



The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

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I am no longer afraid of becoming lost, because the journey back always reveals something new.

~ Billy Joel

There are a lot of models of grief out there—theories based on research and analogies based on experience—that try to explain what happens to us when someone we love dies. Maybe you've heard that grief has stages or tasks or phases, that grief is like learning to surf the waves or like a thousand-pound block of ice on your shoulders that melts gradually over time. Maybe you've seen the image of grief as a ball in a small box that frequently bangs into the sides, but over time, either the ball shrinks or the box expands, and those shocks of grief come less frequently.

Are these models accurate? Maybe. Are they helpful? Sometimes. The thing about models is that they are trying to impose structure on a universal human experience that is also highly individual. What makes sense to one grieving person might not work at all for another.

Especially in the early days of intense grief, it can be helpful to know that what we are experiencing is "normal" under the circumstances, that others have stood where we now stand and survived. It helps to know that the range of symptoms associated with grief includes not just our emotions but our physical, cognitive, social,

and spiritual experience as well. It's important to know that grief in children looks different at different ages and developmental stages. It can be a good reminder that grief is not just a short-term adjustment but a lifelong change that becomes part of our lives. It takes time, but also work and introspection and struggle, to find meaning in this new life that we didn't choose.

Models fall short when they begin to feel prescriptive, when we feel as though we aren't grieving correctly because our experience doesn't fit the model. And no model can fully explain the full breadth and depth of a complex human relationship. As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote in *The Little Prince*, "To me, you will be unique in all the world." Every relationship is its own universe.

You are part of a universal community of grieving people. And your grief is unique in all the world. We encourage you to read and listen to the stories and the knowledge of others who have studied and lived this experience. Take wisdom and comfort and guidance where you can. Remember: You are writing your own story as you live it each day. But you don't have to do it alone.

Grief Is...

By Tammy Jaster, Daughter of William Wimberly (2022-TX)

Grief is about the loss, not just the death of a loved one but the heavy loss that comes with a death. I have found grief comes in all forms. After the sudden loss of my father in March of 2022, I was overwhelmed with grief. STILL AM... It comes in waves or stages and is so unpredictable.

Someone told me it was like a jigsaw puzzle. When you lose one piece, the whole puzzle is affected. It will never look the same, it will never be whole or stay together, it will never be complete. Now the journey is to work through the jigsaw puzzle and figure life out with the missing piece.

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Jaster *continued from page 1*

I am a quiet individual. I internalize, think a lot. I wonder and try to figure things out. I am always at a struggle with myself and trying to make sense of the new norm.

I have learned that it is OK to not be OK. It is OK to have an off day. It is OK to take personal time. It is OK to step away and feel whatever I am feeling. It is OK to cry, laugh, or get angry. It is OK not to be OK.

It is helpful to reach out if you can, to surround yourself with people who understand. Attending the Memorial



Tammy Jaster

Weekend last year was overwhelming. It was heartwarming, emotional, healing, and a thousand other emotions.

Following that weekend up with a retreat was helpful to me. Even though the group might tell you I was quiet and didn't say very much, it was helpful to be there, to listen, to absorb, to work through some of that grief. Grief is a process, and it will never go away. The days may get a little easier, and knowing that it is OK to wake up and not be OK is helpful.

I hope you find some peace in knowing that it is OK to not be OK and it is OK to take care of you.

Grief Is...

By Steve VanderGriend, Father of Zachary VanderGriend (2008-MT)

Grief is like the waves of the ocean. The waves are constant and always there. Sometimes the waves are stronger and try to push you over and drag you back into the ocean. Other days the ocean is stormy, and the waves hit you harder than expected. Other times, the gentleness of the waves just washing against your feet gives a sense of God's goodness, sending you reminders that it is OK. You begin to anticipate the waves and lean into them,



Steve, Marci, and Andriana VanderGriend

so the ocean tides do not knock you over. In time, you begin to see the beauty of the ocean and the quiet, calm, and peacefulness of the waves coming ashore. The sounds of the waves give you moments to be at peace and pause to take in the constants that are now part of our lives and grief journey. Grief cannot be quantified into stages; the loss of our loved ones is now a chapter in our life book. It is with us all the time, just like the waves in the ocean.

Grief Is...

By Marlene Malzahn, Mother of Mitchell F. Lundgaard (2019-WI)

My son, Mitch, was not quite 37 years old when he died and was part of the Appleton Fire Department in Wisconsin.

Grief is waking up each morning and seeing through your mind's eye, the lifeless body of your son laying on a cold hospital table.



Marlene and Mitch

You know it's him. You recognize his face and his quirky nose. But you can't fathom how he got there. Grief is knowing you will wake up with the same picture in your mind each and every day of your life until you see him again in heaven. Seeing him again someday and seeing his family thrive help me cope and move forward.



Grief Is...

By Sandra Clinton, Wife of Madison "Maddy" Clinton (2018-OK)

Grief is like a game of Chutes and Ladders. Every day is a new turn on the board. Some days you spin a 1 and move ever so slowly on your journey. Other times your turn produces a large gain, and you are so excited. Then there are events that shoot you up the ladder, far along the grief journey. You feel good, happy even. You think you have gotten your emotions under control.

Meanwhile, a few turns later, you land on a chute.

Some trigger—

a significant day,

a song,

a person—

sends you sliding back to that place you thought you had already passed. Maybe it's a short slide, or you could feel like you're starting right back at the beginning. The good thing is, no matter where you land, you can start moving forward again on the next spin. As you follow the path set



Sandra and Maddy Clinton

before you, your emotions will continue to follow that pattern of ups and downs. Hopefully, the further you go, the more ups you will find.

Just like a game of Chutes and Ladders, sometimes it seems grief goes on forever. Unfortunately, grief doesn't have a finish line. It's a never-ending road that you navigate for the rest of your life. But, just as there are trips you take so many times you no longer need a map, the grief

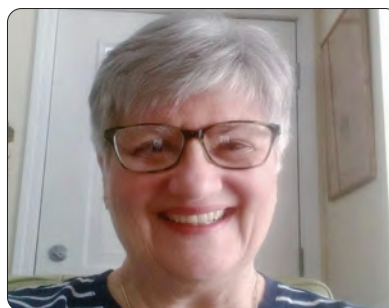
journey gets a little easier to traverse. You learn to avoid the potholes and how to get around the jams. You figure out who is the best person to ride shotgun to help you read the map. The longer you "play the game," the more experienced you become with the rules.

If you are in your own version of Grief Chutes and Ladders, I hope you remember that you can continue to move forward, no matter how many times you slide down. If you are an observer of someone else's grief, be a good sport by encouraging and supporting your person as they navigate their journey.

Grief Is...

By Sylvia Kratzke, Mother of Heather DePaolo-Johnny (2002-CA)

What is grief? Grief is forever. I know it's probably not what anyone wants to hear. The pain of grief is debilitating, and the thought that it will go on forever is too much to bear. However, the miracle of that hard journey through



Sylvia.Kratzke

grief is that we CAN find joy again. After all, the well of grief and the well of grace (love) are the same.

The journey transforms grief. Oh, it's still there, but love propels us forward because love (grace) is forever as well.

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Not everyone will understand your journey. That's okay. You're here to live your life, not to make everyone understand.

~ Banksy

Support and Connection for Fire Hero Families

Join our private Facebook group for Fire Hero Families.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/NFFFireHeroFamilyPrograms>

Find resources that support adults and children who are grieving.

<https://www.firehero.org/resources/family-resources>

Join one of our virtual support groups hosted via Zoom.

Facilitated Support Group

open to adult Fire Hero Family members, for those who are struggling with grief or do not have a strong support system; facilitated by a psychologist.

 Weekly, Tuesday, 8-9 PM (EST)

Register at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/88CKSYR>

Fire Hero Family Peer Support Group

open to adult Fire Hero Family members; meet in small groups to share experiences, encouragement, and ideas

 Weekly, Wednesday, 8-9:15 PM (EST)

Register at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/87W8ZFY>

Men Forging Ahead

open to adult men from the Fire Hero Family community; informal conversation and connection

 Monthly, 4th Saturday, 3-4:30 PM (EST)

Register at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/X3JMT93>

Monthly Remembrance Group

open to adult Fire Hero Family members; during the anniversary month of your firefighter's death, join others who are also remembering their firefighters; facilitated by a grief specialist

 Monthly, 2nd Sunday, 3-4 PM (EST)

Register at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/PQF7X39>

If you have questions about these groups, please e-mail Erin at ebrowning@firehero.org.



BJA
Bureau of Justice Assistance
U.S. Department of Justice

Toll-free: 1-888-744-6513

Enacted in 1976, the Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Programs are a unique partnership effort of the PSOB Office, Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), U.S. Department of Justice and local, state, and federal public safety agencies and national organizations, such as the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, to provide death, disability, and education benefits to those eligible for the Programs.

Write About Your Journey



We face many difficult decisions after a loved one dies. One of those is whether to stay in our current home or to relocate. If you have experience with this, we would love to hear from you. What did you decide about where to live? If you stayed, did you make changes to your home? If you moved, tell us about the experience. Have you found ways to bring your loved one's memory into your new space? What would you say to someone struggling to decide?

To share your story of grief, healing, and hope, please send it, along with a high-resolution photo, by April 1, 2024, to jwoodall@firehero.org.

If you don't use email, please submit your information to:

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation
Attn: Jenny Woodall
P.O. Drawer 498
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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