

Grace in Grief: Hope After Loss

Study Guide

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Episode 1: Suddenly Gone

It's always hard to cope with a loss, but when it comes without much warning, it presents unique challenges. In this first episode of our series, "Suddenly Gone," families discuss the unexpected loss of loved ones -- parent, sibling, and child -- and experts offer suggestions on coping with the loss.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What has your experience been with grief? Have you experienced a sudden loss?
2. Who else was affected by the loss you are experiencing? Have they been grieving differently?
3. How have people accompanied you well during grief? What might be some ways that you can accompany others in their grief?
4. What are some of your fondest memories of your loved one? What would you have liked or needed to have said to your loved one, but didn't have a chance to?
5. Pick one of these quotes from the episode to discuss.
 - "It is a normal part of life, and anyone who is old enough to love is old enough to grieve."
 - "You can't expect people when they are dying to give you what you want."
 - "Each person had a different grieving experience, and that was hard."

Take-Home Activity:

"Now is the moment." Alexa Brandt shares this thought in the episode. Grief often helps us clarify what we really want to be about. What kind of person do I want to be? What kind of legacy do I want to leave? Take time before the next meeting to brainstorm what this phrase, "Now is the moment," means for you. What do you want to prioritize in your life? What are your dreams and hopes that you keep putting off? Make a list of 10 things that you have been putting off, and you want to do. Then choose to do one of these in your loved one's honor.

Consider journaling your responses, in addition to just sharing them orally.
Create a journal/three-ring binder for this purpose.



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Episode 2: Gone Before Their Time

Losing a child is one of the most difficult forms of grief. In "Gone Before Their Time," we hear from two couples who discuss their experience of losing a child, and how their families have been reshaped by this tragic and life-changing event.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Have you or someone else you know lost a child? Was the loss anticipated or sudden?
2. Remember the story of the nurse being there for Traci, and the story of the community outpouring over the Medford family. Who was helpful for you during this time of passing and grief? How was their support a ministry of presence or accompaniment for you?
3. What fond memories do you have of the child who died?
4. What ways can you keep a child's memory alive and a part of you?
5. Pick a quote and discuss:
 - "You don't get over it -- the grief is there all the time."
 - "I grieve the moments I'll never have with her."
 - "You always wish you had more time -- an extra minute."
 - "Life has changed; we can't go back."
 - "What does it mean to be strong? What if I wasn't strong?"
 - "He is watching over his mom and dad. This gives us a lot of comfort."



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Episode 2: Gone Before Their Time

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Take-Home Activity:

Spiritual Practice

This may be a time when turning to prayer or a spiritual practice can be a source of comfort for you. Are there prayers or faith rituals that have provided you with such comfort in the past?

Consider asking Mary to accompany you! Ask her to comfort you in her loss. Create a space in your home to remind you of Mary's comforting presence. Do you have a favorite image of Our Lady? Some favorite images are Our Lady Undoer of Knots and Our Lady of Guadalupe. Find a prayer card with these images and place it somewhere you will see often. Some people even have images of Our Lady as their phone background. Have you ever prayed the Rosary? Go to <https://www.facebook.com/familyrosary> to learn this simple meditative prayer. It takes about 20 minutes. You will accompany her as she ponders the life of her son Jesus, and she will accompany you as you walk through your time of grief.

Further Resources and Ideas:

- Trisomy Support Groups
- The Sacrament of the Sick (Anointing of the Sick) of the Catholic Church
- Care groups for parents in grief
- Catholic Miscarriage Support Group: <https://www.catholicmiscarriagesupport.com/>
- Create an event or foundation to support something important connected to your child.
- Compassionate Friends: <https://www.compassionatefriends.org/> (online & in-person support for parents & families who have lost a child)

For some people, they need to turn their grief for children into action that will protect other children. Is there something you might consider doing in this regard? For example, some families have established foundations in honor of their child; others have legislated for safety measures to protect other children and families.

Episode 3: Unresolved Grief

In this episode, we explore the theme of "Unresolved Grief." Emill shares the difficulties in navigating life while mourning the loss of both his twin brother and his mother. He shares the uncomfortable reality of living without reconciling with his brother and the pain of seeing his mother pass away, still brokenhearted over her son's death.

Alexa shares her own sibling struggle, and how mental illness created tension in her relationship with her brother, Kirk. Our experts weigh in and suggest that, when things become too difficult to bear, we should seek professional help during grief.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How have you experienced resentment and/or unresolved grief?
2. Did your loved one suffer from mental illness or substance abuse?
3. What hurt did you experience in your relationship with your loved one? What needs to heal in you? Who or what might be able to help with that healing process? Who or what can give you what your loved one couldn't?
4. Thinking about what your loved one brought into your life, what are the gifts (i.e. moments, statements, things, and actions) that you want to keep? What are the moments, statements, things, and actions that you no longer want to hold, and need to let go?
5. Choose a quote to discuss:
 - "Whenever your soul tells you you're ready to do the work, it's time."
 - "My last interaction with my brother hadn't been the most positive."
 - "It was so painful to see him suffering and to not be able to help."
 - "He had so much potential."
 - "It's OK to not want to talk about things, and to be in a funk."

Take-Home Activity:

Thank You Letter

Write a letter to your loved one. Include gratitude for some of the good things that they brought into your life. Reflect on the gifts that helped you grow. Identify the gifts that you will carry with you throughout your life. Rest in the gratitude for the goodness that your loved one has given you. And reflect on the gifts that were not helpful, and that you choose to release. Release can be done through a variety of actions including (1) prayer, (2) writing/drawing these ideas on paper and either burning them or dissolving them in water, and (3) speaking with a trusted friend or advisor who, in a spirit of love and non-judgment, will listen to what you need to let go.

Resource:

Center for Prolonged Grief: <https://prolongedgrief.columbia.edu/>



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Episode 4: Mourning Our Matriarch

Matriarchs and patriarchs are often the head of a household and the glue that keeps a family together. In this episode we explore how grief occurs when two families lose their matriarch. Megan shares stories and fond memories of her grandmother, who taught her everything she knows, and who always reminded her and her sister to “remember we are ladies.” Edgar laments over the death of his sister, who passed away from COVID during the pandemic. He shares the unfortunate reality of when someone is unable to travel to a funeral, but also the possibility of finding peace through prayer.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Did you lose someone who was the “glue” in your family or circle of friends?
2. What are three of the most important things you learned from her/him?
3. What traditions or legacies do you want to keep alive in your family?
4. If you could say something to her/him today, what would it be?
5. Choose a quote to discuss:
 - “Saying ‘I love you’ in our last conversation really helped.”
 - “She’s still with me.”
 - “She taught me how to ‘be me.’”
 - “I hope I carry on her legacy.”

Take-Home Activity:

Create a book, or photo album, or website filled with your family matriarch’s or patriarch’s wisdom. Or create a family cookbook with their favorite recipes. Ask family members of all ages to contribute ideas, and then share the finished product with everyone, so that you can all keep this wisdom in your family and share it with others.



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Episode 5: Celebrating a Life

Funeral planning can be a difficult task, especially following the death of a close loved one or family member. In this episode, our participants share their stories of celebrating the life of their loved ones. Bonnie talks about singing Ave Maria at her father's funeral; and Mike and Traci share about their son Jacob, and how his funeral was both challenging and cathartic. Our experts share their thoughts on funerals and suggest thinking about and planning them in advance, so that, when death happens, family members are given the space to grieve.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How do we create sacred space for ourselves and others to grieve the death of a loved one, and celebrate their life? Places of worship? Funeral homes? Our homes?
2. What were the most important or favorite parts of your loved one's celebration of life? What meant a lot to you?
3. What else might you have liked to do? Is there a way you can incorporate that into a future family gathering or celebration as a way to honor your loved one?
4. Did you notice that there was lots of laughter in this episode? Why do you think this is?
5. Whom do you need to talk with now about how they want to be celebrated when they die? How can you and your loved ones prepare for end-of-life, and for funerals?
6. Have you found yourself thinking more about Heaven?
7. Choose a quote to discuss:
 - "Eulogizing was the most cathartic part."
 - "Did my best singing for him."
 - Reminder about "the reality of Heaven – a chance to see them again."
 - "He is watching over Mom and Dad."
 - "Emotional reactions vary during grieving."

Take-Home Activity:

Planning. Have you thought about your funeral and your wishes? Ask loved ones about how each person wants to be cared for at the end of life, how they would like their life to be celebrated. Tools like "Five Wishes" and pre-planning guides on funeral home websites can be helpful and less threatening conversation starters (<https://www.fivewishes.org/>). Record your loved one's wishes in a journal.

Resource:

US Conference of Catholic Bishops: <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/bereavement-and-funerals>



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Episode 6: Community Support

Surrounding ourselves with a community of supporters can be critical to navigating grief after the loss of a loved one. Whether this comes in the form of family and friends, or through peers in a bereavement support group, having people there to share your story, and to collectively grieve with, is important. In this episode, we hear from our participants about how people in their lives helped them during their grief process, and our experts weigh in with their suggestions about how community is helpful. We also visit with the St. Monica Catholic Community Bereavement Ministry and see firsthand how a group of strangers can transform into dear friends through the collective sharing of grief.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Who has been a support to you? Who has surprised you with their love and support?
2. What might you be able to share with others who are on their grief journey? Does your place of worship have a bereavement support group or end-of-life ministry?
3. Who makes up your village? Who are your biggest supporters?
4. What was your experience when visiting a group? How can you invite others into this?
5. Choose a quote to discuss:
 - “Love over fear and community over isolation.”
 - “It was because of the community that we were able to make it through.”
 - “Grief group is totally necessary for any person.”
 - “The healing I have witnessed in these groups is just amazing.”
 - “Don’t go through by yourself.”

Take-Home Activity:

Finding hope. Research the grief groups at your local church and online. Consider joining a grief group, either in person or online. Find out about what community supports might be available in your church or local community. In addition, find a few friends who have also experienced the death of a loved one, and take some time just to share your stories with each other, and see what emerges.

Further Resources and Ideas:

- The New Day Journal by Mauryeen O'Brien
- Grief.com
- Association of Catholic Mental Health Ministers: <https://catholicmhm.org/>
- Soaring Spirits International: <https://soaringspirits.org/>
- Dr. Allan Wolfelt Center for Loss & Transition: <https://www.centerforloss.com>

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Episode 7: A Legacy of Hope

Carrying and sharing the legacy of a loved one who has died can be a way to keep their spirit and story alive. In this episode, we hear from Alexa Brandt, who talks about her brother Kirk's final act of love, through the donation of his organs to those in need of a donor, ultimately saving the lives of four strangers. She shares the amazing story of how her mother discovered a pre-written obituary in her brother's notebook, and how sharing his life has helped to bring a sense of peace to her and her family. Our experts share tips on other ways that we can carry on a legacy and bring hope to those in grief.

Questions for Discussion:

1. The most important way we can keep our loved ones' spirits alive is to tell stories about them and remember how they helped us become who we are. What is a favorite story about your loved one?
2. What are ways you can honor your loved one's legacy?
3. What was something your loved one loved, or what did they really enjoy doing? How can you include your loved one's memories into your holiday celebrations or special days?
4. How can you carry them along in your life? This is a great sign of grief moving along and re-integrating in your life.
5. Choose a quote to discuss:
 - "Honor them in a way to keep their spirit alive."
 - "When we have lost somebody whom we loved, we think about what was important to the person whom we loved: what did they embody, what was of great value to them?"
 - "That was so cathartic, to see those butterflies all flutter away."
 - "Living through your grief, how do we bring that person whom we loved into our hearts...and carry them in our hearts for the rest of our lives?"
 - "Doing something in honor and memory of the person, are somethings that can help with working through the process of grief."
 - "The theme that's most prominent ...is he was always of service...he made a difference."
 - "There's nothing wrong with laughter at these times or telling stories that fill your heart with joy. That's all a part of life. So, I think it is important that you have opportunity to share and remember in any way that you can."
 - "...our last task of grief...when we can figure out how to carry them...then we're moving on with our lives and they're staying alive with us."



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Episode 7: A Legacy of Hope

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Take-Home Activity:

If there was some activity or cause that your loved one was really passionate about, consider getting a group of family/friends together to support that activity, both to honor your loved one and keep their hope alive in the world.

Final Thoughts:

Now that you have watched this whole series, what have you learned about grief? How has taking the time to reflect on this difficult and important topic changed you? Please take time to journal, pray, or just ponder this.

Thank you for sharing your time with us.

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