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# COMPLICATED GRIEF: AN INTRODUCTION

by Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD

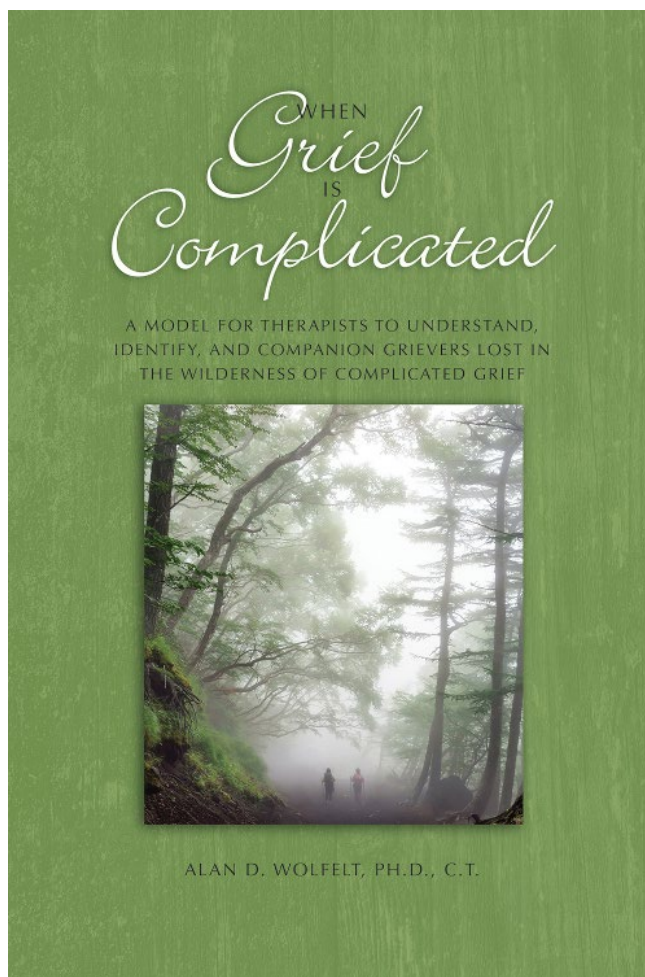
Grieving families come to you from all walks of life and in all manner of circumstances surrounding death. If you have been in funeral service for a while, you have likely companioned people in profound shock and traumatic grief over the most challenging types of loss, ranging from infant death and violent accidents to drug overdose, homicide and suicide.

As you know, death is always hard, but in particularly challenging circumstances, it can seem unbearable. And yet it is your job to help families through the early days that follow these tragic losses. Their challenge becomes, in part, your challenge. We psychologists call what these families are experiencing “complicated grief.” Effectively helping complicated grievers requires special understanding and compassionate care. In this article and three others that follow, I will share some background on complicated grief as well as ideas for helping complicated grievers during and after the funeral process.

## **Complicated grief: a definition**

First, it’s essential to understand that complicated grief is not a problem or disorder but simply a normal, necessary response in what is almost always an abnormally challenging loss situation. It’s a matter of degree, feature prominence and sometimes duration.

Of course, all grief is complicated. Just as love is always complex and multifaceted, so too is grief. Whenever someone we love dies, we naturally have lots of different and ever-changing thoughts and feelings about the death. Grief is often profoundly challenging and chaotic. In fact, it’s common for grievers to feel like they’re going crazy because their inner experience of loss is so different from their usual thoughts and feelings. The experience we will be calling “complicated grief” in this article series is simply regular old complicated grief that has gotten extra complicated somehow.



This article is excerpted from *When Grief is Complicated: A Model for Therapists to Understand, Identify, and Companion Grievers Lost in the Wilderness of Complicated Grief*. To order, visit [www.centerforloss.com](http://www.centerforloss.com).

That “somehow” is often the challenging causes of death I mentioned in this article’s opening paragraph, but there are also other risk factors for a complicated grief response, which I will be reviewing in the second article in this series.

### **The wilderness of complicated grief**

When we think of grief as an arduous journey through a vast, inhospitable, mountainous forest, we capture some of the essence of the normal, necessary experience. Traversing grief is challenging. We don’t always know where we’re going. It’s easy to lose the trail. We sometimes feel the warmth of the sun and glimpse great beauty, but we often encounter obstacles and dangers we weren’t expecting. We’re not always as well-equipped as we thought or wish we were, and we definitely cannot control the forces swirling around us. Understandably, we get tired. Along the way, it gets dark, stormy and slippery, and though we’d often like to be able to fast-forward ourselves to the end of the trail, the only way out is through.

If every significant grief journey is such a challenging trek through the wilderness, what is complicated grief? It’s an even more challenging odyssey. Here in Colorado we’re privileged to be home to numerous 14,000-foot Rocky Mountain peaks, or 14ers, as they’re called. Because of the terrain and topography, some of our 14ers are particularly difficult to summit. They remind me of complicated grief – rugged, relentless and vast.

Hikers often get lost or stranded on Colorado’s mountain trails and peaks, and when this happens, we as a community take it quite seriously. After all, these travellers are often in mortal danger. Predators such as mountain lions lurk in the shadows, and the cold, wind, altitude and vertiginous drops make unassisted survival unlikely. The backcountry is unforgiving.

Fortunately for the lost hikers, Colorado has teams of volunteers and professionals at the ready to locate and retrieve them. These search-and-rescuers are well-trained and well-equipped for the often-perilous expeditions. More often than not, the endangered hikers live to tell the tale. They are forever changed by their wilderness experience, but they are able to continue on with their lives with gratitude and new perspective.

Companioning families through complicated grief is not unlike search and rescue. We trained volunteers and professionals are called upon to assist when we are alerted that a griever is struggling in the wilderness. It is our job to join

them – to meet them where they are – and to accompany them back to safety. While it is not the grief companion’s role to carry, lead or find the way out, it is our responsibility to bear witness, provide shelter, offer sustenance, carry tools, safeguard vital signs and imbue hope. We are not rescuers in the savior or saviour sense; rather, we are rescuers in the “thank goodness you were there to help me” sense.


In short, some people get lost or trapped in the jeopardous wilderness of their naturally complicated grief. We find them and help walk them back to safety. I believe this ministry is nothing less than search and rescue of the human soul, and I am honoured to lead you in this discussion.

### **Why you play an essential role in helping complicated grievers**

It is believed that as many as 10 to 15 per cent of the population may experience complicated grief. When you consider that complicated grief is more of a continuum than a yes-no, and you give thought to all the people affected by the risk factors we’ll be reviewing in the next article, it’s easy to imagine that the true incidence could be much, much higher.

All grievers need the support of people who care about them, but complicated grievers usually need some professional support and guidance to help them get back on track. If they don’t receive the help they need, they often become stuck in their misery, emptiness or harmful behaviour. They remain lost in the wilderness. They die while they are alive.

Not only are people lost in the wilderness of complicated grief unable to self-actualize, they often stultify or negatively affect others around them. Their partners and children can be hurt by their ongoing complicated grief. Their colleagues and neighbours can suffer. And the potential they brought with them into this world is never realized. In essence, their quandary sends out ripples into the world, as each person’s life they touch affects the next person and so on and so on and so on.

And so, complicated grievers need you. Not only do they need you to effectively and compassionately companion them in the early days of their loss experience, they also need your aftercare in the months that follow as well as your support in connecting them to ongoing community resources. The good news is that with education and good companioning skills, you can indeed help. 

Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt is a noted author, educator and grief counsellor. He serves as director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado, and presents numerous workshops each year across North America. Perhaps best known for his companioning model of caring for people in grief, he is the author of *Companioning the Bereaved*, *Companioning the Grieving Child*, and *When Grief is Complicated*, from which this article is excerpted. For more information or to order Dr. Wolfelt’s books, visit [www.centerforloss.com](http://www.centerforloss.com) or call 970.226.6050.