

# What I learned grieving the loss of my dad

BY CHASE L. ANDERSEN ✉ [candersen@mnlcl.org](mailto:candersen@mnlcl.org)



CHASE ANDERSEN, Esq., is a case manager at Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers of Minnesota. He works with lawyers, law students, and judges on issues surrounding well-being, mental health, and substance use.

In the early morning of February 9, 2022, I stood next to my dad's bed in Mitchell, South Dakota, holding his hand tightly as he took his final breath. My father had battled Parkinson's disease for 25 years. The disease had taken a toll on him over the previous few years, and we all knew it was time. We had been planning for this day and knew it was coming. It didn't make his passing any easier.

For the next couple of months, I put most of my grief in an imaginary bottle and placed it on an imaginary shelf where I didn't have to look at it every day. I distracted myself with work, family, and the planning of his life celebration later that spring. I knew that my grief, sitting on that shelf waiting for me, wasn't something I could ignore for long, but it was what I thought I needed to do at that time.

That little bottle, filled to the brim with raw emotions, would occasionally spill out in unexpected ways. Sometimes it would leak feelings of sadness and confusion out of nowhere. Other times, for no apparent reason, it would tip over, resulting in my barking at those closest to me. This is not the type of person I am and it's definitely not the way I wanted to treat others. It became obvious this was all a function of my bottled-up grief and I knew it was time to let it go.

At my father's life celebration, I was finally able to fully open that bottle and flush out so many of the emotions that had been stewing on that shelf for months; I cried more than I ever have in my entire life.

## Grief and loss, generally

Common feelings of grief include sadness, disbelief, and fear. Grief is a natural response that most of us face throughout our lives. Whether it's the loss of a parent, a grandparent, or a friend, these times can be some of the most difficult in one's life, like it was for me.

We can experience grief for many reasons: the end of a relationship, the loss of a pet, or the loss of a job. It can even come from the loss of freedom or independence, financial security, our home, or our dreams. We can even experience grief for things that haven't occurred yet (known as "anticipatory grief").

The concept of distinct stages in dealing with grief and loss was first popularized by the renowned psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her

1969 book *On Death and Dying*. Those stages now are as follows:

- 1. Shock and denial.** We begin by struggling to accept the reality of the loss.
- 2. Pain and guilt.** This is a time of emptiness in one's life, causing pain and yearning that can be accompanied by a relief that your loved one is not suffering, which in turn can cause feelings of guilt.
- 3. Anger and bargaining.** The pain of the loss leads to feelings of frustration and helplessness. Anger can manifest itself in many ways, including irritability or resentment. Then, to regain control or find meaning in the face of loss, one may make promises to a higher power or try to negotiate with fate in hope of undoing the pain.
- 4. Depression.** In this stage, one may experience a deep sense of sadness and emptiness as they come to grips with the magnitude of the loss.
- 5. The upward turn.** One begins to adjust to life post-loss. People begin to see that they have survived the loss and that they have a future to live.
- 6. Reconstruction and working through.** In this stage, one may feel less overwhelmed by emotions and manifest a desire to begin to move forward by finding meaning and growth.
- 7. Acceptance and hope.** In this final phase, one begins to find a way to live with the reality of the loss and starts to rebuild and readjust their perspective and life.

These stages are not always linear, and one may experience them in different ways and in a different order. Additionally, not everyone goes through all the stages, and some may experience certain stages multiple times.

## Lawyers and loss

I am not an expert in grief and loss, but I can surely relate to others who have lost a loved one. I suspect that my experience is similar to how a lot of other lawyers face grief and loss: Bottle it up and put it on the shelf for later.

Several characteristics commonly found in lawyers and the practice of law can detrimentally affect one's ability to process the emotions that

## NEED SOMEONE TO TALK TO?

One great option is Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers (LCL), which provides free, confidential support and services to Minnesota lawyers, judges, law students, and their immediate family members on any issue that causes stress or distress.

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accompany grief and loss. To start, attorneys often detach themselves emotionally from their clients and their cases, especially when dealing with emotional clients and/or challenging and traumatic issues. Lawyers do this to focus on the factual details necessary to successfully advocate for their client. But when lawyers do this case after case, year after year, they can start to detach in their personal lives as well, making it challenging to express and process their own emotions, including grief.

Additionally, long work hours, competitiveness, and fear of seeming weak can also lead to lawyers prioritizing their professional obligations over their own well-being. Demanding clients and overwhelming caseloads may leave lawyers feeling as though they have little time for self-care. Competitiveness may add additional pressures and time constraints. In some cases, a lawyer may just try to “toughen up” in hopes of fighting through the negative feelings associated with grief and loss.

And to top it off, the rates of mental health and substance use issues among practicing lawyers are about double those of the general population. When faced with a loss, these issues are often exacerbated.

### **Prioritizing your own well-being**

When you're facing a loss, it is critical to prioritize your own well-being. Some may think this is being self-indulgent, especially when we as professional problem-solvers might have to help support those around us dealing with the same loss. However, it's essential that we not only recognize how that loss affects us, but also embrace and process those emotions. Allow yourself to feel and grieve. We are all human and this process is natural.

Additionally, remember that the grieving process takes time and energy. Acknowledge the pain, allow yourself time to heal, and don't impose unrealistic expectations on your own grieving journey. Give yourself patience and recognize and accept the range of emotions you may experience. Everyone grieves differently, at their own pace, and there is no “right” way to navigate the process.

The most important thing is to seek support from family, friends, and/or a mental health professional. Establishing and relying on connections through challenging times will not only help you through your own grieving journey, but it will allow you to pour out your bottle of grief at your own pace.

As for me, I do not know where I am on my own grieving journey, but I'm doing pretty well. I have relied heavily on my wife and family, my friends, my co-workers, and my therapist. On occasion, out of the blue, I will remember my dad's silly jokes or even that final day. But as they say, “We grieve because we love. How lucky we are to have experienced that love.” And I was so, so lucky to have my dad's love in my life. ▲