

Secondary Loss

When we experience death, the grief associated with the loss itself is excruciating. There are the obvious things we “expect” (though it is hard to describe anything with grief as expected). In the immediate, the pain of the loss can be all-consuming. But in the weeks and months that follow there can be a sense that we are losing even more than just that person. The world turns upside down and suddenly it feels like everything is changing or disappearing.

So, what are secondary losses? As with so many things in grief, we can’t tell you what secondary losses you will experience. These losses are all unique to our own relationship with the person we have lost, personality, life situation, and other relationships. Some of the losses may include concrete things such as income, a home, or a business.

But when we lose a child, it’s the not-so-concrete losses that can hurt the most and be the most difficult to articulate. Often, we lose a sense of self – who am I outside of my child? And if the addiction lasted many years - who am I when I’m not consumed with worry and fear? We may lose our community or support system when people just don’t know what to say or conflict arises within the family. And certainly, we grieve the loss of our dreams for their future and the hope that they would find sustained recovery. The phrase, “Where there’s life, there’s hope” sums this up perfectly.

A loss of faith can encompass more than our spiritual or religious belief systems, although that is not uncommon. It can also mean a loss of faith in a fair, just world where children don’t precede their parents in death. This kind of “unmooring” from our world view can be disorienting and make the loss that much sharper when we feel we have nowhere safe to turn.

Over time there can be other losses that arise:

- *Loss of memories as they begin to fade.*
- *Loss associated with giving away the belongings of the person.*
- *The pain of watching others grieve the loss (children, parents)*
- *A loss at important milestones (weddings, anniversaries, births, graduations without that person).*
- *Learning difficult or unpleasant things about the person who died.*

Secondary losses can unfold over time. There may be some you are acutely aware of immediately following a loss, and some may arise as the weeks, months, and even years pass. Knowing these secondary losses may arise can help us self-assess when we are caught off guard by a new feeling of loss or pain. You are not “grieving wrong” and it doesn’t mean you’re “not over it.” These secondary losses are a normal part of grief, and you are entitled to grieve them, too.

Secondary Losses

