

## *Grieving the Difficult Relationship*

Most grief books help you mourn the loss of a loved one, how to cope with yearning, how to adapt to the emptiness following the death of someone so significant in your life that the mere thought of living without them feels incredibly overwhelming and incapacitating. But, where are the resources for those who had a conflicted relationship? Where is the book on “Things I *Really* Wanted to Say, But Couldn’t, During the Eulogy”? There are very few, if any.

Not every relationship is that smooth or free of conflict. Many people have mixed feelings about the person that they lost. Many children have been repeatedly disappointed by their parents or caregivers in more ways than they can count.

It is human to feel ambivalent. The people that we lose often had very human problems—addictions, incarceration, gambling, infidelity. These problems are real and are prevalent, yet the unwritten rule of grief is “You don’t speak ill of the dead.”

However, if you can’t speak about it, where does it go? The body remembers everything. Consequently, any unfinished anger or unresolved issues remain with the living, which often impede the natural healing. Excessive amounts of time and energy are spent trying to redo conversations once had, create the statements that were never voiced, or imagine reactions never received. These are heavy bricks to carry for endless days, months, or even years.

Adults have extreme difficulty with guilt for even having the “ambivalent” feelings. Children have an even tougher time with them as it is confusing to have two directly opposing feelings towards a person that was significant in their lives.

None of us do very well with incongruence. So our inclination is to swallow it, hide it away, and hope that it will one day disappear on its own.

Allow yourself the opportunity to name and label these differing emotions. Take inventory of the entire relationship. Help children have a chance to talk. Ask what they miss about the person; also ask what they don’t miss. Permission to have these mixed feelings is crucial. There are no perfect relationships.



Unfortunately, conflicted relationships can often leave much private pain in their wake following a death. It can be more challenging to grieve, since there is little room/sanctioning to discuss the not-so-pleasant memories of the time you had with your family member.

Invite the feelings about conflicted emotions, invite discussions with others about them. For it is the unsaid stories that do the most damage. It truly is okay to love someone, but still be angry at them. It is okay to love someone, but not like (or even hate) their choices or decisions. You are not wrong to feel conflicted.