



**GLOBAL GRIEF
SUPPORT**

Sleep disturbance and grief

Whenever we get a group of bereaved individuals together and they share their grief stories, without fail, the loss of sleep is one of the first things mentioned. And whenever participants of a grief support group hear from others in the group that they experience sleep disturbance, it normalizes insomnia for everyone.

One true story comes to mind. In the aftermath of the Tsunami that killed 30,000 people in Sri Lanka, a local social worker showed me around a refugee camp and made a point to stop in the temporary shack of a young man named Krishna. After cordial introductions, Krishna told his story about the day of the tsunami when the waves began to come in. He desperately grabbed the hand of a little sister, then ran to another and grabbed her hand and they ran to high ground with the tsunami chasing them. He had been terrified of drowning and of losing his sisters, but heroically saved himself and them. But now, he said, “There is no one in all of Sri Lanka who has suffered more than me.” I tried to understand, but knowing that thousands of other families were not so fortunate and that not one of his family members had died in the tsunami, I found it a stretch to believe him. Then he said, “I have not slept since the Tsunami, because every time I lay down my head, close my eyes and try to sleep, the waves come.” Then I understood that he had been traumatized by the tsunami. And trauma is, as they say, “a horse of a different color.” For Krishna, anxiety and fear and post-traumatic stress all conspired together to disrupt his sleep.

Years earlier, while living in a campus dorm at the Wartburg Seminary, I heard a knock on my door about 3 a.m. and opened it to find a fellow student standing there looking like he had seen a ghost. He said he couldn’t sleep and wondered if we could go to an all-night pancake house and talk. I knew his story because he had previously confided in me, a veteran. He had served as a platoon leader in a combat zone and had led many dangerous night missions that resulted in the loss of life. When he returned home, he suffered nightmares, sometimes startling his wife with his shouts and screams. She couldn’t take it and soon divorced him. Now, in Seminary, he continued to suffer nightmares from what I would later learn as a characteristic of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

“ A 2005 study of over 800 college students found that those in bereavement experienced significantly higher rates of insomnia” (compared with students who were not in grief). Tuck Sleep

Other studies have indicated that depression seems to be a greater factor in sleep disturbance than complicated grief.

Tuck Sleep is a health organization that treats sleep disturbance. On their website, I found the following.

“Sleeplessness during grief is very common. Individuals in grief are often consumed with thoughts of loss, which interferes with their ability to sleep. They may also wake up from dreaming about their deceased loved one, as their brain emotionally processes the loss...”

You can find more information about sleep and grief on the Tuck Sleep website:

www.tuck.com/sleep-and-grief/

Group activity suggestion:

Do a round where you invite participants to share their experiences with sleep disturbance.

Do a second round where participants describe what has not worked to help them get to sleep.

Do a third round where participants describe what has worked for them to help defeat insomnia.