Helping the Bereaved
College Student
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Helping the Bereaved
College Student

David E. Balk, PhD
In Loving Memory of

Cleburn Brown and Mary P. Brown
1914–1987       1918–2010

Arnold C. Balk, MD, and Mildred V. Balk
1911–1981       1914–2010

Dedicated to My Wife, Mary Ann Balk
My Daughter, Janet Renee Balk
And My Sisters,
Elaine A. Daugherty and Jeanne M. Boland
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Preface

This book encapsulates a good bit of my professional life: the reading and thinking and teaching I have done as an adult and my conversations with mentors, colleagues, and my wife and daughter. The book represents my efforts to construct a coherent whole of the various threads of my education and professional experiences: philosophy, theology, counseling psychology, program evaluation, thanatology, community mental health, and life in a university.

My appreciation for some contemporary scholars and some mid-20th century intellectuals will be evident. One figure from earlier times, Alexander Leighton, particularly has remained salient for me. I wish more persons remembered and used his ideas about human beings’ responses to distress.

The genesis for this book has both a distant and an immediate source. The distant source is twofold: (a) my doctoral work at the University of Illinois, culminating in a dissertation on adolescent bereavement following sibling death; (b) an offer from Joan McNeil, a department colleague at Kansas State University, to survey students in her large undergraduate class about their experiences with death and bereavement. The dissertation allowed me to make my start in thanatology and become known in those early days to other scholars interested in human grieving (for instance, Dennis Klass, Stephen Fleming, and Nancy Hogan). The survey of college students catapulted me into doing research, both descriptive and experimental, about college student bereavement. I had not realized the prevalence of bereavement in the lives of college students. It is correct to say the students at Kansas State University introduced me to the topic that became the research focus of my career as a professor.

The immediate source of my writing the book is a question Jack Jordan asked me at a November 2009 meeting of the Family Bereavement Program at Arizona State University. During a break in the proceedings, Jack asked me, “Why don’t you write a book on college student
bereavement?” The prospect virtually floored me. It seemed so obvious, and it had never occurred to me. I thought for a second and then said something to the effect, “Yes, I can do that.” I thought it would take me four months. It took a bit longer.

At first I thought the book was going to be written primarily for college students. As I began writing chapters and then worked on a prospectus for Springer Publishing Company, it was obvious I was writing for professionals who are in positions to help bereaved students. These persons are college counselors, student services personnel, and campus ministers, for instance. Sheri Sussman, Executive Editor at Springer Publishing Company who has worked with Charles Corr and me on two books we edited, helped me think through the focus for the book. She showed me that my original title, The Bereaved College Student, did not quite capture the book I wanted to write.

While I want campus professionals to read this book, I hope the book meets a need expressed by college students. Many students have told me they looked in vain for a book on college student bereavement. I hope that bereaved college students read this book and find it speaks to them.

Illene Noppe sent me an e-mail after looking at the prospectus and suggested I include a letter to the grief-stricken student. Thus, I wrote “A Letter to Bereaved College Students.” Jack Jordan wrote me and suggested I include material on bereavement and the family. Thus, I wrote in Chapter 7 the section titled “Family Dynamics and College Student Bereavement.” Thanks to the creative people in Brooklyn College’s Creative Services Office for drawing Figure 7.1.

Thanks are due to individuals who generously read portions of the manuscript and gave me valuable feedback. These persons are Laura Rabin, Tamina Toray, Robin Paletti, Brook McClintic, Kathleen Axen, and Kenneth Axen. Jeffrey Berman did yeoman’s work and read the entire manuscript in a very short turnaround time and gave me feedback on the work as a whole and on every chapter.

The first person I approached when asking for feedback is my best friend, Mary Ann Balk, who also is my wife. She looked long and hard at some of the chapters. She helped me see phrasing that needed to be reframed, and posed difficult questions to ponder regarding my assumptions.

I wish my mother had lived to see this book reach the light of day. She and I talked about the book during the early months of 2010, and I wrote to her more than once about the progress I was making. She
hoped the book would do well. She also encouraged me to write a novel that would sell like hotcakes. I intend to assume the pseudonym Charles Dickens. Knowing my mother and our love for one another, I believe she would have been proud of me for this book. I wish she were still here. There are lots of things I want to share with her, and I find myself wanting to share with her often.

_David E. Balk, PhD_
Brooklyn, NY
I

Prelude to a Discussion of Helping
the Bereaved College Student

This part of the book begins with the overall reality of bereavement, a condition that is endemic to being human and that a significant percentage of college students experiences. Few persons recognize that college student bereavement presents a matter of habitual concern on a campus. After the introductory chapter, I focus on contextual matters: the complex growth and development of students over the course of their undergraduate studies; frameworks that offer descriptions and explanations of human responses to the death of someone loved; and the varying impacts that causes of death have on human bereavement. Once these chapters are completed, readers will have a foundation for reading about college students who are bereaved.
Life isn’t fair. Some persons learn this lesson early, some as early as childhood. Others lead blessed lives, protected from encounters with nasty and emotionally wrenching events for most of their lives. If they did not know before, college students who are grieving the death of a family member or friend have learned that bad things do happen to good people, that at times life is radically unfair.

The death of Nate’s mother from brain cancer, the death of Helen’s sister in a car accident, the death of Shakera’s uncle from a robbery gone very bad taught each person that life is not fair. They learned that irreparable loss doesn’t wait until you are prepared to handle it. It just happens and says, “Deal with me.”

Many college students faced with the death of someone they care for are thrown into a maelstrom of emotional and cognitive confusion that challenges core assumptions on what life is about and what it means to live in a moral world. Perhaps the issue has nothing to do with whether life is fair. Perhaps the universe in which we live is simply there, and things happen with no regard for the effects on our lives. Albert Camus, the French essayist who won the Nobel Prize for Literature, wrote that he assumed the universe is neither benign nor malicious, but simply is, and the human struggle is to find meaning in the face of absurdity.

Persons who have assumed that the world is fair have a very hard time with the meaning and purpose of existence when the life of someone they care for is snuffed out. Clearly one of the effects of bereavement is a challenge to the student’s assumptive world,¹ a challenge profoundly impacting the formative developmental issues going on in the life of a traditional-aged college student (that is, someone between the ages of 18 and 23).
A researcher in the state of New York uncovered that loss is one of the experiences characteristic of many college students. The types of losses varied, covering such experiences as the breakup of a friendship, the loss of a lifelong dream, the loss of valued possessions, and loss of self-respect. More students mentioned the death of a loved one than any other loss (mentioned by 28.5% of the respondents); the end of a love relationship ranked second (mentioned by 24.3%).

Most persons do not realize the significant proportion of college students who are grappling with bereavement over the death of someone they care for. Numerous surveys on campuses in the United States as well as in Europe and in Australia have reported continually that between 22% and 30% of college students are in the first 12 months of grieving the death of a family member or friend. Conversations with deans of student life and with university counselors have reinforced this finding. In the early 1990s, the initial reaction to this prevalence finding was disbelief. The finding was rejected as a fluke. When repeated surveys produced the same results not only on one campus but on several, people began to take notice. Jon Wefald, the President of Kansas State University, was the first administrator I knew who accurately estimated that the prevalence rate is around 25%. He said he knew it because he had been involved in university issues too long not to know.

It is not simply that many administrators and faculty are unaware of the prevalence of college student bereavement. The bereaved college students themselves are not aware of how many other persons on campus are dealing with grief. One reason for this lack of student awareness must be the discomfort others feel when a person mentions his or her grief, so students keep the story to themselves. What a power for change is lying dormant on college campuses. What if bereaved students knew of each others’ existence and decided to do something proactive?

Some programs have emerged here and there as bereaved students decided they would not continue to endure alone and silently. While a person’s coping with bereavement ultimately centers on the individual, as one college student grieving her father’s death told me, “Why do I have to do this alone?”

It is clear that college students who are not bereaved have some intellectual grasp of the factors facing college students who are grieving. It is also clear that the great majority of persons, whether developing adolescents or mature adults, become very uncomfortable when in the presence of someone who is grieving and either figuratively or literally leave the room as quickly as possible. One strategy is simply to change the subject
or ignore what the other person has said, but only after a truly noticeable
and awkward silence.

Who among us has had the emotionally disjointed experience of
sharing something very personal with another person only to have that
person change the subject? Bereaved college students learn early that
others do not want to hear about their loss, and if they don’t curb such
sharing they discover they will lose their friends. Outsiders to grief have
no patience for how long bereavement lasts nor do they have courage in
the face of the intensity of someone’s grief. Consider this story told me by
a student I will name Sarah.

Sarah was in the middle of her junior year when her younger brother
was killed in a car accident. It was now 10 months later, and Sarah had
just landed a job at a popular bar near the campus. It was her first day at
the job, and she was helping set up for the influx of customers around
5 PM.

She was working with two male college students she had met at her
job. They were getting to know one another as they set up the place.
“What are you studying?” “Do you live in the dorms or off campus?”
“Where are you from?” “Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

When asked that last question, Sarah said “I had a younger brother
Jimmy. He died in a car wreck about 10 months ago.” And the two
young men simply left the room.

What we know is that few persons who have dealt with bereavement
fear being around someone who is grieving; in fact, I have not met one
in my research with bereaved high school and college students. We also
know that undergraduates have some knowledge of how bereavement
affects people, such as the emotional and interpersonal impact, the dura-
tion of grief, and efforts to cope with bereavement.

Why would bright college students with some awareness of the
demands placed on grieving peers avoid talking with them? Three expla-
nations come to mind.

1. They don’t see they have any responsibility to respond. They recog-
nize the other person is in pain, but that does not mean they should
interact with that person. Interaction leads to commitment, and those
entanglements are to be avoided. An analogy is offered by the com-
mon avoidance of many persons when faced with homeless individu-
als seeking spare change. Thus, one answer for lack of responsiveness
to college students who are grieving is “I have no responsibility here,
and I do not want to get involved.”
2. Another explanation is that the bereaved individual’s intense pain overwhelms some persons, and they become confused and disorganized. They would like to respond, but in effect they become socially paralyzed, unable to respond.

3. A third explanation is that some persons are aware of the individual’s grief, but they don’t know how to share their awareness. They don’t understand how to share in words what they know about the person’s grief. They may say something they consider inept, such as, “I know how you feel.”

A matter of concern for me is that there are persons who feel a mission to help persons who are bereaved without understanding the intensity and duration of grief or not accepting that approaches to grieving differ. They know very little about the person’s story, but they intend to fix the problem; they want to eliminate the other person’s pain. They, in short, want to be this person’s friend in the worst way. Actually, the compassion that often motivates these well-intentioned healers is a resource worth cultivating. A start in such an effort will be educating about the prevalence of college student bereavement, about the impact bereavement has on college students, and about the various models that have emerged to explain the process of grieving.

Not all is bleak. On every campus, there are undergraduates with social and emotional maturity. These individuals will respond positively to learning how to interact beneficially with grieving peers. An education program to train these persons is feasible and well within the resources of a college or university.

Finally, there is the 22–30% of the student body in the first year of bereavement. Some will welcome the opportunities offered by support groups. These groups can be run by licensed counselors, by interested faculty, by trained nonbereaved students, or by bereaved students themselves. Such outreach to bereaved students provides one example of how a university can offer something of value to students whose grief endangers their continued presence and success on campus.

This book is about the phenomenon of college student bereavement over the death of a family member or friend. In the following chapters, I look at what we know about bereavement, what we know about college students, what we know about bereavement in the lives of college students, what bereaved college students need, what colleges can do, and the place of self-disclosure when bereaved. Other topics include what recovery from bereavement means and the interplay between bereavement and spirituality.
All other books and journal articles I have written are filled with textual citations to sources. This book is different. The only citations in any chapters are for the few direct quotes I have used. At the end of each chapter you will find references pertinent to the information I have presented.

NOTES

1. Simply put, a person’s assumptive world encompasses what the person takes for granted about reality. In Chapter 12, I discuss the place of assumptive worlds for coping with bereavement.
2. Kathleen Axen, Professor of Health and Nutrition Sciences at Brooklyn College and a colleague in my academic department, mentioned she knows women grieving the death of a child who avoid being with other women who are grieving the same kind of loss.

FURTHER READING
