

## *Disenfranchised Grief*

Losing a loved one is difficult under any circumstances. It is a time filled with numbness, hopelessness, sadness, depression, anger and guilt. With the help of friends, family and social organizations, the pain of grief lessens gradually over time. Some losses, however, are not acknowledged or supported by society and the bereaved person is left to carry their painful burden alone. They are denied the comfort of meaningful death rites and rituals and are often forced to hide and suppress their feelings. This type of grief is referred to as “disenfranchised grief.”

Ken Doka, in his book Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow (1989), describes three main categories of disenfranchised grief: (1) when the relationship itself is not recognized by society; (2) when the loss is not recognized as important; and (3) when the griever is not recognized as being capable of grieving.

- **The relationship is not socially recognized.** Examples of this type of disenfranchised grief include loss of a partner in a homosexual relationship, death of a partner in an extra-marital affair, loss of a person from your past (such as an ex-spouse), loss of a loved one by capital punishment, or people who you are not related to by blood (such as step-parents, in-laws, friends or neighbors).
- **The loss is not socially recognized.** This type of loss includes miscarriage and abortion, loss of a pet, loss of someone with whom you had an ambiguous (love/hate) relationship, or loss of a loved one by AIDS, suicide or the effects of drug and alcohol abuse.
- **The griever is not socially recognized.** Some members of society are considered to be incapable of grief, such as very young children, the elderly, the mentally disabled or those with dementia.

Bereaved persons who are healing from a loss that is not supported by society do not have access to the normal support systems for persons who are mourning. The social stigma attached to the relationship or the loss itself causes the mourner to shy away from assistance that may be available. Without the assistance often provided by churches and grief support groups, they may become isolated and alienated from others. In some cases, the disenfranchised griever may be excluded from mourning rituals after a loss, such as the funeral or memorial service. As a result, the normal healing process may be delayed, and this unresolved grief may resurface with each subsequent loss.

To facilitate healing, bereaved individuals need to feel the support of others (and society) during their grief process. In the case of disenfranchised grief, friends and loved ones may be uncertain as to how they should act, or even whether they should acknowledge the loss at all. When in doubt as to what to say, they may say nothing at all. Following are some suggestions for supporting the disenfranchised griever:

- Recognize and validate their loss, even if you do not understand the depth of their pain.

- Listen without judgment. No need to offer them special words of wisdom. The love and support of friends and family is even more important when society does not acknowledge the loss.
- Be understanding of their pain, even if you do not share it.
- Be patient. Don't suggest they "get over it and get on with life."
- Help locate community resources and encourage them to seek assistance.