

Processing Grief through Sex Work

as discussed by KWD

Content Warning

There will be discussions of death, addiction, suicide, and overdose



We: Sex Workers Rights Advocates: Human Rights Advocates: LGBTQ+ Rights Advocates

Quick Note on Language

I use some words interchangeably.

Not to the detriment of either word, or in a way that is meant to baffle... and I will try to avoid long-winded stories.

I think it is important to confirm:

Stripper: Dancer: Sex Worker

Sex Work: Work: Job

Client: ⁽¹⁾someone who uses adult services in person, virtually, occasionally, or often; ⁽²⁾someone who uses government services such as healthcare aid, filing taxes, or a public library.

Who the hell am I?

- I am a first generation sex worker to the best of my knowledge, based on all of the interactions I have had with my family during the slow coming out process as a stripper.
- I have been a Sex Worker since 2018; taking time off only during parts of the [Covid-19] pandemic, and after my dad passed in 2021.
- I was a bouncer, DJ, doorman, bartender, and dancer at the first club I worked at. I was young and a little drunk, but I would not trade that experience for anything.
 - ◆ I transitioned to try other forms of work during/after the pandemic, and have quickly fallen in love with my hobbies and clients.
- I have been a Sex Worker's Rights Advocate, now for Full Decrim, since my second year of SUNY, when I transitioned out of 'Primary Education' and into 'Sociology' and 'Womxn's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies'.

Crying on the Job

...anyone can do it!

Where do we hide Grief?

- ❑ In anger at ourselves, at those who have passed, at strangers
 - ❑ Are we short circuiting on the phone with customer service because we are mad at the wait time? Or because we are left with a mess to clean up when *someone* had to go and pass away?
- ❑ Tardiness
 - ❑ Which manifested for me as a one-two punch of 'time-blindness' and 'lethargy'
- ❑ Brain fog
 - ❑ I promise your rational thinking will return one day
- ❑ Memory loss
 - ❑ The brain is so busy processing what the hell just happened, it will have trouble recalling even the most important information in that moment

How does grief appear in our work?

1 | [Clients] who are grieving loss of partners, family

How can 'safe intimacy' possibly be considered a human right?

- ❖ Key Points when we Advocate on Behalf of Sex Work

2 | [Clients] who may be struggling with mental health or depression

The [Illinois Dept of Health](#) [who seems reliable enough] shares that Suicide is the #8 cause of death in men

- Although "Unintentional Injuries" is #3...

3 | The grief [We] try to check at the door, but might see triggered

Unfortunately, as Adults, We must navigate our own emotional reactions, sometimes as a response to others.

- How can we redirect and refocus to ensure no one, not even ourselves, gets hurt?

1. The 'Work' of Emotional Labour

It is this big loud secret that Americans [men] are afraid of therapy. It is also a big loud secret that most often the people who are engaging in the consensual adult industry are people [men] with wealth providing excess income to people without. Is it a far stretch to ask, *Are Sex Workers Therapeutic?*

I'd like to pose a real-world example for discussion:

A friend of mine has a client, who reached out to her in February 2024. His wife, Molly* passed from a long battle with cancer in November 2023. My friend is blonde, his late wife was blonde.

He spends most of their sessions speaking only of Molly, and, with consent, requests my friend 'be Molly' when she feels comfortable.

*name has been changed

Where are all the resources?

Finding published work on 'sex while grieving' proved to be more than a little difficult. *Sex After Grief*, published in 2019 and written by Joan Price, was a hidden gem I uncovered¹ while scouring the mental health sections of bookstores.

Plenty of books discussing grief only lightly poke at the idea of 'sexual relations' after losing a loved one, and a majority are directed towards widows, with the chapters suggesting to, of course, go at your own speed.

Price included a chapter called **Massage or More?** discussing the importance sex workers and similar providers can have to those who are only looking to feel connected to another human again, not necessarily start dating again.

I have processed grief with a sex
worker before.

I have processed grief as a sex
worker before

Advocacy Points along the Lines of Mental Health

- When we are well versed in language surrounding healing our own emotional wounds, we can speak on our experiences as a way to educate others
 - We can provide a space for those around us to feel safe exploring previously painful thoughts
- To date responsibly as an adult involves taking care of our emotional baggage so it does not spill onto those we love
 - Someone with little-to-no experience dating could really benefit from hiring a professional for guidance

Corrine

of Tasmania, Australia
excerpt from Sex After Grief

“Seeing a sex worker is more than just sex. Sometimes it’s about getting some of the feel-good brain chemicals back. Touch involves the hormone oxytocin and sex is a complex mix of oxytocin, dopamine, and vasopressin. In my experience, seeing a sex worker during grief brings out a level of vulnerability. By making a booking, you are cementing the decision to recognize your need to be open, to feel. **If you are unsure about seeing a sex worker when you are grieving, wait. We can’t fix things for you, or make things right. But when you are ready, we can help you to feel connected to a human again, with no judgement or expectations.”**

2. Witnessing Mental Health Disasters at Work

> How do you know when you need your Hard Hat?

...or your Thinking Cap?

"Is this client being obscene, or is this client struggling with loneliness//depression?"

> Clients struggling with addiction

> Grieving the loss of clients – to Death or to Disrespect

- Loss of steady income
- Loss of a 'friend' // 'coworker'

* * *

There was Artie once, five years ago. He came to see another dancer, Charlene. She was mean to him, cut him out. He was hurt. I consoled him. He bought me drinks, was tender and quiet. A handsome young man of twenty-three, an auto mechanic. I was older. He was blond and blue-eyed, wide-eyed, an innocent. He drove me home one night, made delicate love. Next week, we had dinner in the village, walked, ate brownies with milk like kids. We made love that night. But something happened. He lay his head between my legs, gone for no apparent reason. I asked what was wrong. He was silent. Then we hugged, sang old songs. He left happy. I went to sleep.

At nine a.m. the phone rang. His father, frantic. What happened last night? he demanded. Were you drinking? No, I tell I him, groggy. But Artie's dead, his father yells. He killed himself. Car fumes in the garage. It was a customer's

car he drove, sideswiped it, the second time this month. His partner found him at the shop right now. Dead on the front seat. There was a note: Sorry, Bob. I fucked up again. Artie. Oh god no, I breathe into the phone, smash the pillow against my face. This isn't true. You're lying. It's my son, he says. He's dead. The funeral's tomorrow and the wake. He liked you. He told us. Please come. You're the last one who saw him alive.

I go. I swoon. It can't be true; he was so young. I had no idea; he said nothing. Why didn't I see? Damn my perception. But it was his secret hidden in silence.

And I remember that last night, when his head lay still between my legs and I roused him, saying lightly, "It feels like you're dead."

I'll never speak again. All speech is treason.

His family reassures me it was written on the wind, but for me, it's an airless season.

At his grave, his mother says, This job was his last chance. He dropped out of college, out of technical school, too, quit job after job. Never could make his father happy, never could do enough to please him. So, he gave up.

could do enough to please him. So, he gave up.

His father cries and clutches me to him, desperate for a last touch of his son. Desperate for an answer. His grief smothers me. Dry despair and gaping agony. The graveyard, the hole in the ground, the box. How can it dare be so sunny this day? I'm alone in the crowd. I know no one but the dead man, and I didn't know him, either.

His aunt says, nasty: Well, you certainly have an appetite, when I eat the mournful lunch with them. Her suggestion chokes my screams: *But I'm alive. I'm alive. I'm still alive, that's why I'm eating, goddamn you.* Instead, I cast my eyes into the plate and swallow one last time.

I return to his grave when they all leave and ask him why.

Ask the raw earth, and he tells me: There is no hope. All is horror.

I turn my back, but he never leaves me, his blond, pale face a breath away, a heartbeat missed. I knew him oh so little, the last two weeks of a too-short life. He needed to be saved, but who can we save but ourselves?

Daughter of death, temptress whom men expect to save them. But life's a ploy for deeper secrets: The dance of life is our salvation. Death wins when we stop dancing. I dance oblivion in naked sorrow, touch the horror of a wasted life. His face smiles back beside me. We are one.

The blond man at the bar winks at me. I never date blonds anymore. It's a superstition. I never date men under twenty-four. I never accept silence as an answer.

3. When I was a Young Stripper...

...I had moments of inappropriate-for-work behavior, as aligned with my current self-healing oriented goals.

Having danced, and entertained, and de-escalated, sober and intoxicated, I prefer to be the party when I am in a sound state of mind and body. I grieve not knowing what I did and what I heard and who I saw while I was intoxicated on the job.

What I look out for now, as best I can, are actions typical for and thoughts said aloud that a person considering serious self harm might display.

-Why is this person reaching out now?

-What kind of support system does this person have at home?

You are In Charge of You

When we have 'trauma dump stories' imposed on us while in a Statehouse, or we're asked rude and personal questions* while tabling and on-the-job, or come face-to-face with the [knowledge] that *healing isn't linear*,
How do We Stay Focused?

1. Stay Confident— no one knows how you are feeling until you tell them, so if you remain calm and assured in your tone, you will be believed
2. Deep Breath— continue 'thinking' before 'speaking', there's no reason to ever add fuel to a hateful fire
3. Go at Your Own Pace— there is no timeline to your grief

*'worst experiences', 'weirdest client', 'arrest history', etc

Struggl

The IRREVERENT GRIEF GUIDE

HOW TO F*CKING
SURVIVE MONTHS 1-3



ELIZABETH KUPFERMAN RN, LPC

What if You Don't Process the Pain of Grief?

You don't want that life. **People who choose to not process the pain of grief end up carrying the pain instead** (Wolfelt, 2014). You don't want to walk around with your unprocessed grief year after year. Repressed pain spills out into your life in toxic ways and you don't want to spend your life self-medicating it. Trying to deny or outrun or ignore your pain leads to bitterness and misery. Grieving is one of the hardest things we do as humans, and of course, because it's so painful, we want to avoid it, but the only way is through, so we actually WANT to grieve. Grieving your loss is the courageous and psychologically advanced choice.

Just by reading this, you are on the brave and heroic side, the strong side, the very healthy side. Understanding your grief is a way to process it. Even if you feel like you have given up, you are here with me searching for answers, searching for relief, trying to understand and trying to find out how in the hell to live after the worst has happened.

The whole point of doing your grief work is to eventually thrive as opposed to survive. Instead of letting the grief affect everything we do, we want to experience our lives, and let the grief inform our lives, who we are, and who we ultimately become.

I'm saying all of this in the second month of grief because I want you to know the PURPOSE of all the shit you're going through. It is not a waste of your life and it is not pointless. I want you to know that being in the muck of grief in the first three months has value because it is leading you to **post-traumatic growth**. Post-traumatic growth is when **"a positive change is experienced as a result of the struggle with a major life crisis or traumatic event"** (Calhoun & Tedeshchi, 2003).



An active sex worker since 2018, KWD advocates regularly in Northeast Statehouses on behalf of Full Decrim and any related healthcare, gender, and LGBTQ+ legislation. They attend meetings and events as a member of the [*Oregon Sex Worker's Committee*](#), where she got her start in advocacy, and was introduced to [*The Ishtar Collective*](#) alongside other like-minded human rights organizations.

They hope to keep writing and speaking in impactful ways for the 'Rights Not Rescue' movement; with long term goals of inclusive sex education and the right to safe intimacy.

Resources

Borden, Lizzie. *Whorephobia: Strippers on Art, Work, and Life*. Seven Stories Press, 2022.

Harper, Faith G., and Erin Bennett. *Unfuck Your Grief: Using Science to Heal Yourself and Support Others*. Blackstone Publishing, 2022.

Kupferman, Elizabeth. *The Irreverent Grief Guide: How to F*cking Survive Months 1-3*. Independently Published, 2020.

Price, Joan. *Sex After Grief: Navigating Your Sexuality after Losing Your Beloved*. Mango, 2019.

¹ 'uncovered' is being used loosely, as I needed to ask an employee of [Powell's](#) for assistance, and they had not sold this book in stores for 4 years. Upon looking into my local library, it was only available as an e-book. It does seem to be available in paperback online.