

GRIEF

THE

INSIDE

STORY

Pat Bertram

Grief: The Inside Story

A Guide to Surviving the Loss
of a Loved One.

Pat Bertram

This book reflects the author's emotions and experiences of grief after the loss of her life mate. It is not intended to reflect everyone's experience with grief, nor is it intended to be a substitute for professional help or medical attention. It does not provide medical advice, diagnosis, treatment or care. If you have a health problem, medical emergency, or a general health question, you should contact a physician or other qualified health care provider for consultation, diagnosis and/or treatment. Under no circumstances should you attempt self-diagnosis or treatment based on anything you have seen or read in this book.

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Why Can't Others Understand My Grief?

We who have lost our spouses, life mates, soul mates often have to show empathy and understanding to others rather than receiving it from them. We are the ones hurting, so why do we need to be understanding of their feelings? Because it is far easier for us to remember what it felt like to be in their situation, than it is for them to imagine what it must be like in ours.

Everyone has suffered some sort of loss, so people think they understand what we are feeling, but they don't. They can't.

Shortly after Jeff died, I had to let a man know of the death, though I don't remember how I conveyed the information. It took months before I could actually say the words, "Jeff is dead." But I do remember his response. "I know what you're going through," he said. "My dog just passed away."

I stared at him, unable to process those words. To this day, his remark appalls me, though I have come to understand he was reaching out the only way he knew how.

We bereaved are offered platitudes about death that are supposed to encourage and reassure, but more often than not do the exact opposite. "It's God's will." "When a door closes, a window opens." "You'll get married again." Despite the hurtfulness of the words, we need to remember that these people, too, are reaching out the only way they know how.

We get these canned comments from everyone—family, friends, and strangers— though mostly, strangers give us blank looks or shuffle their feet in embarrassment when, for whatever reason, we have to tell them that we are a widow or widower. They feel obliged to express words of sympathy, and we are forced to reassure them that all is well, to indirectly let them know that their sympathy is not needed.

We don't expect much from strangers, so we aren't

disappointed, but when it comes to family and friends, the situation gets complicated. We want more from them. We need more. And since often these people are grieving too, we expect them to understand.

When we lose our spouse, our daughter loses a parent, our brother-in-law loses a sibling, our neighbor loses a friend. At first, we all grieve, but one by one everyone else puts aside their grief until we are the only one left crying. Then these people begin to wonder what our problem is. They got over their pain, why can't we get over ours? After all, we all lost the same person.

But we did not suffer the same loss.

“I lost a lot of family members and cried and grieved, but that was it. This death of my husband has been a completely different type of grief. Unless you have personally suffered the loss of a husband, significant other, mate etc. you don't have the ability to understand how awful grieving is, and what it means to go through it!” (Aggie, blog follower)

The complex and painful experience of grief for a spouse, life mate, soul mate is not something we see on television shows, in movies, or read about in novels. Fictional folks shed a fictional tear or two, perhaps go on a fictional spree of vengeance, then continue with their fictional lives unchanged.

Because of this cultural conditioning (and because we quickly learn to hide our grief from view), people believe that grieving is a much faster process than it actually is, so just a few weeks after the funeral, the phone stops ringing, people we encounter no longer mention our loved one, and our family and friends start urging us to move on.

This can be disheartening, especially since this is when the awful realization starts to sink in that our loved one really is gone. Those closest to us go home to their husbands and

wives and unchanged lives. We go into our sad and empty rooms, apartments, houses to be faced again—and again and again—with the knowledge that who we loved was gone, what we had was gone, what we needed was gone, what we hoped for was gone. All gone.

We might wish for our friends to act as impromptu counselors and companions, but they sense, at some subconscious level, that our needs are so great and so complicated that they would be best not to get too involved. And perhaps they sense their own inadequacy at dealing with the very topic of death.

Death and Survival

Death is shrouded with an element of blank. It is the great unknown and unknowable, and our brains are not equipped to handle the immensity.

“We ignore death, deny it, grab on to incomplete theologies to find comfort for it, and as a result more often than not run away from those experiencing its impact. It is hard to hear of the impact of death on a person because we don’t get it and we know we are going to have to deal with death one day and it terrifies us.” (Leesa Healy, RN, Emotional/Mental Health Therapist & Educator)

While we are in the grip of our grief, the survival mechanisms of those around us are triggered. To avoid facing the unfaceable, people close to us will indulge in self-protective behaviors that shut us out.

Sometimes old friends, especially couples, draw away from us. The death of our spouse and the demise of our couplehood change the dynamics of our friendships. People fear we will now be uncomfortable in the company of couples. At the

same time, they are uncomfortable with us because all unwittingly, we are a reminder of how fragile life really is. New friends, perhaps the most unlikely people, can fill the gap.

Sometimes people minimize our grief, which allows them to deny the validity of death itself. “You weren’t married, so you can’t possibly feel bad over the loss of your mate.” “You divorced your first husband in order to remarry, so you got what you deserve.” “She was drinking and driving, so she doesn’t deserve to be mourned.” Or, as one particularly obtuse acquaintance said to me, “How did Jeff allow himself to get so sick?”

The jargon of grief is that of illness, of negativity, of . . . fault, as if somehow we who are grieving chose our state and now we have to overcome, heal, recover, move on, get over, return to normal. By blaming us for grieving too long, by refusing to admit that our grief is normal, onlookers to our grief can more comfortably return to their job of surviving, and leave us alone with our sorrow.

Even those who are kind to us bereft, even those who continue to be supportive, lose the urgency they had at the beginning. They cannot sustain that same level of support because grief takes way too long, and they need to focus on their own lives.

Finding Balance

One common piece of advice given to griever is that we should seek support from family and friends, but what is rarely acknowledged is that those nearest to us may especially struggle to make sense of our grief and their own reactions to the near brush of death. Our grief is our responsibility, not theirs. It is up to us to be realistic about what support we can expect from others and not to become embittered by what

appears to be a lack of interest or love from people we hoped would give us more.

Ironically, at the beginning when family and friends are more willing and able to offer support, we are so lost in our wild and chaotic grief that we do not have the words to describe what we are feeling to help them understand. By the time the chaos abates enough for us to make sense of it, they change the subject when we try to explain because they think we are wallowing in our grief.

For our own protection, we must strike a balance between accepting—and being grateful for—whatever kindnesses are shown to us, and not being provoked by thoughtless words and actions. We don't want to be bereaved. Our friends don't want us to be bereaved, but neither can they make the huge imaginative leap to understand even a fraction of our feelings. They simply cannot comprehend the immensity of our grief and how death has affected us. They do not know what to say or how to act, so we need to make allowances for that.

Still, even though people don't understand the depth of our grief, sometimes they give us what we need when we need it. Six days after Jeff died, I had to go to the grocery store. The clerk asked where Jeff was, an understandable question because we were always together. I could not force myself to say those impossible words, "He's dead." I just shook my head and wept. She hugged me and cried with me. Not enough tears had been shed for Jeff—no amount of tears will ever be enough—so those tears from a stranger gave me comfort.

But we cannot count on comfort from strangers. Nor can we always count on support from family and friends, so we need to find alternative sources of comfort and support. In my case, I had my blog, which attracted people in the same situation as I was, and I went to a grief support group for a while. Being around people who were also dealing with the complex and

painful experience of losing a life mate was comforting. They did not have to imagine what I was going through. They knew.

However we deal with the need for support, however we deal with the lack of understanding from others, we do survive these trying circumstances, and we find that we have a far greater ability to cope on our own than we ever believed possible.

Conclusions:

- It is difficult for others to understand or imagine what we are going through.
- We have to learn to accept any kindness with grace and to ignore the thoughtlessness.
- We should be realistic about the support we can expect from family and friends.
- We need to guard against becoming embittered by the lack of support from family and friends. They are doing the best they can.

Metamorphosis

We do not choose grief. Grief chooses us. The moment our life mate dies, the grief process takes hold and begins to change us, because that's what grief is: an agent of change. It takes us from being half of a couple to an autonomous individual. It takes the incomprehensible concept of death and rewires our thought processes to accommodate the unthinkable. It takes us from despair at having lost all chance of happiness to renewed hope.

After losing one's life mate, it's hard to accept that, no matter how unfair or unwelcome, life does go on. Once grief has done its work, we not only accept life's continuity, but we eventually come to embrace it, though it takes a long time—years—to get to that point.

At the beginning, I accepted grief as my final gift to Jeff. He'd endured so much pain, I was glad, if one of us was left behind to deal with the angst of loss and loneliness, that it was me and not him. Still, I didn't feel right about embracing life. I knew he wouldn't want me to be sad, but frankly, he had no say in the matter, and for the most part, neither did I. Grief is a force, like a hurricane or tsunami, and all I could do was endure as best as I could until it lost its power. Even when the power of grief began waning, I still didn't feel right about embracing life. It's not so much that I had survivor's guilt, but that it didn't seem fair. If life is a gift, why was it taken from him?

But it was not my choice, who of us lived and who died. My choice was for the two of us to be together, healthy and happy, but death came anyway.

From the beginning, I sensed that grief would take me where I needed to go. Even when the pain of Jeff's absence made it almost impossible to breathe, even as I railed against the sorrow, I trusted grief to guide me through the days, months,

years. Despite the insanity of what I was feeling, I knew I was sane and well adjusted, and so I felt free to follow the wild and agonizing ride. While the emotional aspects of grief and mourning occupied my thoughts, underneath it all, the process did its job: the gradual detaching from Jeff and learning to cope alone, and the even more gradual process of becoming a different person.

Grief changes each of us bereaved into a person who can survive the loss of our life mate. That doesn't mean we like our situation. We don't. It's not how we chose to live, but it's what we're left with.

“Every possession of the dead thrown away, every decision that would probably have been different if they had lived, takes us further away from them and changes us. At the heart of all of this is the simple unmovable truth: there is no choice in this, the change is inevitable and cannot be resisted however much we try. Even if we stay in the marital home and keep everything the deceased owned, we are still changed by what has happened. The better option is to accept the change, and try and take some kind of control over the person we are becoming.” (Robert, blog follower)

Embracing Life

I've always referenced Jeff's death as “the beginning,” as if giving voice to a subconscious belief that his dying was a new start for me rather than the end that it felt like at the time. And it was a beginning.

I am no longer a shattered, left-behind half of a couple. I've learned much these past years about how to survive when all seems hopeless, how to find sense in the senselessness, how to find peace within the sadness. I've learned to embrace

uncertainty because none of us ever truly knows what is going to happen to us. From one minute to the next, everything can change, so an acceptance of life's uncertainties gives me a built-in sense of security. Along the way, I've found courage, patience, compassion, and a strength I didn't know I had.

Whatever our life together meant, whatever our connection, this is my life now. Not his. Not ours. Mine. My being alive does not make his being dead any less significant, though oddly, his being dead does make my being alive more significant.

His death inspires my life. He faced the end so courageously, I can only face my life with as much courage. His death set us both free, he from pain, and me from being tied to an invalid. A small life, a life of not much, a life of not trying different things would dishonor that gift of freedom.

So I dreamed my new life into being. Hikes in the woods and along the ocean. Cross country road trips. A backpacking trip. Camping. I did all these things, too, and did them alone. I've taken dance classes and performed on stage, though such things had never even been a ghost of a thought before Jeff died. The call to adventure is not as strong as it was while in the throes of grief, but the habit of trying new things remains, a habit I developed while celebrating the gift of freedom.

Even though I no longer mourn, I still think of myself as in the grief process because in a very real sense, grief is a life-affirming and life-long process. Everything I am today, everything I do is because Jeff died. His death was truly a beginning for me, one I didn't want, but it was foisted on me, and I have chosen to embrace this new life of mine.

“I can do what I like with my life, become whoever I wish to be. I don't instinctively relish change or seek it, but given that events have driven a bulldozer through my life, I don't feel obliged to stick with

former traditions that have been torn up and burnt in front of me. I suppose the analogy is perhaps a tornado tearing a town to pieces, why should anyone feel the need to rebuild exactly what they had before? You do something new, improve on what was there before if possible.” (Robert, blog follower)

So, start afresh, building on an inner acknowledgement of the truth of your situation. You didn't choose to be the one left behind, but you can choose to make the most of it. You can choose to accept whatever happiness comes your way. You can choose to live a rich and meaningful life. So dream big! Take charge of this new life you have been given. Embrace a future that is still alive with possibilities!

Conclusions:

- Grief is an agent of change, turning us into the person who can survive our great loss.
- It is not our choice who lives and who dies, but we can choose to live despite their death.
- Dream big. Make the most of this new life you have been given.

About the Author



After the death of her life mate/soul mate in 2010, Pat Bertram used her blog—bertramsblog.com—to write about the experience of grief. Along the way she received and replied to thousands of comments and emails from readers who have also lost a loved one, and in the process came to the conclusion that much of the orthodoxy surrounding grief is simply wrong. In addition to *Grief: The Inside Story*, Pat has written [*Grief: The Great Yearning*](#), a memoir about her experiences of the first year of grief, and [*Unfinished*](#), a novel about a widow who discovers that her beloved husband had many secrets.

Grief: The Inside Story

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