

Hierarchy of Grief

Sharon Brubaker & Erica Honore

Grief Specialists

Tony ([00:02](#)):

Erica and Sharon are sisters who began their grief journey in 2006, when Erica's 10 year old son, Austin drowned. Together, they participated in a grief education program were so moved by this experience they studied and became specialists so they could help the broken-hearted find recovery. In 2015 tragedy struck the family once again, when Erica's oldest son, Donovan was killed in a motorcycle accident, Erica and Sharon are committed to sharing their experiences of love, loss, and healing through this podcast. Now, your grief specialists, Sharon and Erica.

Sharon ([00:40](#)):

Did you know, there's no such thing as hierarchy in grief. Sometimes it's really upsets me because people can treat us as if our grief and our broken heart or their friend's broken heart is worse than anyone else's. The other thing that can happen is that we walk around with this air of you have to understand that my grief is worse than yours, or we see it causes us to compare our grief to one another. And the truth is grief is grief is grief. A broken heart is a broken heart period. Stop comparing your loss or your grief to someone else.

Erica ([01:22](#)):

Yeah, it is really a challenge when you get with someone that wants to portray themselves as though they are more devastated and broken than someone else, because the loss is different. We can't compare our losses when, when someone is sad and we're talking to them, I don't say to them, well, you're not as sad as I am because your grief, you know, you're just getting a divorce. You'll get over that. I would never do that. That's so rude. If someone is completely devastated, you meet them where they're at and you deal with the pain that they are feeling. It doesn't matter what caused their pain.

Sharon ([02:03](#)):

So the hierarchy of grief usually looks something like this on the top of the loss is a loss of a baby, right? Followed by the loss of a child. So I would say a baby between the ages of zero to three years old, followed by the loss of a child, then the loss of a spouse. And even I can stick in there, the loss of a parent for a child, right? So the child is anywhere from zero to 13, we stick a parent in the middle of there, right? Way at the bottom of this hierarchy is our grandparents. Keep in mind that grandparent, that grandmother may have been the one that raised you. You also maybe in your twenties and she may also be your best friend, right? So we can't judge that at all. And I'm really sorry to say this, but really at the bottom of that hierarchy list is the loss of her babies. I don't know why we do that.

Erica ([03:04](#)):

That's even if, cause there's some people that won't even acknowledge for babies as an actual loss. I mean, they were just like, it's a dog get over it. But I mean, if you are a dog or a cat person or any, any pet that you open your heart to and you're home to, and you care for, you do love it, like a family member. So it doesn't matter what people think. And that's what society is. You know, what is the I'm? Sure. I think the pet industry is like a billion dollar industry. It wouldn't be that big of people didn't love there fur babies.

Sharon ([03:38](#)):

The other thing that happens is within the family, there's a hierarchy that goes on within the family. And I think that happens naturally. I literally thought that you were going to be, you and Louis were going to

be grieving. And it was going to be our job to be the support. I never thought ignorantly. This was an ignorant thought that I was going to grieve. First of all, I don't even think I'd ever used the word grief. You guys have heard me say this over and over again. And because it didn't affect us. That was for old people, old people grieve. Like we live our lives. We go on and on our lives, I put you and Louis in a higher position. And then under you and Louis would have been Donovan and Jordan and then grandfather, right? My dad would come before me and the grief of Austin. This, this is just how I went. And then I was going to be trinkled away and never have a grieving experience. We do this within our own circle. We say who's grieving more than the other.

Erica ([04:42](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. And I don't, I'm sure you remember this. It although it was six years ago, but yeah, when Donovan died, the significant other in his life, one, it, all of the, I guess I'll say grief glory. If that's a thing, we just made it a thing. She wanted all the grief glory, because she was the significant other. And she behaved in a manner that was for me, I received it very negatively because I'm like, I'm his mom like please, you know, acknowledge at least. So it's like, you do get people in your circle. You're absolutely right. That want to claim the grief glory. Like I was closest to him. I knew him more. I spent more time with him that does happen in an immediate family circle. And it can be a challenge when, especially when you have a kind of dysfunctional family dynamic, people can begin to fight over the lost relationship and who is grieving more than everyone else, which is sad because everyone is just in pain. They're devastated. They're in shock at the situation that's occurred, they're trying to find their footing. And then to add in this negative aspect of the person that wants to hold the biggest grief, glory flag or whatever, it just, it makes it that much more challenging to get towards the healing and to acknowledge that as a whole collectively, everyone needs to heal.

Sharon ([06:11](#)):

Well, look at the loss of of just a grandmother, for example. So the grandmother dies. They parents, the, the child of that mother is grieving. Her husband, who also has a very close relationship with the mom is also grieving. But now he's trying to take care of his wife because he knows she's in so much pain. Then we have the three children of that couple. And they're also grieving the loss of that grandmother. Well, what happens when you meet one of the children, right? One of the grandchildren, and they just get blown off because intellectually we put in our head that it was just your grandmother. She lived a good life. It was time for her to go you know, I'm really sorry for your loss, but let's get back to what we were doing here. And it get, we don't respect the griever. In that case, when we go into a hierarchy stance, we are not respecting the griever's loss and their brokenness period. That's all it is, is that we are literally disrespecting

Erica ([07:19](#)):

That's the truth. I think that's the perfect word. It is a disrespect because they are in pain and they are sad about the loss and they have every right to be so, and they have every right to express it. And the people in the family and the supporting circle, and even this, the grandchild, let's say the grandchild is working. The coworkers need to understand that this person has experienced a loss and their pain should not be minimized because they weren't first in line to the throne, so to speak.

Sharon ([07:53](#)):

So, and here's the other thing that I find very interesting. The hierarchy is also it's invisible. It's not something that you see, it's almost like it just looms over the situation. Right. But the truth is that when

they comes time to making the decisions and doing the things that we need to do to, for the loved one that has passed on, then there is sort of a hierarchy. And it's like, so for example, when Donovan died, the decisions for B when to post on Facebook what does decisions to be made to the funerals? And those sort of things need to be made by the parents, not the significant other or the people in the wrong. Correct?

Erica ([08:37](#)):

Right. Right.

Sharon ([08:38](#)):

That's where the respect goes. And that what happens with the hierarchy, I think more than anything, Erica, is that it's a comparison of a loss.

Erica ([08:46](#)):

Yeah.

Sharon ([08:46](#)):

Just like you said earlier, it's just, we're, we're literally comparing our losses.

Erica ([08:51](#)):

Yeah. And they, you know, I don't know what the validation is that's needed when you get into that sort of grief contest of who's who's sadder and who's going to be more devastated. I don't get the point of it, but it does actually happen. And I think that it's important to bring it to, to people's attention that this is something that's real. And they met because you said it's an invisible thing that's looming. They don't even realize they're participating in it. But now that we've put it out there and as situations continue, we continue to have losses in our lives, which we will, hopefully people will be aware and they can look out for it and make sure they don't get caught up in the grief tornado of, well, no, I'm more sad than you are. I was closer to him. I spent more time with him because that could also cause a lot of fighting and unnecessary drama that the family doesn't need when everyone is just hurting and broken.

Sharon ([09:50](#)):

So here's the other thing that happens. Well, number one, it's very childish. Let's just put it out there. It is immature and child is to put yourself in a stance and, and buy into this hierarchy of grief. That's number one. The second thing that happens is it creates a competition. Not only is it secret, it creates this competition of breathing. Well, I feel it more than her, so I should have more attention. And basically what is bringing in this competition to the center of the grief is all the brokenness of everything else you have, you have experienced in your life. We happen to be really close as brothers and sisters. And you hear me friends, when I tell you we fight like cats and dogs, we really do. You think Erica and I are this, the ACE flu kills and we get along? It's fine anymore, but we definitely fight and we get it out there and we get other sisters involved. There's four of us and constant brother gets involved. We fight we're brothers and sisters it's normal. Okay. But it creates this competition. If you, if we were really in an unstable environment and unhealthy environment, and we had a lot of anger and brokenness in our past, within that hierarchy that is going to show up, it gets pulled into your hierarchy, into your family, a stance and positioning because even think about finding out Austin had died, other than you and Lewis, wasn't here in the state. So other than you, the next person that I really felt I needed to look after was daddy.

Erica ([11:32](#)):

Right. Cause they were best friends.

Sharon ([11:33](#)):

Austin and daddy were best friends

Erica ([11:37](#)):

They were besties. And that that's the truth because we do, I think we do address things more than I would say your typical family. Well, not typical. Cause I, you hope that most people acknowledge that. If your, you know, you're gonna fight, you're gonna move on. You're going to get over it. It's atypical. When you have the situations where people get in the fight and they don't speak for years, right? 15, 20 years, then the death occurs. Then they got to come together to make funeral arrangements, plan out everything. And those are the ones that the competition is really on, in full force because they definitely aren't having addressed their past. They haven't addressed the, the angry words that were said, they haven't addressed the reason why they're not speaking, speaking. And now they're thrown into this house and they have to plan this beautiful funeral to honor the loved one that has passed away. I mean, to be a fly on the wall in that situation because you and I can spot it, you know, immediately, oh, there's the grief queen. She's the one that wants to have the biggest grief flag going. You know? I mean, it's like, that's just the way it plays out. And it's sad because the person that gets caught up in it is either the parent, the surviving parent, because then they want the children want them to be the tiebreaker, you know, for all the decisions and all the fights and all the passive aggressive things that are going on, which is unfortunate because there's already, there's already such a sadness about the person that's, that's lost. All this other stuff is just causing drama and additional hurt that doesn't need to be there. It doesn't need to be present when you need to come together as a unit to honor a loved one.

Sharon ([13:21](#)):

Well, I think also because the the hierarchy can be invisible and it can be invisible within the family. Right? The other thing that happens is somebody could really be grieving and they're, they're looked over, they're dismissed. They're not even addressed with their grief. Right? The other thing that can happen is that we see clients where they may lose someone. They just started dating, right. For example, and that person may die. And the, the family members were like, well, you didn't even know him that long. It's almost your grief is like dismissed or it's thrown away as not important because of the hierarchy Wolf. You weren't even that close to him. You only dated him for three months. You know? It's like, you need to store that away. This is what someone told me the other day. You need to store that away and move on.

Erica ([14:15](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. That's true. And that is sad. That is very sad because that happens. It happens all the time where you, we find, we've heard stories of people who are newly dating and they pass away and the family wouldn't even acknowledge them at all. Let them have any say so, or, you know, and, and we, we in Donovan's situation I had feelings like that because I didn't feel like I really knew his significant other, but I still allowed her to have a part. She was able to speak, you know, I, I, I included her as best I could. The challenge was she wanted to wear the biggest grief glory flag. I'm saying flag. I don't know why, but she wanted to wave the biggest flag. And I, in that time, in what we had already been through as a family, we kind of collectively were like, no, sorry, that's not gonna happen.

Sharon ([15:11](#)):

And then, okay. So think about this and that week or two that you're actually doing all the services. There's so much emotion, there's so much emotion. And if there's underlying issues going on in your family, those that comes to light 100%, nothing ugly is hidden, right. It all gets revealed. And that's a lot of what was going on. Go ahead.

Erica ([15:35](#)):

Go. No, you go.

Sharon ([15:37](#)):

No, you go.

Erica ([15:39](#)):

I was going to say, had I not done the relationship with Donovan on the training weekend? You and I had just finished. I would have been really nasty because you're right. I would have been carrying all the fighting. He and I had been having about this relationship and all of the things, the nastiness that was happening up until his motorcycle accident, I would have carried all of that. And I would have been really nasty towards her it's because I had just done a lot of work on him and it was very fresh. I had released all of that and I was able to then open my heart enough to know that she needed to have a part in this, because that would have been, I think, extremely consequential for her healing. If I would have shut her out. You know what I mean?

Sharon ([16:30](#)):

Yeah. Oh yeah. I get it a hundred percent. So, okay. Let's talk about the hierarchy and losses, right? So we've talked about death, but there's also divorce. These are things that we can grieve, right? Divorce, breakup, over romantic relationship. What about foreclosure? We can grieve foreclosure and losing our house. Who's to say that what we go through in our heart, when we deal with a foreclosure or we lose a child, is that we just portfolio, you can buy another house. Do you know what I mean?

Erica ([17:05](#)):

Absolutely.

Sharon ([17:06](#)):

You built that house from house, from scratch. What if that was the house that you and your husband built from scratch? And then you had a divorce and now you're losing the house. And all the memories of that house is connected to that miscarriage. We see people with miscarriage and infertility, which is a show that you and I just did get so dismissed as far as greed. It's part of the hierarchy. That's what happens is like quite often, Erica will get clients that go, can you tell us which one of these is more important?

Erica ([17:35](#)):

Right.

Sharon ([17:38](#)):

No. You got to experience that. You got to go through it. Just think about grief. For example, I was talking about this with a client the other day. I remember years and years and years ago before we, you and I started setting up the science degree, telling a woman who had a miscarriage, me telling her, well, you can have more children. Oh, don't feel bad. You can have more children, which is the worst thing. You can tell somebody that has had miscarriage until you're actually in that club. And you understand loss. You, you continually put these in order in some sort of order, simply having a new family member added to your family can cause a grieving experience, right? So adopt someone or how does someone have a baby and having a baby come into the family can cause a grieving experience. We don't know where people are. Don't compare your loss to theirs. Don't compare your brokenness to theirs.

Erica ([18:32](#)):

Right? And th th the grief and the pain is felt 100% by the griever, no matter what the cause it does not matter. The cause is it just is, it's a circuit. It just, the circumstance is what it is. That is not the focus. The focus is the brokenness and the pain in your heart. And everyone feels it at 100%. When you have a fur baby that dies, you, don't only feel 15% of sadness. You feel it at a hundred percent. People need to understand this, and we need to stop minimizing the pain of others. And I mean, just look at, for example, what's happening. We see these stories day in and day out. Since the pandemic people are hurting, the pandemic has brought a lot of pain and tragedy to the forefront of our world, right? Everyone has had some sort of negative experience in this pandemic, whether it be financial, whether it be you had to quarantine with your relationship partner, and it was already rocky before you went into quarantine and now you've broken up. So now you have a breakup of a romantic relationship. We've got all of these losses in the pandemic and everyone is hurting. I'm seeing more and more mental health commercials and commercials for counseling now, then I feel like I ever have. If you don't acknowledge people's pain, they are going to react negatively on our in society, the shootings that are happening. I mean, it's just the minute the pandemic kind of, we found a light at the end of the tunnel with the pandemic. Then we had a ton of schools. I mean, school shootings, a ton of massive shootings. It's devastating. We have to acknowledge people's pain and stop minimizing it and acting like people are not hurting. They are hurting. And, and when someone comes to you and says, I am so sad, I just had to put my fur baby to sleep. And you say, oh, you can get another dog. That's not helping them. And then they stop. You're no longer a safe space for them. They stuffed their pain. And then something tragic happens. They stuffed that pain because now they don't, they don't feel like they have the right to talk about how they're feeling. And next thing you know, they're either hurting themselves or they're hurting someone else.

Sharon ([20:59](#)):

Yes, yes. To all of that.

Erica ([21:02](#)):

It was a rant, but I'm, I'm concerned. I feel like we're going in a negative direction when we keep minimizing people's pain.

Sharon ([21:10](#)):

Yeah. So I'm going to leave. We're going to leave with these final notes. Number one, don't compare your loss to someone else's, don't compare your brokenness to someone else's. Number two, remember that every loss is different and it will be experienced different. And sometimes it can surprise us how deep we go down the grief hole. There are no two snowflakes alike. There are no hearts alike. They're all

different. They're different size. They beat at different beats. Our hearts are going to accept the pain differently. Just feel your pain, just feel your pain. And remember that no one is walking in your shoes so they don't understand it or see it from your view. Grief just is that's it. My friends, it just is.

Erica ([22:04](#)):

We have to stop pushing our feelings aside and being scared to acknowledge them, allow the feelings in, find a safe space. There are lots of safe spaces out there for you to talk about how you really feel. If you are in a family where you didn't feel, you got to share about your loved one, that you lost. Find someone who will listen to you. There are lots of people out there, Sharon, and I will listen to you. Don't hold on to this don't stuff it. It's going to end up causing you more pain in the long run.

Sharon ([22:35](#)):

Bye friends. Thank you.

Erica ([22:38](#)):

Bye. Thank you. Hi friends, Erica Andre here with healing starts with the heart. Sharon and I are so glad you joined us for another great episode of our podcast. We hope you enjoyed this episode. We want to let you know for more information, you can go to our website at healingstartswiththeheart.com. There you will find not only today's podcast, but all of our podcasts, along with our blogs, the information on the programs that we offer and the griever's guide, which is something Sharon and I put together to document how we came to be your grief specialists. We also have a quiz to take, to identify if you are truly grieving. And if you want to talk specifically with either Sharon or myself, you can schedule an appointment there. You will also find a place to join our private facebook group at hope, heal and recover. Thank you so much for being with us. Have a great day friends.