

# "AM I PARANOID, OR ARE PEOPLE AVOIDING ME?"

by Russell P. Friedman & John W. James

Even though griever seem to be walking through quicksand, they usually have a heightened awareness of what is going on around them. In particular, they are very aware of being judged, evaluated, or criticized. Unhelpful comments almost always encourage the griever to feel some way other than the way they feel. For example, don't feel sad, you should feel grateful that you had him/her for so long.

In addition to the constant fight against killer clichés, the griever starts to experience being avoided by people they know. Grievers notice that friends who know about the loss will not approach them or will talk to them and never mention the loss.

The truth is that people often do avoid grievers. Since our society has so miseducated us about loss, we are often led to believe that the griever wants and needs to be alone. Although grievers sometimes want to be alone, more often they want to be treated normally. Because we were never properly taught how to talk about the conflicting feelings caused by loss, we are often afraid to talk to our friends when they have experienced a loss. Therefore, our own fear will cause us to avoid grievers or to avoid the subject of their loss.

Fear is one of the most common responses to loss. For example, when

a spouse dies: "How can I go on without them?" Or, after a divorce: "Where will I find another mate as wonderful, as beautiful?" While fear is often the emotional response to loss, in our society, ISOLATION is frequently the behavioral reaction to the fear.

Look at the combination outlined above. People avoid grievers because they are misinformed and afraid. Grievers avoid others because they are afraid and then isolated. Is anybody talking to anyone else, and if so, are they talking about anything important to the griever?

As the result of tens of thousands of direct interactions with grieving people, we can tell you that what grievers most want and need to do is to talk about "what happened" and talk about their relationship with the person who died or to whom they were married. That does not mean that every griever will want to have a detailed conversation with everyone they meet. Nor does it mean that you always have to make yourself available to someone who may need more time than you have.

What we are suggesting is that instead of avoiding the subject of the loss that you at least acknowledge it. A simple

comment like, "I was sorry to hear about your loss," can be very helpful to a griever who may be questioning their own sanity because no one is even mentioning their loss.

For information about programs and services, write to: The Grief Recovery Institute, P.O. Box 461659, Los Angeles, CA 90046-1659 or call (323) 650-1234 or fax (323) 656-9248. Russell P. Friedman and John W. James are co-authors of "The Grief Recovery Handbook — The Action Program for Moving Beyond Death, Divorce, and Other Losses" (HarperPerennial, 1998). [www.grief-recovery.com](http://www.grief-recovery.com).

*"I will love the light  
for it shows me the way,  
yet I will endure the darkness  
for it shows me the stars."*

Og Mandino, *The Greatest Salesman in the World*,  
Contributed by Tara Waters — North Carolina

