



WHEN A DONOR DIES

10 Things Nobody Tells Fundraisers

A field guide for the grief that lives between the professional and the personal



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Before we begin...

You have probably read grief resources before. They tell you that grief is normal, that it comes in waves, that you should be kind to yourself. All of that is true, and almost none of it reaches the specific, strange, sometimes uncomfortable experience of grieving a donor.

This guide is not about grief in general. It is about the ten things that happen to fundraisers when a donor dies: the things that catch you off guard, the things you feel guilty about, the things nobody in your life quite understands, the things you might not even admit to yourself.

The fundraising profession trains us extensively for one reality: building relationships. It barely acknowledges a second: those relationships will end. When they do, the grief that follows is real, it is complicated, and the field has almost nothing to offer us when it arrives.

This guide is an attempt to fill that gap with honest language for what is actually happening instead of checklists and platitudes. Read it in order, or turn to the page that already describes what you are feeling. Either way, you will not find reassurance here for its own sake. You will find support from those of us who know this work and are willing to name it plainly.

1

Your grief is real, but hard to explain.

On disenfranchised grief
and why it hits fundraisers.

Society has rules and norms for how to treat a person when someone they care about dies. An immediate family member gets bereavement leave at work. Families stay home and receive visitors bearing food. Flowers are sent and received. Close friends of the deceased get phone calls, or cards filled with stories and fond memories. But when a donor dies, you the fundraiser get a task list. No one knows what to do with you.

There is a term for what you are experiencing: disenfranchised grief. It is grief that society does not officially recognize; grief that happens outside the categories people know how to respond to. You were not family. You were not technically a friend. So the people around you may have no idea that you are grieving at all. They are not being cruel, but they do not have a category for what you had with this person.

You knew why your donor gave, the legacy this person hoped to leave, and what they were trying to achieve with their life and their money. You knew about the child they were proud of and the one they worried about. You sat in their living room, shared coffee and maybe some wine. You watched them take stock of their lives in clear view. You were, in ways that are hard to explain in a staff meeting, part of the fabric of their life.

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**You knew things about
this person that their
family did not.**

**The nature of your
relationship does not
have a clean name, but it
was real.**

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That is an unusual kind of relationship. It does not map onto spouse, friend, colleague, or acquaintance. It exists in a category culture has not yet named, which is part of why the grief goes unrecognized. But unnamed is not the same as unreal.



What to do with this

Stop waiting for permission to grieve. The relationship you had was legitimate. The loss you feel is legitimate. You do not need someone else to recognize it before you are allowed to feel it.

If you can, find a mentor or a peer from another organization who you can say the real thing to: “I am grieving.” That simple act of naming turns invisible grief into something witnessed, and witnessed grief is easier to carry.

2

The work does not stop.

On being expected to function while something inside you is not functioning.

You find out a donor has died. Maybe you get a call from the family. Maybe you see the obituary. Maybe a colleague forwards an email with no subject line. And within hours (or sometimes within minutes) the professional machine starts moving.

There are calls to make. Records to update. Leadership to notify. Perhaps an estate gift to manage, a family to contact, a memorial to attend. The donor literally just died and already your role has shifted from relationship manager to grief administrator.

Nobody warns you how strange this is, to be asked to manage the professional aftermath of a loss you are simultaneously feeling. The world expects you to be competent and composed precisely because of the nature of the relationship you are grieving. The deeper the relationship, the more indispensable you are in the days after the death. The more indispensable you are, the less space you have to fall apart.

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This is one of the crueler paradoxes of this work, and nobody talks about it. It's past time to talk about it.



What to do with this

Give yourself a pause, no matter how small, before you start executing. Even five minutes. Close the laptop. Name what you are feeling. Then step back in.

You are allowed to be both grieving and competent. They are not opposites. But you will do the work better if you acknowledge, even briefly, that you are carrying something heavy while you do it.

3

You may be simultaneously grieving and managing the estate.

On the particular exhaustion of having to be professional about someone you cared about emotionally.

For major gift officers and planned giving staff, this can be the most disorienting part: the donor dies, and you become the person responsible for stewarding their final act of generosity. You write letters to estate attorneys. You update pledge records. You call the family to discuss the bequest. You attend meetings about how the gift will be recognized.

All of this happens while you are grieving. And because it is professional, and because the stakes are high, you are expected to do it with calm precision even as part of you is still sitting in their living room, remembering the last conversation you had.

The estate gift, if you're closing one, is in many ways the last chapter of the relationship. You are writing the ending. And you are writing it while you are still trying to accept that the story is over. Sometimes there is no estate gift, and then you have a story interrupted; no ending to write beyond the abrupt cessation of their life, like a show that ended on a cliffhanger.

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You are writing the ending of the relationship while you are still trying to accept that the story is over.

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There is also something strange about the estate process itself. The donor spent years building a vision for their giving. You helped shape it. And now that vision is being executed through paperwork and legal correspondence and institutional process, while the person at the center of it is gone. That mismatch can feel unbalanced, cruel, or even surreal. You may find yourself dissociating during this part of the work.



What to do with this

Try to separate the tasks from the grief. Don't do this by suppressing the grief, but by processing the tasks separately and giving those tasks space from your grief. Before you open the estate file, take a moment to remember the person. Write a line in a journal. Say their name. Then shift into professional mode. You don't have to dissociate to get through it.

This is not compartmentalization in the unhealthy sense. It is a way of honoring both realities at once—the loss and the obligation—without letting either one collapse into the other. You are allowed to feel the weight of this work. You are also capable of doing it well. Both things are true.

4

Part of your brain will immediately think about the portfolio.

On the guilt of having professional thoughts in a grieving moment.

It's uncomfortable when your brain drives itself to thoughts that feel self-serving. But it happens to almost every fundraiser, and it happens fast.

The donor dies, and somewhere in the back of your mind, sometimes before you have even fully processed the news, the professional thoughts surface: Who will manage the relationship with the family now? Will the bequest come through? What does this mean for the campaign? Is there a replacement prospect in the pipeline? Will I meet my goal? If I don't, am I going to get fired?

And then the guilt arrives, hot and fast: What kind of person thinks about that right now?

A fundraiser. That's who. A person who has been trained to think in terms of portfolios, timelines, and goals. A person whose professional identity is so intertwined with these relationships that loss and strategy arrive simultaneously, whether they are wanted or not.

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What kind of person thinks about that right now?

A fundraiser. That's who.

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Thinking strategically does not mean the grief is fake. It does not mean you are a bad person or that the relationship was only transactional. It means your brain is doing two things at once, the way it has been conditioned to do for years. The portfolio thought is not evidence of cynicism. It is evidence that you are a professional, and professionals think professionally even when they are hurting.



What to do with this

Notice the thought. Do not shame yourself for it. Then set it aside. Not forever—just for now. There will be time, and it will be appropriate, to think through the professional implications. That time is not the first hour.

Give yourself the gift of feeling the loss before you manage it.

5

The relationship was real, and also professional. Both things are true.

On the complexity of caring about someone who was, technically, a donor.

One of the hardest things about grieving a donor is that the relationship existed in a category that defies easy description. It was not a friendship; not exactly. It was not purely professional either. It was something in-between, something our language does not have an adequate word for.

After the death, you may find yourself questioning the relationship in ways you never did while the donor was alive. You wonder: Did they really like me, or did they like the cause? Was I a friend to them, or a skilled professional who made them feel good about giving? Did they think of me when I was not there?

These questions are worth sitting with. Not resolving, but sitting with. The fundraising profession rarely invites us to think seriously about the nature of the donor relationship itself. What exactly is it? How is it different from friendship? Why do we struggle to describe it to people outside the work? Why does it produce genuine grief when it ends?

“Were you a friend, or a skilled professional who made them feel good about giving?”

That question is worth sitting with, not resolving.

The donor relationship occupies a particular social space: it is personal in its emotional texture, professional in its structure, and philanthropic in its purpose. All three things are real simultaneously. The warmth you felt was real. The institutional role that shaped the relationship was also real. The fact that your organization benefited from the connection does not cancel the humanity in it.



But there is an honest reckoning available here, if you are willing to undertake it: Some fundraising relationships are deeper than others. Some are built on genuine mutual affection; others are built on skilled professional rapport that resembles affection. Most are somewhere in between, and the proportion shifts over time. After the death, you may find yourself recalibrating, realizing the relationship was either more or less than you thought while it was happening.

Both discoveries are legitimate. Both deserve acknowledgment.



What to do with this

Stop trying to litigate the relationship in your head. It was what it was: complex, layered, shaped by professional structure and genuine human connection in proportions you may never fully know.

You are allowed to grieve it without first deciding exactly what category it fell into. The ambiguity is part of the truth.

6

Sometimes the death reveals things you were not ready to see.

On what grief can surface about the relationship and about yourself.

Not every donor relationship ends cleanly. Sometimes a death surfaces things you were not prepared for.

You may learn that the donor spoke warmly of you to their family, and realize the relationship meant more to them than you knew. You may discover they changed their bequest without telling you and feel a sting that surprises you. You may find out that family members have a very different sense of your role than you did. You may realize, sitting at the memorial, that you feel out of place, like you are on the periphery of a story you thought you were part of.

Or you may discover something harder: that you were performing more than you knew. That the warmth you thought was real was, on your end, more professional than personal. And now, sitting with the news of their death, you feel guilty about that because grief is supposed to feel a certain way, and yours does not.

Grief reflects relationships as they actually were, not as we wished them to be.

All of these things happen to fundraisers. They are uncomfortable, and they are real. The death of a donor can be a moment of unexpected clarity about the relationship: what it was, what it was not, what you wish it had been.



What to do with this

Be honest with yourself, even if you are not honest with anyone else. If the relationship was complicated, let it be complicated in your private processing. If you feel guilty, name the guilt and see if it is teaching you something. If the grief is less than you expected, that is also okay, and it does not require explanation.

Grief reflects relationships as they actually were, not as we wished them to be. That honesty, even when uncomfortable, is more useful than performance.

7

Sometimes nobody at work notices you are grieving.

On invisibility, and how to survive it.

You are having the worst week of your professional year and your colleagues have no idea.

Maybe they did not know the donor. Maybe they knew the name but not the relationship. Maybe they are wrapped up in their own deadlines. Maybe they simply do not think of fundraiser grief as something that requires acknowledgment because nobody ever taught them that it should.

This invisibility is one of the loneliest parts of the whole experience. You are carrying something real and heavy, and the workplace around you is just moving forward with meetings and campaign updates and quarterly reports as if nothing happened.

What makes this worse is that fundraisers are often skilled at being fine. It is part of the job. You are trained to show up warmly and professionally regardless of what is happening inside. That skill, which serves you so well in most circumstances, can make it very easy for grief to go completely unseen by colleagues, by managers, and sometimes by yourself.

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That skill, which serves you so well in most circumstances, can make grief go completely unseen.



What to do with this

You have two choices, and either one could help you.

The first is to name your grief to one trusted person at work. Not a full account, but enough to make it real: "I knew this donor well. I'm having a harder time with this than I expected." That simple act of naming turns invisible grief into something witnessed.

The second is to build your own witness: Keep a journal. Create a private ritual. Mark the loss in a way that belongs only to you. You do not need an audience to grieve legitimately.

8

Sometimes the family does not recognize your importance.

On the sting of being peripheral to people who were central to you.

You spent years building a relationship with this donor. You knew their giving history, their values, their fears about their legacy. The family may know your name. They may not. They may see you as a pleasant acquaintance of their parent's later years, or as the person who is going to shake them down for money that should be rightfully theirs.

You show up to the memorial and you respectfully sit towards the back. You sign the guest book with a note you have thought carefully about, and you wonder if anyone will read it. You reach out to the family and get a brief, polite reply—or no reply at all.

This can hurt in a specific way that is hard to explain. You were important to this person. And now you are on the periphery of the aftermath of their death. The hard truth is that the relationship you had with the donor existed within a particular context—your organization, your shared work, the giving relationship—and the family's grief is organized around a completely different set of connections. You were central to each other in a very particular context. Outside that context, the relationship does not always translate.

Understanding this intellectually does not make it sting less. But it does reframe what the family's response means and does not mean.

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You were central to each other in a very particular context.

Outside that context, the relationship does not always translate.

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What to do with this

Try not to measure the relationship by how the family treats you in the weeks after the death. Grief is chaotic. People are managing logistics and emotions and extended family dynamics. You will not be the priority, and that is not a verdict on what you had.

Honor the relationship on your own terms. Write the note. Attend the service. Keep the memory. You do not need the family to validate what was real between you and the donor.



9 Sometimes it takes a while to discover you cared more than you realized.

On the grief that arrives late, and what to do when it surprises you.

You hear the news, and you feel okay. A little sad, maybe. You write the condolence note, you handle the professional tasks, you move on. And then three weeks later, you are driving to work, or sitting in a meeting, or doing something completely unrelated, and it hits you.

The relationship was more important to you than you knew.

This happens for a few reasons. Grief sometimes has to wait until we stop moving long enough to catch up with us. The professional tasks in the immediate aftermath

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Grief sometimes has to wait until we stop moving long enough for it to catch up with us.

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of a death can function as welcome distractions: keeping us functional, keeping us busy, keeping us from feeling the full weight of the loss temporarily. But not indefinitely.

It also happens because some relationships reveal their depth only in absence. You did not fully understand what this donor meant to you until they were gone, and now you are recalibrating. That recalibration is its own kind of grief: not just mourning the person, but mourning the relationship you had with them without fully appreciating it at the time.



What to do with this

Let it in. Whenever it arrives, whatever form it takes, let it be what it is. Late grief is not less real than immediate grief, it just had to wait for a quieter moment. It deserves the same attention you would have given it on day one. Grief has no timetable.

10

This probably won't be the last donor you lose.

On accumulated loss, and what it does to a fundraiser over time.

This guide is written as though you are facing a single death. But fundraising is a career built on relationship after relationship, and relationships end. Some end because donors move away, or lose interest, or simply drift. But some end because people die.

If you are a major gift officer or a planned giving specialist with a long career, you will likely experience this grief not once, but many times. After the fifth donor death, after the tenth, after the twentieth, the experience changes. The question is: how?

Nobody in the fundraising profession asks this question openly. Does repeated loss make you better at the work—more present, more attentive, more grateful for the time you have with donors? Or does it make you harder, more detached, more inclined to keep relationships at a careful professional distance to protect yourself from the next loss? Or does it do both simultaneously, in proportions that shift depending on the year and the donor and how well you slept?

Some fundraisers find that repeated loss deepens their practice. They become more skilled at being present with donors, more attentive to the things that matter, less interested in the transactional parts of the work. The grief teaches them something the training never did: that the relationship is the point, and it is finite, and therefore it deserves full attention now.

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The question nobody asks in our field is what repeated loss actually does to a fundraiser over the arc of a career.

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Others find that the accumulation of loss produces a kind of quiet hardening. Not cynicism, exactly, but distance. A self-protective instinct that keeps new relationships



from getting too close. This is understandable, and it is also worth watching. The hardening that protects you from grief can also slowly disconnect you from the thing that made the work meaningful in the first place.

There is a third possibility: that repeated loss produces grief fatigue, a state where each new death registers less, not because you care less, but because there is simply not enough capacity left to process each one fully. But unprocessed grief doesn't simply go away. Unprocessed grief accumulates. It contributes to burnout in ways that are hard to trace because the cause is not a single loss but the weight of many.



What to do with this

Pay attention to the pattern over time, not just the individual losses. If you notice yourself pulling back from new relationships, or feeling numb to news you would once have felt strongly, or carrying a fatigue that does not lift after normal rest, these are signs worth taking seriously.

The fundraising profession has not yet developed a coherent framework for understanding what repeated relational loss does to the people who do this work. In the absence of that framework, you have to build your own: small practices, honest reflection, and enough support to keep the accumulated weight from becoming unbearable.



Carrying it Forward

There is no clean ending to this kind of grief. You will not arrive at a point where you can file away your grief in the proverbial file cabinet of your mind. What you will find, over time, is that it becomes something you carry differently; less like a weight and more like something that has changed the shape of how you move through the work.

The donors who die do not disappear from your practice. They become part of how you listen, how you build trust, how you understand what giving really means to a person. If you pay attention, they teach you how to do this work better.

The discomfort you feel, the guilt around thinking about your portfolio “at a time like this,” the confusion about what the relationship was, the sting of being invisible to the family—none of these are signs that you are doing this wrong. They are signs that you are doing people-centered work.

The transactional fundraiser does not feel any of this. You do, because you showed up as a whole person. Hold onto that.

A Note on Seeking Professional Support

If grief is interfering with your sleep, your concentration, or your ability to function over an extended period, or if you notice yourself using unhealthy patterns to manage the accumulated weight of this work, talk to a professional.

Talking to a counselor or therapist is not a last resort. It is a smart, professional choice for someone doing emotionally demanding work.

Many organizations offer Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) that provide free, confidential short-term counseling. If yours does, this is a completely legitimate reason to use it. The note in your file will say something like “personal matters.” It does not need to say more.



We Must Care for One Another in Grief

The fundraising profession trains us extensively for one reality: building relationships. It barely acknowledges a second: those relationships will end, and the ending will cost something.

We learn how to cultivate, how to solicit, how to steward. We attend conferences on donor engagement and portfolio management and the psychology of giving. We read case studies about transformational gifts and record-breaking campaigns. What we do not read, what nobody writes, what no conference session addresses, is what happens inside the fundraiser when the donor dies.

This is a gap in the profession's self-understanding. Fundraising asks us to build real relationships with real human beings. Real human beings die. The grief that follows is not a side effect of the work. It is a direct consequence of doing the work well, of bringing genuine care and investment to these relationships over years and decades.

A profession that asks this of its people has an obligation to prepare them for it. The fact that it has not is a serious oversight. It is a structural failure that contributes to burnout, to early exit from the field, and to the very real suffering of skilled fundraisers—people—who have no framework for what they are experiencing.

None of us can fix this alone. What we can do is name it. Name it to yourself, to colleagues, and to managers who may not yet understand what they are asking of their staff. Name it to your mentees if you've been fundraising a long time.

The first step toward a profession that takes this seriously is fundraisers who are willing to say: this is real, it matters, and we deserve better than silence.

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