Poems reach up like spindrift
and the edge of driftwood
along the beach
wanting, wanting

They derive from a slow
and powerful root
that we cannot see.

Stop the words now.
Open the window
in the center of your chest,
and let the spirits fly
in and out!

Resources

Callanan, Michael and Patricia Helley

Final Gifts: Understanding the Special Awareness, Needs,
and Communications of the Dying

Doka, Kenneth J.

Grief is a Journey: Finding Your Path Through Loss

Fisher, Shelly and Jennifer Jones, editors

Breaking Sad: What to Say After Loss, What Not to Say,
and When to Just Show Up

Resources

Samuel, Julia

Grief Works: Stories of Life, Death, and Surviving

Soffer, Rebecca

Modern Loss: Candid Conversation About Grief: Beginners Welcome

grief.org.au

modernloss.com

ProQOL.org

whatsyourgrief.com