

# Working with Military Grief in Gold Star Families

## Navy Gold Star Mid-Atlantic Region - January 29, 2020

NGS Mid-Atlantic Region  
January 29, 2020



**Working with  
Military Grief in  
Gold Star Families**

JOANNE STEEN, MS, NCC  
Author. Instructor. Speaker  
on Line-of-Duty Loss

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1

**Learning Objectives**

- Identify unique factors that complicate military grief
- Discuss the needs of grief to move forward in grief
- Identify obstacles and indicators of moving forward
- Learn current grief language

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**Misconceptions On Military Loss**

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- Service members only die in war
- Families are prepared for loss
- Military takes care of its own

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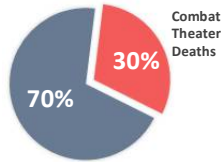
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## “Service Members Only Die in War”

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24,000 US Military Deaths  
9/11 - Present



### Combat Theater Deaths\*

- Combat (KIA)
- Combat (non-KIA)

### Non-War Deaths\*\*

- Other military operations
- Terrorist attacks
- Operational readiness
- Mishaps and accidents
- Equipment failure
- Suicide and homicide
- Natural causes

Non-War Deaths

(DMDC, 2019)

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Complete list in *We Regret To Inform You* \*p. 13-14 \*\*pp. 10-11

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## “Families Are Prepared For Loss”

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- Families are not prepared for that “knock at the door”
- Worry more, especially in war or high-risk fields
- “What if” conversations do not prepare for bad news



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## “Military Takes Care Of Its Own”

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- Surprisingly common misconception
- Civilians often uninformed on military
- Isolates survivors within their community
- Disenfranchises families

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## Whose Loss Is Worse?

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**Family of PO2 Brody Miller, USN**

**Mom: Rita, 52**

**Widow: Elise, 29**

**Daughter: Hannah, 6**

**Dad?**

**Stepdad?**

**Brody's brother?**



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## Primary Losses

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**Losses that originate from the death:**

- **Personal relationship**
- **Physical presence of loved one**
- **Physical part of family**
- **Part of your past/present/future**

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## Secondary Losses

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**Valid losses stemming from death**

- **Tangible**
  - **Loved one's dog**
  - **Family or friends who fade away**
- **Intangible**
  - **Loss of safety from harm**
  - **Identity**

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## Grief

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**Grief is a:**

- normal
- natural
- expected reaction to loss

**Grief is the price you pay for love!**

**Love deeply → Grieve deeply**

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## Important Point to Remember on Grief!

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- **How sudden the death was...**  
**...affects how a person initially responds**
- **Cause and circumstances of death...**  
**...impact what a person will contend with down the road**

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## Anticipated, Sudden and Traumatic Death

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- **Sudden traumatic death**
- **Human-caused sudden death**
- **Natural sudden death**
- **Anticipated death**

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## Traumatic Death

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- Sudden and unexpected
- Random or preventable
- Violent w/ major damage to body
- Multiple deaths
- Survivor's confrontation w/ death
- Loss of a child

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## Traumatic Death in the Military

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- Unnerving notification process
  - Second-hand account
  - No tangible proof
  - Inaccessible death site
  - Time delay
- Unviewable or unrecoverable body
- Unknown and unknowable details

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## Perfect Storm of Military Grief

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**“The intersection  
of 3 powerful forces  
that has the power to create  
the perfect storm of grief  
in families of the fallen.”**

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## Perfect Storm of Military Grief

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### Intersection of 3 powerful forces:

1. Death of the service member
2. Likelihood it was sudden and unexpected
3. Unique factors that military service brings to death

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## Ten Unique Factors of Military Loss

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### Life and death of the service member

1. Young service members
2. Purposeful lives
3. Died sudden deaths
4. Possibly died on deployment or away from base

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## Ten Unique Factors of Military Loss

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### Life experience of the survivors

5. Young families/young parents left behind
6. Deployment-delayed grief
7. Isolated by geography

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## Ten Unique Factors of Military Loss

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### National view of military service

8. Personal loss entwined in a national loss
9. National reminders of service/sacrifice
10. New identity for families



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## Grief is a Package Deal

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## Grief is a Package Deal

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Emotional	Behavioral	Physical
• Crying	• Acting out	• Sighing
• Sorrow	• Mannerisms	• Back pain
• Numbness	• Restlessness	• Insomnia
• Anger	• Nightmares	• Illness
•	•	•
•	•	•

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## Grief is a Package Deal

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Cognitive	Social	Spiritual
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Memory</li> <li>• No focus</li> <li>• Distracted</li> <li>• Scattered</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Isolation</li> <li>• Hyperactivity</li> <li>• Sensitivity</li> <li>• No interest</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beliefs</li> <li>• Faith</li> <li>• Blame</li> <li>• Why?</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>

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## Factors that Influence Grief

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<b>Lost service member</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship w/ deceased</li> <li>• Type of death</li> </ul>
<b>Surviving family members</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical and emotional health</li> <li>• Personality and coping behaviors</li> <li>• Religion, ethnicity, geography</li> <li>• Support system</li> </ul>

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## Stages of Grief Model (DABDA)

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- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

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## Needs of Grief Model (New)

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1. Understand that your loved one is dead
2. Feel the pain
3. Adjust to a different relationship
4. Develop a new self-identity
5. Search for meaning
6. Be open to support

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## Men, Grief and a Checklist

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**When it comes to grief men get the short end of the stick!**

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## Men Get the Short End of the Stick

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**Because of:**

- Social conditioning
- Stereotyping
- Perception of grief as only emotions

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## Different Styles of Grief

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★ **Intuitive grievers**

- Need to feel pain
- Need to talk about it
- Experience grief as feelings
- Find comfort and strength in sharing with those who understand

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## Different Styles of Grief

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★ **Instrumental grievers**

- Work to keep emotions in control
- Respond to feelings by turning emotional energy into actions
- Tend to think their way through grief
- Talk about solving problems stemming from the loss

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## Men and Women and Grief

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**Women:** *“Generally talk about grief in paragraphs.”*

**Men:** *“Generally talk about grief with headlines.”*

( **PS. Both ways are correct!** )

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## Grief “Checklist” for Men

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1. **Learn about your type of grief**
2. **Tap into previous crisis skills**
3. **Don’t ignore depression or anxiety**
4. **Watch out for harmful behaviors**
5. **Get moving**
6. **Take a break from grief**
7. **Maintain personal relationships**

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## Disenfranchised Grief

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- **Circumstances of the death**
- **Survivor’s loss isn’t acknowledged**
- **Relationship isn’t respected**
- **Survivor may be left out of funeral**
- **Grieving style not validated**

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## Suicide

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### In the military

- **Perceived as flaw vs. illness/injury**
- **Record of service may be devalued**
- **‘Rock of Gibraltar’ mindset**
- **Considered LOD death**

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## Suicide

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- More than one cause
- More than 70% have been dx'd w/ a mental illness\*
- Illness or injury—not a flaw or sin
- Trail of unanswerable “Why’s”

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## Suicide Language

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- Died by suicide
- “Committed” suicide
  - Perception of criminal overtone
- “Completed” suicide
  - Perception of accomplishment

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## Suicide Grief

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- Same military factors
- Very intense grief reactions
- Disenfranchised risk
- Stigmatizes deceased *and* survivors

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## Suicide Grief

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**Can have very intense reactions of**

- **Anger**
- **Guilt**
- **Blame**
- **Responsibility**
- **Rejection/abandonment**

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## Points to Remember w/ Suicide

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- **Personal beliefs on suicide**
  - **Coordinator**
  - **Survivors**
- **Say the name of the deceased** 
- **Awareness of survivor's state of mind**

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## Military Grief has a Long Shelf Life

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**Obstacles to moving forward in grief:**

- **Additional details/changing circumstances**
- **Other military deaths (esp. like your loss)**
- **National triggers and reminders**
- **Gold Star identity**
- **Military in news cycles/social media**

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**7 Tips for Survivors on Dealing with Military Grief's Long Shelf Life**  
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1. **Learn about military grief and your particular type of loss**
2. **Grieve your secondary losses**
3. **Recognize your hot buttons/triggers**
4. **Establish boundaries**

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**7 Tips for Survivors on Dealing with Military Grief's Long Shelf Life**  
\*\*\*

5. **Review your progress every now and then**
6. **Make it a priority to take care of yourself**
7. **Get help if stress, anxiety or depression interferes with your daily life**

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**Moving On vs. Moving Forward**  
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**Moving on:**

- **Breaking ties to people, places, things**
- **Letting go and putting the past behind**
- **Trying to forget**

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## Moving On vs. Moving Forward

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### Moving forward:

- ✓ Work on the needs of grief
- ✓ Gain strength body, mind and spirit
- ✓ Take the love, memory and spirit of your loved one with you !

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## Signs of Moving Forward

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- Loved one isn't your first waking thought !!
- Genuinely laugh at something funny 😊
- Memories bring comfort
- No longer work your loss into conversations !!
- Remember the story line of a movie
- Enjoy yourself and not feel (too) guilty
- Take a time out from grief

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## Measuring Progress

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- *"One step forward and two steps backward is still progress"*
- Former Vice President Biden example

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**When Moving Forward Isn't Working**  
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**Stuck in grief?**

Seeking out help  
*is not a sign of failure;*  
 it's an act of determination !!

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**Complicated Grief**  
**Mayo Clinic: [www.mayoclinic.org](http://www.mayoclinic.org)**  
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1. Overview
2. Symptoms
3. When to see a doctor
4. If you have thoughts of suicide
5. Causes
6. Risk Factors
7. Complications
8. Prevention/Treatment

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**Building Resilience in Gold Star Families**  
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Energy helps you get through the day;  
 resilience moves you forward for the long haul

**“RESILIENCE** can mean  
 having the doggedness to persevere,  
 the backbone to get up again when life has  
 knocked you down, or the grit and guts  
 to not let grief win.”

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## Tips on Building Resilience

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**In addition to eating right, exercising and getting enough sleep:**

- **Keep up a routine**
- **Play with your pets**
- **Give time to a hobby**
- **Try to laugh every day**
- **Respect your boundaries**

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## Helpful GSF and Grief Language (1)

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**Use correct service branch language when referring to a deceased service member**

- **Army: soldiers**
- **Navy: sailors**
- **Air Force: airmen**
- **Marine Corps: Marines (Yes, it's capitalized)**
- **Coast Guard: Coast Guardsmen**
- **National Guard: Guardsmen**

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## Helpful GSF and Grief Language (2)

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- **Try not to use "passed away"**  
**Instead use "died" or "killed"**
- **Use "died by suicide"**
- **Use the deceased *first name* with families**

- **BEST condolence:**
  - ***"I'm sorry for the loss of your (son, spouse, etc.) and use his/her first name!"***

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### Grief Clichés to Avoid

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- *Time heal all wounds*
- *Everything happens for a reason*
- *It was his/her time to go*
- *Don't dwell on (his) death. Remember...*
- *I hope you find closure*
- *You've got to move on with your life*
- *It was God's will*
- *You're in my thoughts and prayers*

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### Case Study #1

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**PO2 Brody Miller, USN. Died in an onboard ordnance mishap only 2 months into a 6 month Mediterranean deployment. Only partial remains recovered. Immediate family: Widow and Daughter, Dad, Mom and Stepdad, Brother**

**Immediate implications:**

**Long-term issues:**

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### Case Study #2

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**LCpl Alexander Johnson, USMC. Died in a non-combat helicopter crash in the Al Anbar Province, Iraq in 2005. All 31 onboard the helo were killed. Now 15 years out, his mother appears to be stuck in her grief, which is seriously impacting her health and living conditions. She is an alcoholic and currently homeless.**

**Immediate issues and needs:**

**Impediments:**

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**Services**

- Practical training on grief, loss and resilience
- Author books on grief for Gold Star families
- Deliver motivational talks on building personal resilience in the midst of adversity

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**Contact Information**


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**NEW\* WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU. A Survival Guide for Gold Star Parents and Those Who Support Them**  
 By Joanne Steen (Central Recovery Press, 2019)



**MILITARY WIDOW: A Survival Guide**  
 By Joanne Steen & Regina Asaro (NIP, 2006)

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