



Grief and Financial Services

Wendy Z. Cox, J.D., CTFA

Vice President

Director of Personal Trust, Fiduciary Officer

As we get older in life and in business, the losses of friends and family begin to add up. After 25 years serving clients in the estate planning and trust administration arena, I thought I had a good understanding of grief. That changed when my son's best friend died at age 14. My husband and I were with his parents that night, and I quickly realized how little I knew about grief — my own, and how to support my son and my friends. With every advancing year, the passing of my clients and friends (most often the two are not mutually exclusive) has become a more common occurrence. As a society we talk about grief as something to work through or get over, and the sooner the better. Our personal trust team here at Greenleaf Trust knew we wanted to do a better job supporting each other and our clients, and so began our journey of learning about grief.

It may seem odd for a financial services organization to educate its professional staff about grief. Unfortunately, many of us have had the following experience when dealing with other service providers (e.g. the cable company):

CALLER: "I'm calling to close/transfer this account because the account holder is deceased."

REPRESENTATIVE: "I see, well I'm going to need to speak with the account holder. I'm not authorized to speak with you."

CALLER: "The account holder is deceased."

REPRESENTATIVE: "I understand, but I'm going to need to speak to the account holder."

Nothing could be more hurtful for clients and frustrating for a team.

Our quest for understanding started with a Greenleaf

training session moderated by our friend, Caroline Meyers, of Hospice Care of Southwest Michigan. She asked us, "Why is it so hard to talk about grief?" Some of our answers were:

"It's emotional and it's inappropriate to talk about "feelings" at work."

"I just don't know what to do."

"What if I say something stupid?"

Ms. Meyers helped us identify several lessons from our discussion, including that before we can provide support to others, we have to be willing to acknowledge our own grief and the losses in our lives, and that our reactions are shaped by our experiences. We were reminded that each person grieves in his or her own way, and that we can't impose our feelings about grief on others. We recognized the need to listen and follow the lead of the person who is grieving. We learned that it is important to say the name of the person who

has died—their loved ones want to remember them. Finally, we acknowledged it is appropriate to accept that we are uncomfortable and don't know what to say, and sometimes all that is required is to simply be present.

Our team also read Megan Devine's excellent book *It's OK That You're Not OK*. Drawing on her training in psychology when she faced the sudden loss of her partner, she provides insight into the feelings and actions of those who are experiencing grief. She describes in detail how grief affects every aspect of life, both physical and mental. Ms. Devine states that grief is not something to recover from or move on from because it cannot be fixed, but rather something to support the natural process of and integrate into our lives. As I once heard a pastor say: "You don't get over it, you learn how to carry it in a place that allows you to go on."

"... we wanted to do a better job supporting each other and our clients, and so began our journey of learning about grief."

Ms. Devine also has excellent advice for those providing support. In her appendix entitled “How to Help a Grieving Friend,” she provides some ground rules for those looking to care for the grieving. These include: 1) grief belongs to the griever, 2) stay present and state the truth, 3) do not try to fix the unfixable, 4) be willing to witness searing, unbearable pain, 5) this is not about you, and 6) love.

When those around you are suffering, it is hard not to want to fix it for them. It is difficult to watch people you love and care about be in pain. I have learned that good listening and honesty are what our friends need from us.

Sharing memories of the person is healing both for us and our friends. I have also learned to accept that there will always be moments that I am sad, but that it is OK to simply live in those moments as well. In the end, all we can do is love each other.

At Greenleaf Trust, we will continue our journey to provide better support for those who are grieving, and we will seek to walk alongside our clients, our friends and our family. If we can be of any assistance to you, now or in the future, please feel free to contact any member of your client centric team. ☒

