



Journey of Grief for the Professional

Do professionals grieve? Yes, they do! Grief for the professional is different from that of the bereaved parents or family members, for they cannot feel the same pain, or mourn the same loss.

Worden (1982) refers to four tasks of mourning: to accept the reality of the loss; to experience the pain of grief; to adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing; and to withdraw emotional energy and reinvest it in another relationship.

For the professional, these same four tasks of mourning must be accomplished in order to live and continue to work effectively with a family's loss and grief.

Accepting the reality of the loss

Involvement by professionals in a sudden infant death is personally difficult for many of the same reasons that it is for parents.

- Desire to protect or save lives.
- Our orientation to "fixing" things. Infant death is the ultimate "unfixable" situation.
- Our sense of order and safety is shaken.
- We go home to families of our own, which often include infants and young children.
- Professionals ask, "What could I have done differently?"
- We become emotionally drained, feeling the need to be strong.
- Even while maintaining a professional stance, we repeatedly face our own death issues.

Experiencing the pain

An emotionally charged issue, such as sudden infant death, can give new meaning to the professional's experience with burnout. Working on a regular basis with death, especially infant death tends to run down our professional batteries rather than burn us out. With burnout, professionals may go back to their offices and have bursts of anger at coworkers. When we are "used up", coworkers (and even our own families) might prefer being "yelled at" rather than experience the emotional detachment and isolation that is often exhibited.

Adjusting to the environment

Professionals can make the necessary adjustment to the sudden infant death loss within their work environment by engaging in networking activities such as:

- Seeking out sudden infant death information, including visual aids and printed materials.
- Attending infant death conferences and workshops.
- Participating in case-conferences and/or de-briefing sessions with peers and supervisors.

Reinvest energy in another relationship

Take ownership of your own feelings. Evaluate and express the “stressors” being experienced.

- Seek out support at work. Supervisors need to provide a clear role of expectations and support. They need to assist professionals in setting limits.
- Take part in self-care activities such as talking with a trusted friend or coworker.

For the professional, being cognizant of these same four tasks of mourning for themselves must be accomplished in order to live and continue to work effectively with a family’s loss and grief.