Psychology of loss


By Perpetual Private Insights
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Losing a loved one is never easy. The shock and grief that follow news of a death, whether it’s expected or comes out of the blue, can propel us into an emotional tailspin.

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Other responsibilities, tasks and information often arise at this time, such as increased communication and decision making, estate administration and sometimes even news of an inheritance, that also need to be processed and dealt with, while we’re also coping with grief.

What happens to our minds and bodies when we learn of the death of someone dear to us? How can we best manage the additional load that can occur after a loved one’s passing – and how can that loved one minimise the load they leave? And when it comes to managing the estate, where can they – both will makers and beneficiaries – turn to for help?

Some things, you have to do yourself, others can be the realm of trained professionals whose job it is to make your life easier at a time when it’s particularly difficult.

The emotional rollercoaster of grief

Grieving can be an unpredictable business. One minute you’re overcome with sadness and feel you may never be happy again, the next you’re able to enjoy the feeling of the sun on your face and life beyond loss seems bearable.

“What we don’t always understand is grieving is not necessarily a sustained feeling 24/7,” says Professor Amanda Gordon, a clinical psychologist and the founder of Armchair Psychology in Edgecliff, Sydney.

“You can feel sad and then go about your business and then those overwhelming feelings can return and hit you later in the day. You deal with them and get back to whatever you’re doing… and then maybe another emotion will hit you,” Professor Gordon says. “For most people, grieving is a roller coaster which diminishes in frequency as time passes.”

One thing is for certain, though – when we're grieving, our brains are physiologically unable to operate as usual.

"When you first have a loss, the immediate response tends to be what we call shock – a psychological shock. It's as though you can only think of one thing at a time. When we're grieving and in shock, our brains literally don't work the way they normally do."

How to manage the emotional load

The shock induced 'paralysis' that comes with the first throes of grief is one of the reasons why it can be so hard to receive other life-altering news at this time, such as the contents and intent of the loved one's will.

Tim Bestelink of Perpetual Private, one of Australia's largest wealth managers that has been helping Australians with the administration of taxation, property and investments for complex estates since 1886, says he's learned never to expect people to be happy at the news of an inheritance. The Senior Trust Manager has been helping people to transfer assets for 20 years and says it's just not that simple.

"Wealth is most often transferred within families, and many beneficiaries don't learn about what's in the will and how it's been allocated until after the will maker has died. It's often my job to tell them, and to help them navigate that experience," says Bestelink. "I've seen people respond with happiness, anger and guilt. I've seen people worry; I've seen people get into a complete rage."

"The challenge is, news like this can bring about very big emotions at a time when a person is already experiencing very big emotions," says Professor Gordon, suggesting just working on one thing at a time, asking for and accepting offers of help, and making time for not doing anything at all.

Navigating relationships and news of an inheritance

Superannuation, cash in the bank, proceeds from life insurance, investment properties, businesses, private companies, family trusts, and the family home are often assets which need to be dealt with following death. There are also often items of personal significance.



Source: Getty Images

Bestelink says that the family home is often an estate's biggest asset. It's also one of the most common sources of friction – sometimes even outright conflict – between beneficiaries.

"The family home usually resonates for beneficiaries, as it's full of memories. Most often, if it's not being passed to a living partner or spouse then it's auctioned, and the proceeds divided amongst the beneficiaries. But sometimes, one beneficiary will want to buy the others out."

Small household effects of sentimental significance can also cause distress and friction, particularly if they're overlooked in a will. Perpetual Private helps people navigate the estate administration experience as well long-term implications of receiving an inheritance such as managing taxation.

Bestelink says his role often extends to that of peacekeeper or mediator, where he does his best to support families to resolve disputes in a rational way.

"A large part of my job is to sit with beneficiaries and help them work through all their concerns. My style is very responsive; I take my lead from the people I'm sitting with. I'll come to the auction of the family home with them. I'll take as long as it needs."

Talking about the will

Christine Page of David Landa Stewart Lawyers is a solicitor and accredited estate planning lawyer. She advocates for clarity and transparency in the will, and communication about what's in the will before the will maker's passing.

"I like to meet with will makers personally. I seek to understand their personal, family and financial stories. We map out their assets, and they tell me what they'd like to do with them. I try to help them understand how things could be viewed when they're not here," Page says.

Page encourages her clients to have a family meeting and tell their children (or other beneficiaries) how they've set up their will, and why. Some people feel more comfortable having a meeting that also involves Page, where she facilitates a conversation and shares details on the will maker's behalf.

"Will makers don't always realise that they don't have to tell the beneficiaries how much money there is in the estate. But I've found that if the children understand why their parents have done what they've done – well, it just makes life so much easier."

Appointing an independent trustee like Perpetual can help people – both will makers and beneficiaries – at what is arguably one of life's most challenging times.

"I really enjoy my job; I just love meeting people from different walks of life. We're called upon to help with advice and administration of taxation, property and investments for estates that are often highly complex," says Bestelink. "Every day Perpetual is entrusted with peoples' assets – and their emotions. It's such a privilege for Perpetual and its Trust Managers to be able to help people in this way."

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