

Thank You Senator Beyer and member of the committee.

My name is Robin Zimmerman and I live in Lafayette of District 12.

Friday, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, was the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my wife, Bonnie's, death. Since then I have spent a lot of time educating myself in the subject of grief in an effort to provide better care for my daughter and myself. Much of what I have learned has gone into my written testimony. In 2011 the Senate passed this bill with bipartisan support. And the presence of my daughter reminds me of why I requested this amendment in first place. At the time it was not about my losing my wife. It was about the 12 year old girl who lost her mother. I realized that what my child needed more than anything else was her father at home. My employer did tell me I could take off any time I needed. The reality is I could only take off only the time I could afford. During the previous 2 years I had nearly exhausted my vacation time and savings with caring for Bonnie. So, as a result, I was expecting to return work after only 1 week, just one day after the memorial. I had 12 weeks of sick pay benefits on the books at work, but FMLA and OFLA rules did not allow access to them. At the memorial a coworker told me a collection had been taken at work and handed me an envelope full of cash. What my friends did was an answer to a prayer. That generous gift made it possible for me to take that next week off with my daughter. A situation like this should not be left to the generosity of others. Not all Oregonians have large support systems or such a close relationship with their coworkers. Many of our fellow citizens could have many more financial issues than even I had. My work on a high speed production line takes constant concentration. One mistake can render thousands of dollars worth of product unusable in just a few short minutes. A false step or movement because of my own distraction could have resulted in an unsafe action and possible injury. If I had returned on the day I expected my mind would have been at home with my daughter and not on my job. And I know that the time off made the difference of how my daughter and I went on healing from there.

## House Bill 2950 Testimony

Chairperson Beyer and members of the committee.

My name is Robin Zimmerman. I live at 1282 Third St. #25, Lafayette, Oregon.

I am a concerned citizen and I am in support of House Bill 2950.

Death, whether it comes after a protracted illness or in the blink of an eye, has the same result. Survivors left behind. The initial shock will leave a family unable to function with their daily lives. Even the basic chore of fixing and eating meals will disappear into a fog. I know the effects of this from personal experience. Everyone, at some point in their lives, will be touched by death and its aftermath. Shock, grief, bereavement, and recovery have been largely ignored and unspoken in our society today. We go from day to day thinking we will be immune. We say to ourselves, "It will not happen to me", or, "I can handle it".

The national conversation about grief has begun to expand and make a dramatic change in the last couple years. In less than a year we have seen tragedy strike in a very public way. Aurora, Colorado; Newtown, Connecticut; our own Clackamas Town center. All these are very public views of the trauma of loss unleashed on families. In watching the news stories I noticed that now, a vital part of the first responders, are grief counselors. At the end of each of the news stories on the Clackamas shooting information was given on obtaining grief counseling. And if unable to attend these scheduled counseling sessions the Department of Justice offered to reimburse the cost of outside counseling. In one interview a doctor explained that many people will not start to realize the need for help until 4 days to a week has passed.

Another matter is considering the safety of having a person return to the workplace while dealing with the trauma of loss. I witness firsthand the large amount of resources my employer invests in safety. There are policies written, training sessions, banners, and incentive programs. A company would not do this if it was not getting a return on this investment. The costs of insurance, and the costs generated by an accident in the workplace, are always a factor in planning the cost of doing business. Allowing a person to take what amounts to a few extra days off to help them recover enough to think clearly only makes sense as another investment in safety.

In the article "*Emotional jet lag. Grief affects concentration.*" Russell Friedman says:

*"You must realize that the inability to concentrate is the single most common of all responses to loss."* and as advice to those that experience loss "*When possible it is a good idea to avoid driving and working with any tools that require concentration and mental co-ordination.*"

It has become a standard in our country for an employer to allow three days to an employee to arrange and attend a memorial, which in itself is very difficult. But no time to address the trauma generated from a loss and its effect on the individual and their family. The loss may mean finding daycare, arranging therapy, or a complete restructuring of the household dynamic. I feel an effective and appropriate way to help with this is by amending the Oregon Family Leave Act to allow protected time off in the event of a death in the family.

I can tell you how the death occurs will make no difference. You can get a call in the middle of the night to be told there had been an accident. Or, you can spend a year at someone's bedside as

they suffer through an illness and hold their hand as they die, either way, you will sit there in disbelief wondering how you came to this point. Always having believed it would never happen in your life.

When considering this bill think to yourself. How would I handle, or, for some of us, how have I handled this kind of loss? Could I make all the necessary arrangements and put my household back together in three days? Now consider, how much time would I want my family allowed if I were to die? The truth is that every one of us will face the death of a family member at some point in our lives.

**Thank You for the opportunity to testify before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions.**

**Robin Zimmerman**

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## **Emotional jet lag. Grief affects concentration**

### **1**

*February 1st, 1994, by Russell Friedman*

Working with grieving people for more than thirty years has given us a wealth of practical experience. Amongst the many observations we've made is the fact that grieving people often seem to be slower to respond to even the simplest of questions, and to be baffled by tasks that are normally routine. Imagine that your brain has been filled up with three quarts of molasses. That is pretty much the effect that a major loss event can have on your capacity to think, feel, and participate in life.

We offer this truth for the dual purpose of helping griever and for helping those around griever. If you have experienced a major significant emotional loss of any kind, there is a high probability that your ability to concentrate on day to day activities may be severely limited. You may have an idea, walk to the next room to act on it, and when you get there, realize that you haven't got the faintest idea what it was you had intended to do. If you hear nothing else, please hear that this is a normally occurring phenomenon. Recognize that your entire being – emotional, physical, and spiritual – is focused on the loss that just occurred. When possible it is a good idea to avoid driving and working with any tools that require concentration and mental co-ordination. An incredibly high percentage of serious and fatal auto accidents befall grieving people.

It is essential that you recognize this naturally occurring inability to concentrate. It is equally important that you not judge yourself harshly for being dazed, confused, and preoccupied. But most important, you must be gentle with yourself. There is absolutely nothing to be gained by hammering yourself for being normal and human.

For those of you who are near and dear to friends who have recently experienced a painful loss of any kind. Read all of the above – reread all of the above. You must recognize that the inability to concentrate is the single most

common of all responses to loss. Do not berate. Do not scold. Do not have an opinion or judgment. Remember your friend is on another planet – the planet grief. Their entire being is trying to make sense out of an incredibly painful experience.

By definition, “grief is the normal and natural emotional response to loss of any kind.” Most of us have been falsely socialized to shift the emotional reaction into the intellect. But, the head is not broken – the heart is broken. You must resist the temptation to make intellectual comments to your grieving friend. For example; while it is intellectually accurate that “life goes on,” many grieverers have a hard time participating in life at all, so life “goes on” without them.

If someone staggered towards you with an arrow sticking out of their chest, and blood dripping from the wound, you would probably recognize that the person might be in massive physical pain. It’s unlikely that you would say “Don’t feel bad, at least it wasn’t a poison arrow,” and just keep walking past them. More likely, you would say “My gosh, you must be in terrible pain, let me call an ambulance.”

Yet when someone’s heart has been broken by a major loss, most people say “Don’t Feel bad, you should feel grateful you had them so long.” While it may be intellectually accurate that you have a great deal of gratitude in that relationship, that is usually not the foremost emotional response to the death of a loved one. Perhaps it would be helpful to imagine that there is an emotional arrow sticking out of their chest. It will remind you to respond more helpfully.

Even though death can be separated into two categories, sudden death or long term illness, ultimately all death is sudden. Don’t make the mistake of thinking that if someone has tended to a dying loved one for a long time, that they would automatically have less pain than someone who has lost someone to a sudden death. In fact, it is a good idea to make no assumptions at all. The finality of death, along with end of any hopes of a miracle remission or cure, brings a tremendous amount of emotional pain.

For many people, drowning in a sea of painful emotions, numbness seems like a constant companion. It may take hours or even days to sort out the feelings and thoughts that have been unearthed by the death of a loved one. The death of a “less than loved one” may produce even more confusing emotions.

We have been talking mainly about reactions to death. The emotional response to divorce, while different, is parallel. Divorce is the “death of a relationship.” Quite often, one divorcing partner feels as if there has been a sudden death and one feels like they have been caught in a long term illness. In either situation, there is liable to be the same inability to concentrate that effects those responding to death. It is also quite probable that those reeling from the affects of a divorce will have some difficulty identifying the feelings they are experiencing. As we pointed out earlier, this reduced ability to concentrate is normal. Don’t fight it. Be gentle with yourself. Avail yourself of *The Grief Recovery Handbook* as soon as possible. It is never too soon to begin to recover.

Friends, be alert to the emotional arrow that you can’t see. Your friend has a broken heart. You need to be gentle also.