

Haven Herald



Multiple Losses by Sarah Raison

The death of one loved one is a lot to contend with. But what do you do when after you've lost one person, another loved one dies? Or multiple people at once? Or person after person as the years go by? Whether they come in quick succession or extend across a lifetime, multiple losses can wear us down, make us feel life is handing us more than we can take, and leave us spinning as we try to reckon with the impact of so much loss.

When people are faced with multiple losses that happen either simultaneously or in a short amount of time, they often try to use the same kinds of coping strategies they might for a single loss, but find they need these coping methods for longer and face more complications. The emotions along with practical matters that might need to take place with each death take a tremendous amount of energy. With so much going on at once, a person often does not have the time or stamina to grieve each loss in the way they might have if the deaths were spaced out. This can lead to delayed grief which can emerge later. Some people describe looking back and realizing they never really processed multiple losses individually, because they were dealing with so much tangled sadness all at once.

Other times, losses are more spaced out and the person grieving has more time to deal with each one individually. But loss after loss can begin to shake a person's confidence. The world around them can feel more uncertain, and the snowball effect of each new loss accumulates. Some people describe feeling angry, bitter, and unlucky (or even cursed or punished) when people close to them keep dying. This can have a cumulative effect on the griever's psyche and how they view the world.

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Letter from the Executive Director

Winter arrives and we begin the season that brings colder days and longer nights. There is a beauty to winter and a stillness that, perhaps, allows for moments of reflection and peace. Winter has its own unique personality as does every season, and it can often be a metaphor for darkness and grief. The truth is that grief's power is so much greater than any season.

During winter things slow down a bit at Haven and we take time to plan for future training, groups and other programs. This continues to be very important as we are still adjusting to our re-opening.

This edition of the newsletter focuses on the hardship of experiencing multiple losses. Any loss is a life changing experience that alters the view of the world as we know it, but when many losses occur, it can be overwhelming and confusing. Sorting through feelings and taking time to grieve each person is important but can also be very challenging. The thread of loss will run through our lifetime, but for some, that thread is notched with the pain of losing many loved ones.

Jill Bellacicco





What Worked for Me by Mae Claggett

I was born in 1930, the youngest of five sisters. When I was 16 months old, my mother died of spinal meningitis. She was just 34 years old. Then when I was four years old, my father died. It was said that he died of a broken heart—but the more scientific explanation is that he was run down and then got a bad case of pneumonia. My sisters and I were split up and sent to live with different relatives. My sister Hazel and I were raised by one of my mom's sisters and her husband. They had children, but their children were older and helped care for us, so really, I was spoiled. In those days, no one really talked to children about what had happened. I do remember my dad a little bit, and I knew he was my dad, but I was seven years old before I understood my mother had died. One day I asked Hazel why she and I had a different last name than my aunt and uncle and their children. Hazel explained that both our parents were dead—I really didn't understand until that moment. When I was fifteen, the uncle that had raised me died. That was another sad loss.

I grew up, married, and had twin daughters in 1965. They were born two months early and did not survive. One died the next day and one died a week later. I was very sick too—I had multiple infections. After the twins died I relied heavily on my faith to get me through. My husband was very quiet and had feelings of relief that I had not died also. He thought he was going to lose all three of us.

For another twenty years I did not have to face deeply personal loss again until my husband died of cancer in 1985. He was diagnosed in June and died in September, at the age of 69. He was so sick at the end that the one thing I took comfort in is that he was not suffering anymore. But losing him was so difficult. They say that after the worst thing has happened nothing else is quite as bad, and I have found that to be true.

After he died I remember thinking how it would be interesting to live to see the year 2000, and I wondered if I would live that long. Now it is nearly 23 years *past* that, and I am still alive and honestly pretty surprised. My life experience has taught me that people die at all different ages and for all different reasons so I never expected that I would get to live so long.

After my husband died I eventually had a boyfriend, who died in 1999. Then after some time I had another boyfriend, who died in 2021. He was 95 years old so sometimes I would wake up worrying, thinking maybe he had died. But the morning he actually died, I wasn't expecting it at all. That is how it is—you are never prepared for the actual moment when they are no longer here. I still actively cope with his death, because it is the most recent one. I am still in touch with his family and I am included with them so that is helpful. There are so few family members or friends left. I have outlived all of my sisters and most other cousins and friends.

There were times that I felt anger. You have moments of wondering why the people you love die, especially if it is untimely. But I have tried not to dwell on that and I know that loss and grief happen to everyone.

The things that have helped me cope with the loss in my life are my faith, and believing there is a plan for everything and everyone, although I do not believe I know what happens after we die. Maybe we are not supposed to know. I am also an introvert and able to be alone if I need to. Other things that have helped are the knowledge that death is a part of life and you might not cope very well with it but you do have to try and cope. Like the serenity prayer: accept what you cannot change and the wisdom to know what you cannot.

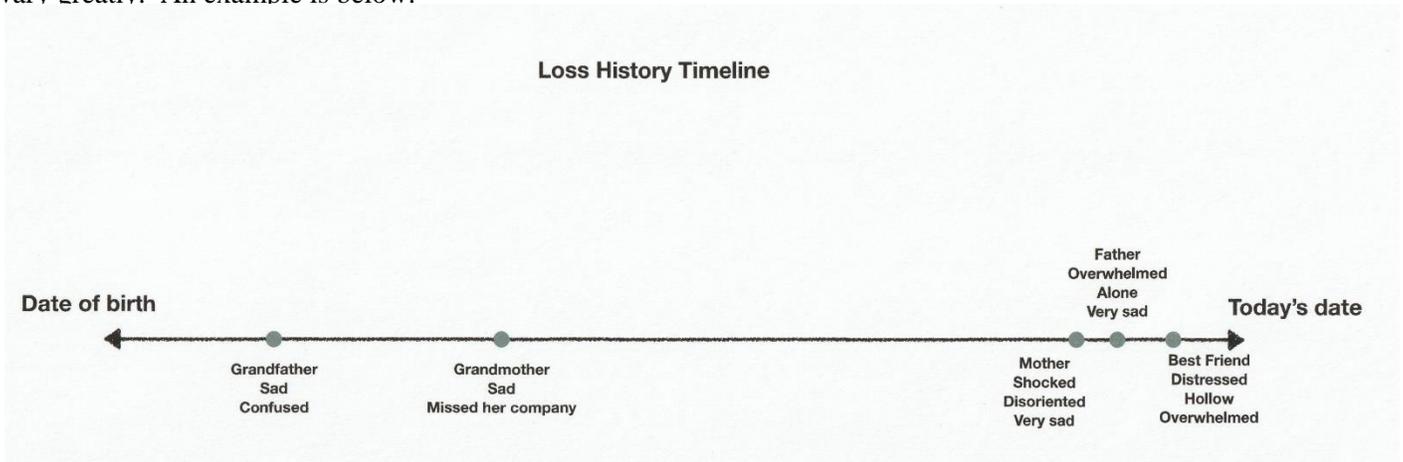
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For anyone suffering multiple losses, either all at once or more spread out, some important things to remember are:

- Be aware of the risk of grief overload**
 Just knowing that multiple losses pose a unique challenge and can put you at risk for a complicated grief process is half the battle. Multiple losses do put us at higher risk for prolonged, delayed, and complicated grief. It is especially important to seek help through professional counseling, support groups, religious support, and trusted friends and family when you are confronting more than one loss.
- Be aware of the increased possibility of avoidance or denial**
 With so much going on at once, our resources may be spread so thin we cannot face all that is truly happening, so we end up avoiding or denying. With multiple losses spread out over time, the griever may be exhausted by the thought of facing yet *another* death. But avoidance and denial will not solve anything in the end. Each loss must ultimately be grieved individually.
- Understand it is normal to have unique emotions that overwhelm, outrage, or feel deeply unfair**
 Many people who face multiple losses describe dark emotions that they might be afraid to say or feel. “I can’t believe this happened again!” “This is too much.” “I can’t do this again.” “Are we cursed?” “Is God punishing us?” “Why does everyone keep dying?” “Everyone in my life keeps dying but my (friends/spouse/neighbors) still have their (parents/spouse/child/friends)!”
- Grief cannot be rushed**
 With so much to process, grief can be exhausting, and it is tempting to think maybe we can group our grief work together, or because we have already faced so much loss, subsequent losses will be easier. The reality is that grief is not generic; it is specific to each person that we lose, our relationship with that person, and the circumstances of the loss. Attention must be spent on each loss and grief takes as long as it takes.

Loss History Timeline

A loss history timeline is a tool we can use to visualize the losses we have faced in our lives and some of the effects they have had. At the far left of the line, write your birth date. At the far right of the line, write today’s date. Then chart each loss you have experienced, including a couple of descriptive words that help note the impact it had on you—which can vary greatly. An example is below:



HOW HAVEN IS FUNDED

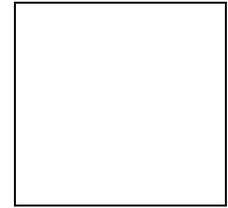
Haven is classified by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. It is funded mainly by donations from individuals in the community who wish to support our work and by those who donate in memory of a loved one. Donations are tax deductible. If you are interested in making a donation, please contact Haven at (703) 941-7000 or at havenofnova@verizon.net



Haven of Northern Virginia, Inc.

4606 Ravensworth Road

Annandale, Virginia 22003



Winter Schedule

Workshops

Several are planned for the winter and spring.
Please check our web site for dates and times.

4-week Widow/Widower/Partner Support Group
group is forming for January or February 2023
Saturdays from 1:30-3:00 pm.

Call or email Haven to register.

ZOOM Suicide Loss Support Group
1st and 3rd Saturdays of each month
11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Haven also offers individual support by phone and in person; please call to schedule an appointment. For immediate support without an appointment, a volunteer is available on a walk-in basis Monday through Friday between 10:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.

Contact Information

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Hours of Operation

Monday through Friday
9:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.
www.havenofnova.org

Messages may be left on our
voicemail after hours