

**Coping with Loss: My Journey of Grief After Losing My Brother**

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### **Introduction**

Losing a loved one is a significant life event with profound emotional and practical consequences. In this paper, I will share my personal experience of dealing with the loss of my brother, who was and still is very important in my life. I will discuss how I dealt with the many losses that resulted from his death, how my family and cultural background influenced my coping process, and what I learned from that process.

I also share some important knowledge from my class Individual and Family Development - Grief and Loss, in my Master's in Family and Marriage Therapy. I hope that by sharing my experience, others going through a similar journey can find comfort and hope in knowing they are not alone.

### **Background**

#### **Changes in Life**

At the end of 1998, we (my husband and I) were scared about the violence in the city where we lived with our three daughters in Brazil. It was a significant change in our life when we moved to a small town and started a new life on a banana plantation farm. I would work as a pediatrician in the town's hospital, and my brother Marcio, who had experience with banana plantation, went to help us in the farm. He had lost a significant amount of money in a bad

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professional decision and needed to start again in his career. Initially, the idea was he and my husband work together in the banana production.

After two years, my husband decided to return to our city of origin. Understandably (he is a software engineer), he did not adapt to the new lifestyle, and I need to be able to take on the challenge of raising our three daughters, working in the hospital, and helping my brother with the farm.

It is a great time to bond with my brother and learn more about him. Both were going through a difficult time, so that we could support each other. Sometimes, difficult situations can bring people closer together, and it's essential to cherish those connections. It was a difficult but rewarding experience, and I needed to realize how to balance many responsibilities at that time, but I could count on my brother. So, things seemed less hard.

We lived in that town for eight years, and then I must return to the big city due to the girls' school. At that time, we did not have a banana plantation; once, a virus contaminated the trees, and we had to exterminate the whole plantation. So, my husband suggested selling the farm. However, my brother, who was alcohol addicted, started a severe depression process, and asked if he could live at the farm for a while. He loved being there, and with the idea of selling the place, his depression increased. So, we thought it would help him with his mental disorder if we kept the farm for some time. He lived there until 2017, when he passed away due to alcoholic cardiomyopathy.

### **He was Gone**

His death was an acute process. He visited my mom on Wednesday, July 01, 2017, and I asked him to go to the hospital due to a cough he had had for a long time. The town where he lived was small, and he did not trust the doctors there. He was reluctant, but my sister convinced him to go to urgent care. He never came back from there. The doctor said he had severe cardiomyopathy. He was admitted to an ICU the same day and passed away the following Friday morning, July 03, 2017, after he underwent a cardiac procedure.

We had a ceremony for him in our city of birth, and his body was put in our father's grave.

I returned to the farm the following week after his funeral to communicate with the employees about his absence and how things would work without him. That experience was challenging. I needed to reaffirm for myself his lack and that it was not temporally but forever. I packed his clothes, put them in a box, and took them to his wife's house in a town nearby. I kept some pictures, journals, and a notebook with me. I wanted to have some of his stuff, with his letter. I did not have a significance for that, but now I also can see it as part of my grief process.

I was alone that day, and the house was empty but full of memories, so lived. I stayed there until sunset when we used to sit together on the balcony to see the sun gone and to listen to the uproar of the birds going to sleep, the buzz of insects, and the croak of frogs, which made a singular melody. He was no longer there; I needed to learn and handle this complicated and painful reality.

### Coping with Loss

Losing my brother was a challenging and emotional experience, and I could experience a wide range of emotions, behaviors, and different feelings during this time. Having dreams with him, for example, was a way to feel more connected and relieved my yearning. Until today, I felt so happy when he appeared in my dreams, the best part is he is always alive.

After his death, I started doing things and could not stop. At that time, I could not see how doing things helped me lead with my pain. However, nowadays, after reading about grief, I can understand my restless hyperactivity, as part of my grief behavior. Worden 2018, pg 30, cites restless hyperactivity as a behavior "*frequently associated with normal grief.*"

A sequence of losses led me to the necessity of working with and handling them each day. After learning about loss and grief in my Family and Marriage Therapy course, I can now cite the following ones as the most remarkable and how I have been working on them. Before, they were only feelings, but now they have more meanings, and I can understand what is going on with me.

1. *Emotional loss.* My brother was important to me because we had been really close to each other for eight years. Even though he married three years after moving to live with us, we developed a deep bond. We shared many memories, problems, and lifestyles (we like to live in country places and appreciate nature). Losing him caused a deep emotional void in my life. It caused me feelings of sadness, grief, and loneliness. The emotional connection I shared with him will never be replaced. I understood that I needed time to

learn how to process my pain and grief, to cope with my sorrow, and to respect my feelings.

Honor his memories has been a way to deal with the emotional loss. With my family, we planned a memorial event to celebrate his life. This helped me feel connected to him and comforted me during this difficult time. My daughter built a garden at the farm, in his honor, with the help of the family. Talking to others about my feelings and sharing memories was also helpful. I reached out to the family and friends who knew him and reminisced together. I also worked in a non-judgmental space to process my emotions; once, as a psychiatrist, I sometimes asked myself why I could not help him with his addiction. I needed to accept my limitations and respect his decisions. Keeping his belongings also helps me to feel attached to him.

2. *Functional loss:* Losing him caused me a functional loss as well. He took care of the farm and knew everything about the process of taking care of it, so I lost the practical support he provided me. After he passed away, I needed to take on additional responsibilities that I did not use to handle on the farm. It was difficult because, as my husband had insisted on selling the property in the past, when my brother passed away, he was not willing to take care of this matter, so I had to assume responsibility for the issue.

3. *Financial loss:* Another type of loss was a financial loss. Due to my brother's absence from the farm, I had to pay someone to take care of the place, an expense I didn't incur with him helping me. He knew how to work the fields, so it was productive. With

the banana tree exterminated, he started to work with cattle and in the cultivation of corn and beans. Without him, the farm was never productive again.

4. *Lose a role as family:* Our loss also made us lose our roles as a family. We lose the role of being his sisters and brothers. Citing Polan & Taylor, 2019, pg 227: "*Death of an adult sibling creates a void and a break in the family chain.*" To lead with the role that exists now in our lives, we as a family have discussed the importance of grief and respect each grief process. To see grief as a natural and necessary process when someone experiences the loss of a loved one. We talk about the importance of allowing us to feel our emotions and process our grief in our own time and in our own way. No "right" way to grieve exists; everyone experiences it differently. My mom has been having a more difficult grief, but she is strong. For instance, once she asked me to take her to the farm. She said: "*I need to face my ghosts. I thought I would never return to the farm, but I now understand that I need to come back and feel free to cry and be sad because he was not there anymore*". I was worried about it, but we had a wonderful time there. She cried, but we also laughed and remembered the good things that had happened there with my brother and us. However, I had a sister who never felt able to return to the farm.

5. *Identity loss:* Losing him also caused me an inevitable identity loss. Once we have so many things in common, I must struggle to define myself as someone who no longer has his presence to reaffirm my thoughts about life, to support me. I need to find new sources of meaning and purpose: Losing created a sense of purposelessness or lack of direction related to some decision, for example, what to do with the farm, a space he revered.

Going back to the farm now seems to make no more sense. It was a complex decision to sell or not since we have families living and working there. I had to consider exploring new interests or activities that bring me a sense of purpose to keep the place for a while. It is, for me, a way to keep him present in my life. I need to be patient and understand that coping with identity loss is a challenging process that takes time. I needed to learn how to be patient with myself and allow myself to move through the grieving process at my own pace, remembering all the time that healing is a journey and it's okay to take things one day at a time.

Losing a loved one is a complex and painful experience, and it can shake our sense of identity to the core. In order to come to terms with our loss and move forward, we may need to reconstruct our sense of identity without our loved ones. This can involve examining our values, beliefs, and roles and finding new ways to define ourselves. Boss wrote, "*In relation to a lost loved one requires reconstruction in mind and emotions.*" (Boss, 2022, p. 78). This process of reconstruction is a necessary part of the grieving process, and it can help us find meaning and purpose in our lives even after experiencing such a profound loss.

6. *Physical absence:* His death left a physical absence in my life, a physical loss as he could no longer interact with me or engage in activities we used to enjoy together. Losing my brother was physically and emotionally exhausting. I saw that I should care for myself by getting enough rest, eating a healthy diet, and engaging in regular exercise or physical activity. These cares helped me manage stress and improve my overall sense

of well-being. I tried remembering my brother's memory by putting photos in my office and listening to his favorite music. It has been a way to cope with my physical loss.

7. *Social Loss*: Finally, losing him also resulted in a social loss. I miss the connection and interaction with his family members as his wife and stepdaughters. I also lost contact with his friends. Accepting my feelings has been a way to cope with the social loss of my brother. It has been challenging to bond with his family once his wife does not want to keep in contact with my family. In the same way, contacting his friends has been difficult, and we lost this part of his life.

### **The Family and Cultural Influence in my Grief and Cope Process**

The impact of one's family of origin and cultural background on their experience of grief has been widely studied and recognized. Different families and cultures have unique beliefs and practices that shape how individuals cope with losing a loved one (Worden, 2018). For instance, in some cultures, death is viewed as a natural part of life and is celebrated as a transition to the afterlife, while in others, death is seen as a tragic and unbearable event.

In my case, my family's Christian concept of life and death has profoundly impacted my approach to grief. Our belief in the afterlife and the hope of being reunited with my brother has provided me comfort and consolation during a difficult time. The belief that I will see my brother again has given me hope and optimism, making the pain of his absence more bearable. It can be seen as a coping mechanism that enables me to find meaning and purpose in the face of loss. It

can also provide a sense of closure and peace, knowing that my brother is in a better place, and I will one day be reunited.

My mother's strength and resilience made a difference at that time in my life and have been essential in shaping my experience of grief. She was always a strong and brave woman. After losing my father at age 35, she cared for us alone. Despite the immense responsibility of raising eight children, she never showed signs of desperation or hopelessness. Her persistent faith and belief have provided comfort and strength for our family. It also served as a guiding light during times of anger or loneliness, providing me with a sense of direction and purpose. Her faith in God and the belief that everything happens for a reason and about God's control over our lives have given me the strength to face the difficult questions and challenges that come with grief. My mother's teachings and faith have served as a bridge, helping me navigate emotions like anger, frustration, and hopelessness during the grieving process and come to a place of acceptance and understanding.

I believe it is worth noting that the impact of a parent's strength and resilience can have long-lasting effects on their children. My mother's ability to overcome such a significant loss and provide a sense of stability and comfort has undoubtedly left a lasting impression on us. Her persistent faith and belief in God's plan have shaped my approach to grief and my perspective on life in general.

In Brazil, grief is a deeply ingrained aspect of the culture, with a rich history of rituals and customs surrounding death and mourning. For instance, Brazilians often hold a wake for the deceased for at least 24 horas, where friends and family members come together to pray, share

stories, and offer condolences. This gathering provides a space for individuals to come together and share their grief, which is seen as a collective experience rather than an individual one. My brother's funeral was full of friends and kin—people we had not seen for ages appeared to be with us. Having them there was a consolation, knowing they cared about my brother and the family.

We have the Dia de Finados, or Day of the Dead in Brazil, a significant cultural influence on grief. This holiday, celebrated on November 2nd, is an opportunity for Brazilians to honor and remember their loved ones who have passed away. It is a day of remembrance, where families visit cemeteries, light candles, and offer prayers for their deceased loved ones. However, my family does not celebrate that day once we believe our dead are alive in Jesus' promises.

### **When I am Weak, I am Strong**

Reflecting on my morning process, I can identify strengths and deficits. On the one hand, I can acknowledge and confront difficult emotions, such as going to the farm alone and facing the reality of my brother's absence. This awareness shows my willingness to face complicated feelings head-on and take responsibility for my actions. Looking now, I can understand how resilient I was that day. I was feeling so weak that day, but I was strong.

On the other hand, I need to improve in accepting the realities of loss and the changes that the loss produces. I still struggle with the idea that my grandkids will never know my brother as the wonderful uncle that he was. However, I am working on finding healthy ways to cope with this feeling, for example creating new memories from him to my daughters and grandkids.

Despite my faith, I am weak, my brother's death challenged my belief in God. I had prayed intensely for his recovery those days, but he passed away. Why did God not hear me? He was young, such a good person. Some many bad people lived longer than him. Those were some of my thoughts and feelings. Ecclesiastes 7:15 express the same indignation in King Salomon's heart: *"In my useless life I have seen both of these: I have seen good people die in spite of their goodness and evil people live a long time in spite of their evil"* (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Ecclesiastes 7:15). I felt more normal when I read this verse, I am not the only one to think about justice when I lost my brother. I remember feeling so guilty for thinking about it, but now I can understand it as part of a natural process of grief.

I also have difficulty leading with feeling such guilt as if I could have done everything to help my brother with my medical knowledge. However, I eventually realized that it was his choice to continue drinking, not God's fault. While I understood it was a mental disorder (alcoholic addiction), it was his decision not to take treatment for his illness; he did not care for himself. This realization has helped me come to terms with his death and move forward with a deeper understanding of the complexities of grief.

I know this difficulty in accepting changes in life rote can lead to prolonged grief and emotional distress. After seven years of losing my brother, I understand now that I am in an accommodation phase when I know the importance of recognizing that life still goes on. (Walter et al., 2022). It was necessary to find new significance in life after losing him. This process involved re-evaluating my priorities, finding new sources of joy, and meaning, and focusing on the things that really matter in my life. It has been taking time and effort to adapt to a new way of living, but it was possible to find hope and purpose even in pain and loss.

As Boos 2022 highlights, it is essential to find a meaning for my loss. One thing that I started to do after his death was I studied more about alcoholic addiction to be able to work in a more effective and incisive way with patients, friends and kins with addiction problems. His death has a meaning for me now. I can help others with the same problem. I can feel strong again.

### **Learning with a Lost and Grief Process**

The experience of losing someone or something important to us can be a deeply painful and emotional process. While everyone's experience with loss and grief is unique, in my case, despite my sorrow, I have been learning a lot during this process.

An important key is the significance of expressing emotions: Grief can be a complicated mix of emotions, including sadness, anger, guilt, and even relief. It is essential to allow us to feel these emotions and express them in healthy ways, such as talking to a trusted friend or therapist, journaling, or engaging in creative activities. However, never hide these emotions. They need to be felt at the right time, which is healthy.

Another point is our self-care needs. Grief can be physically and emotionally exhausting, and taking care of us during this time is essential. This may include getting enough sleep, eating well, exercising, and engaging in activities that bring you joy. We tend to forget that we exist. I remember feeling so tired and trying to keep going without understanding why.

Looking for support is okay, it is not weakness, it is life. It is common to feel alone and isolated during the grieving process, and reaching out for support from friends, family, or a therapist is a way to cope with it. Support can help us feel less alone and provide practical help

and emotional comfort. I used to call my friends and ask them to listen to me talk about my brother. I just needed to talk about him and about my pain for a while, and it helped me a lot.

The process is different for everyone. Grief is a highly individual process, and there is no "right" way to grieve. I remember that my older sister did not cry. She arrived a few minutes before the end of the funeral, once she was working in a faraway place. She was so tired; she had traveled for 24 hours. She had only a few minutes with him. She looked in shock but could not cry. On the other hand, his father-in-law, an older man known for being rude, cried like a baby. He said he was losing a son.

Finally, I think about the possibility of growth and transformation. While grief is a painful experience, it can also be an opportunity for personal growth and transformation. Going through the grief process helps me better understand myself, my relationships, and my values, which leads me to a greater appreciation of life.

### **Grief Therapy's Importance**

In my Master's in Family and Marriage Therapy, I learned about Grief therapy, a kind of therapy which aims to address the specific conflicts and issues that prevent individuals from completing the tasks of mourning. This approach is typically used with individuals whose grief is chronic, delayed, excessive, or masked as physical symptoms (Worden, 2018).

This class has helped me understand what happened and how I coped with the emotional and psychological challenges that arose following the loss of my brother. Here are significant points that I learned in my course about this subject:

1. Grief is a complex and individual process: Everyone experiences grief differently, and there is no "right" or "wrong" way to grieve. Grief therapy recognizes this and provides a safe and supportive space for individuals to explore and express their emotions, thoughts, and feelings without judgment.
2. Grief therapy can help individuals navigate the different stages of grief: Grief can be a long and challenging journey, with different stages or phases of grief and many different feelings, behaviors, and emotions, such as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.
3. Grief therapy can help individuals develop coping strategies: Grief can be overwhelming, and it can be hard to cope with the intense emotions that arise.

One of the key benefits of grief therapy is that it can help individuals find a new sense of purpose and meaning in their life after losing a loved one. It can involve exploring new hobbies, pursuing new interests, or finding new ways to connect with others. Grief therapy can help individuals identify what is important to them and provide them with the tools and resources to rebuild their lives meaningfully (Worden, 2018).

### **Final Notes**

Losing a loved one is a hard experience, and coping with the various losses that result from it can be challenging. However, it is essential to allow ourselves to feel our emotions and process our grief in our own time and in our way. No "right" way to grieve exists; everyone experiences it differently.

The experience of grief can be transformative, and it can teach us important lessons about life, love, and loss. One of the most important lessons I learned on my grief journey is cherishing my connections with the people I love. Losing a loved one can make us acutely aware of how fleeting and precious life can be, and it can inspire us to make the most of the time we have with those still in our lives. I tried reaching out to old friends, spending more time with my family, or simply expressing appreciation for the people I care about. By recognizing the fragility and beauty of life and by treasuring our connections with others, we can find meaning and purpose during our grief and honor the memories of those we have lost in a way that honors their legacy.

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