

# The Amuta

## An Israeli model of caring for disenfranchised mourners



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**Abstract:** Unmarried partners of soldiers who have died on active duty in Israel have traditionally been excluded from the recognised 'family of bereaved'. They may be seen as a distinct group of disenfranchised mourners. A non-government organisation (The Amuta) was created in 1997 to provide emotional support, counselling, and remembrance ceremonies to these young men and women. The support offered aims both to acknowledge their loss and help them plan for the future. This paper reports the findings from a small-scale quantitative study of the experiences of some of the people who have sought help from The Amuta. The model of care it describes may be helpful to people bereaved in similar situations in other countries.

**Keywords:** Bereavement, disenfranchised grief, military service, young adults, identity

This paper takes as its focus a distinct group of bereaved people with very particular support needs: the unmarried partners of soldiers who have died on active military service. In Israel, where the project it describes is based, unmarried partners have traditionally been excluded from the 'family of bereaved', compounding their sorrow and giving rise to a sense of alienation. However the learning from this work is likely to be relevant in other countries, even those with more liberal attitudes to marriage.

In Israel, the Ministry of Defense is legally obliged to provide care only to first degree family members following the death of a soldier in active service – that is, the blood relations of the dead soldier (parents, siblings, children) and his/her spouse. This excludes unmarried partners from the financial, psychological and social support provided to married partners. Very few test cases have been taken to court to try to win equivalent support for unmarried partners and it is unlikely that this law will be changed in the foreseeable future.

Immediate family members of fallen soldiers receive support from a special bereavement unit within the Israeli army. Unmarried partners are excluded from this support and are not even officially notified of their partner's death. This exclusion is most evident on Remembrance Day, a national day of mourning in Israel during which the names of all soldiers who have died in service are broadcast on television and radio and printed in the newspapers. Places of entertainment are closed and a siren is sounded twice during the day throughout the country, when people stop what they are doing and stand to attention, no matter where they are, to silently acknowledge the fallen soldiers. Even on highways, drivers and passengers stand beside their vehicles for the duration of the siren. Memorial ceremonies are held throughout the country and bereaved parents and siblings are provided with transport to the ceremonies and to military cemeteries. It is by far the most emotional day in Israel – a day when the nation collectively acknowledges the loss of all the men and women who have given their lives for the country.

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In 1997, The Amuta (the Non-Profit Organisation for the Emotional Support of Girlfriends and Boyfriends of Fallen Soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces – Amuta in Hebrew means a non-profit, non-government organisation) was established to fill this gap by providing support services to the unmarried partners of fallen soldiers. The Amuta offers free group therapy sessions led by a trained health professional to any unmarried person who has lost a partner in military service, irrespective of the cause of death. If there is no group available for the person to join, The Amuta pays for individual therapy for the newly bereaved partner. It also provides a 24-hour support system, and organises an annual memorial ceremony. To date, The Amuta has supported 280 young men and women who have lost their partner during military service, whether through military action, accident, illness, suicide or terrorist attack while on leave.

Since its inception, The Amuta has changed the public perception of unmarried partners in Israel. The media have

reported and applauded the organisation's work. Funded originally through donations, The Amuta now receives some financial support from the Ministry of Defense. It is also now notified by the bereavement officers of the Israeli Defense Force if it is known that the deceased soldier had a boyfriend or girlfriend, so they can be contacted and offered support. Special support groups have also been set up for people who lost a partner before 1997 when The Amuta was created.

In 2008, The Amuta helped establish a memorial ceremony for unmarried partners on Remembrance Day. Considering the significance of that day, the event is emotionally important and an acknowledgement that The Amuta's members are not forgotten and are among the 'family of bereaved'.

In addition to emotional support, therapy and memorial ceremonies, The Amuta organises occasional social events. These are very significant to the members because they are seen as equivalent to the invitations to picnics, concerts and other outings provided by the Ministry of Defense to bereaved married partners, and a sign of further legitimisation of their status as bereaved partners.

### Disenfranchised grief

Doka (1989, p4) defines disenfranchised grief as: '... grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, socially sanctioned or publicly mourned'. The bereaved person may experience an intense reaction, but family, friends and society in general do not acknowledge this.

Doka (1989) also describes how disenfranchisement can occur at several levels in the grieving process. The first level is the lack of recognition of the person's relationship with the deceased. Instead of receiving support and acknowledgement of their loss, the bereaved partner may be expected to support the family of the deceased. The next level is exclusion from the mourning rituals, which leads to further marginalisation. Lack of social acknowledgement of the relationship can result in failure by significant people in the mourner's life to validate the impact of the loss (Thornton, Robertson & Mlecko, 1991).

Bereavement is known to affect people's physical and mental health. Bereaved people report physical and mental health problems – especially depression and anxiety (Jacobs *et al*, 1990; Zisook & Shuchter, 1991; Mendes-De-Leon, Kasl & Jacobs, 1994). Other health-related problems that can follow bereavement include alcohol abuse and excessive use of prescription drugs (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1994), and loss of identity and self-esteem, particularly in young people (Bar-Nadav, 2007).

There is no evidence that unmarried people experience any less intense grief following the death of a partner. In a ground-breaking study, contrary to previous belief, Bar

Nadav (2007) found no association between the legal status of the relationship and the intensity and duration of sadness and loss experienced by the surviving partner, if the marriage/relationship was childless. Widows and bereaved girlfriends alike experienced depression, anxiety, difficulty in concentrating at work, and problems in managing social situations. The pain of their loss was equal for both groups and did not wane any faster over time. The major difference between the two groups was the support available to the widows from the Ministry of Defense.

Bar Nadav also highlighted a particular problem for young mourners, who may be more vulnerable to identity problems and loss of self-esteem following the death of their partner, particularly if the relationship has progressed to a formal engagement. This is well captured in the words of one member of The Amuta, who told us: 'I felt like I had lost myself, too. My life revolved around his, he was my other half, and suddenly it was gone. So who and what was I?'

Given these known effects of disenfranchised grief, how these unmarried partners live the rest of their lives may be influenced by whether or not they receive acknowledgement and support at the time of their bereavement.

We therefore conducted a small-scale qualitative study to explore Amuta members' views about the role of the organisation in their recovery and the aspects they found most helpful. The results reported here are based on a small sample of female respondents, which precludes our making broad generalisations from the findings. However they do highlight those aspects of the support services that are most valued by members, and suggest pointers for further research.

## Methodology

The Amuta's directors were contacted for permission to carry out this project and ethical approval was received from the local Helsinki Committee for Human Rights. As the members had already responded to a questionnaire for the Bar Nadav study, it was decided to conduct a number of face-to-face interviews with people who had used The Amuta's services. Participants were recruited by

a letter e-mailed from the Board of Directors to Amuta members listed on the database who were known to be in the country. The letter guaranteed respect of privacy. Face-to-face interviews took place at a location that was convenient to the participant. We devised a list of questions (see Table 1) that were open-ended so participants could expand on their replies if they wished. Participants were told they could disclose what they wished and that they could conclude the interview at any point. Several members who were unable to attend interviews contacted the team and asked that their comments be considered for inclusion because they believed that their insights were important.

We completed three in-depth face-to-face interviews and four other members who could not attend interview contributed comments by telephone.

## Results

The stories of the three individuals who were interviewed face-to-face are summarised here and typify some of the experiences described to us by the people attending groups over the years. Although each person's story is unique, a number of themes emerged from participants' responses. These are:

- exclusion and involvement
- social networks and legitimacy
- the importance of collective remembrance.

### Exclusion and legitimacy

Jewish mourning rituals sanction the exclusion of unmarried partners. Jewish law mandates that burial should take place as soon as possible after the death. It is not uncommon for funerals in Israel to be held on the same day that the person dies, or the following day at the latest. During the first week following the funeral, the immediate family remains at home, and no entertainment or frivolity of any sort is permitted. Mirrors are covered to avoid distractions of vanity, and relatives, friends and neighbours make condolence calls. This mourning ritual applies exclusively to the immediate family; an unmarried partner has no recognised role in these rituals. Moreover, because

**Table 1:** Interview questions

1	Can you tell me a bit about yourself and the nature of your relationship with your partner?
2	Can you remember where you were and how you were told what had happened?
3	Did you attend the funeral and/or sit shiva (observe the week of mourning)?
4	Can you remember how people responded to you in the immediate period after the death?
5	When were you first approached by The Amuta?
6	When did you feel you were beginning to recover and what helped you get to that point?
7	If you could give any advice, what would it be?

only the immediate family is expected to remain at home for that week, unmarried partners may have difficulties getting time off from work or school/college to take part in the family mourning rituals.

Interviewees described their own experiences of exclusion and how family and friends were unable to understand the intensity of their grief because they were not married.

'I missed the funeral. By the time I heard, it was over. I went to his family and then all I wanted to do was sleep in his bed and wear his clothes. I know that his parents and mine thought I was crazy.'

'After the funeral was over, I was supposed to be getting on with my life. That's what everyone said. All I thought about was suicide. I might have gone through with it if I didn't get help and I know some of the others in the [Amuta] group thought this way, too. It was a surprise to find out that it wasn't only me who felt that way.'

'I was there with the family, they wanted me to be with them and I needed to be there, but I remember some woman I never met whispered to me, "It's good you're young, you'll meet someone else." That made me so angry. I had lost everything that mattered and it was like saying it didn't matter. Maybe she was trying to help. She didn't.'

D remembered that her family was no help whatsoever and that, ultimately, she was excluded by the family of her partner, who felt she needed to 'move on' before she was ready, severing her only tie to her dead partner:

'They [her family] were distant in every sense. As for my partner's family, they did try, but in the end they told me to stop visiting because I wasn't getting on with my life. That hurt because it was that last thread that bound me to them.'

One of F's parents was quite ill at the time of her partner's death. She recalled: 'I tried to pretend that I was fine. I didn't want them to worry about me, but I don't think I fooled anyone. They didn't have the time or energy for me, but it wasn't their fault.'

These accounts suggest that many parents did want to help but did not know how to support their child. The Amuta has organised groups for the parents of its members to help them support their child, but some parents may also require ongoing support.

### Social networks and legitimacy

The Amuta was regarded as a 'lifeline' by these interviewees. C felt that The Amuta and the friends she made there gave her the legitimacy that she craved for her lost relationship. She raised the issue of identity that can affect people excluded from the 'family of bereaved' – a

problem that arose when she entered a new relationship and found herself asking: 'Am I still a bereaved girlfriend or not?' One of The Amuta's goals is to help these bereaved young people heal and eventually establish new, healthy relationships and continue their lives.

J felt she had coped with her partner's death several years previously, and initially attended Amuta sessions 'to help others'. It was only when she joined a group that she recognised her own need for help and for a network of social support that understood her experience. J, now married with children, discovered that she wanted her husband to know about this part of her life and has been gratified by his response and support.

Interviewees also described problems with friends with good intentions who inadvertently behaved insensitively and in ways that failed to acknowledge their grief. D recalled:

'I couldn't win. I didn't want to go out with anyone but if I did agree to meet somebody, I wondered if anyone had told him about me. It was a kind of paranoia on my part, like "Be nice to her, she's had a bad time", or something like that.'

E remembered using her deceased partner's aftershave as perfume. She knew her friends thought this was odd, and she admits that she imagined that, if she could smell his scent, he must be coming back. J recalled being criticised for not going out and enjoying herself, and also being criticised when she did start to go out.

G would not accept any help because she saw it as a sign of weakness. When The Amuta finally persuaded her to join the group, she described the importance of being with others in the same situation:

'I still feel cheated and I am not going to forget – I don't want to forget, but it's now easier to bear and it helps to be with others who have been through the same nightmare.'

### Expressions of remembrance

Walter (2009) points out that every society has its set of social norms that determine the place of the dead and how mourners should behave. Expressions of remembrance are part of this social norm. Fallen soldiers in Israel remain within the collective consciousness of the Israeli public through Remembrance Day, literature, music, art, memorials, and charitable funds established in the name of the dead soldier. That unmarried partners are excluded from this collective ritual may be experienced as another sign that their grief is not acknowledged.

The interviewees had different views about how best to remember, but all agreed that public acts of remembrance are important as a token of respect for the lost relationship and to honour the deceased. Amuta's memorial ceremony was seen as important to the grieving process.

### J's story

J is now in her mid-30s and is married with children. She met her former partner while still in high school and the relationship continued for several years, throughout their army service and after she completed her service. During that time, she recalls having many dreams that something would happen to him, that he would be killed. When he was killed, her family wanted to help her, but didn't know how. Her mother sent her for professional counselling, which J said was useless. She described her father as an 'army man' who expected her to 'tough it out'. She felt she got more support from her boyfriend's family than from her own but sensed a subtle pressure to begin a relationship with his brother. She felt in a dilemma about how to behave socially: if she refused to go out with them, friends criticised her, but when she did, they commented: 'What? You're going out already?'

J had continued with her plans to study and felt she was coping well. However, when The Amuta was formed, a special support group was created for those who had received no help in the past, when their partner was killed. She agreed to attend this group, believing she was going 'to help others'. It was only when she began to attend the sessions that she realised she needed help as well.

She described The Amuta's work as 'holy'. She has made lasting friendships through the group. The memorial ceremony is important to her, and she has attended all of them with her husband, and chose to speak at last year's ceremony in April 2010. She says The Amuta gave her legitimacy, and a place where people understood her. She believes a support group for parents would be of value, and that there is some justification for the military services to take on the work of The Amuta. 'Times have changed. Today, being a girlfriend is seen as being more important, not the way it was.'

### B's story

B is in her 20s. She met her late boyfriend shortly after his arrival in Israel as a new immigrant. With no family of his own in the country, her own family 'adopted' him. She remembered how he ignored her at first, assuming she was too young. It was only after her mother mentioned that B was soon to be inducted into the military that he realised she was closer in age to him. Their relationship slowly evolved into a romantic one. As B put it: 'He was my boyfriend, but in a way, I was also his sister, his mother, and his family and that made it more intense.' He also began his military service and made new friends but spent every leave with B's family, which became his own, and increasingly more time with B. He proposed marriage when B was 19 years old and still in the army. She felt that she was still too young, but she accepted and still wears the engagement ring that he gave her.

He was killed while she was still in service. The news was delivered to her by her commanding officer and she was devastated. She received support from the military during the initial period of grief, but complications arose about the young man's burial. His mother insisted that he be returned for burial to his home country. Through the intervention of The Amuta and military authorities, B was granted permission as a soldier to attend the funeral – a most unusual occurrence during military service. With no grave to visit in Israel, she arranged for a monument to be built to her partner in her home town. B recalls this period of grieving as a time when her body and mind were affected: she suffered headaches, chest pain and general dysfunction. Her family tried to support her but they were also devastated. B believes her ability to recover was due to the support of The Amuta. She did not attend group sessions, but feels that her distress, grief and the significance of their relationship was legitimised through the work of The Amuta and she remains grateful to it. Unlike others, she does not attend The Amuta memorial ceremony as she is invited to the ceremony organised by her late fiancé's army unit and believes it is more important for her to attend that one. However, she was quick to point out that the ceremony is important for others and that the practice should continue. B noted that the tendency today is to marry later and that more girlfriends are likely to be needing support in coping with their grief.

J, for example, had attended all of The Amuta's memorial ceremonies, accompanied by her husband. After hearing one woman deliver a eulogy to her deceased partner in 2009, she decided to speak in 2010.

B's experience was different in that she herself was still on active military duty when her partner was killed and she received support from her military commanders. She nevertheless said that the support of The Amuta was important in helping her get permission to accompany her partner's body and attend his funeral abroad. With no possibility of visiting his grave in the foreseeable future,

she arranged for a memorial sculpture to be erected in her home town. Unlike the others, she does not attend The Amuta's memorial ceremonies, but only because she is invited to attend her partner's military unit's ceremony.

D described as sense of 'coming home' when she attended the memorial ceremony. It was, she said, a significant step in her process of recovery, and an opportunity to be with others.

G experienced the ceremony as sad but also positive, and considered it important for there to be a defined time and place for remembrance.

### C's story

C is now in her mid-20s and at university. She met her late boyfriend on her first day of high school. She recalls that he made her laugh and that they were very good friends for a long time before the relationship became romantic. Both served in the military, although C was inducted several years before him. She had completed her service and was preparing for university entrance examinations when he died. Unlike the many others who lost their boyfriends in military action, he was killed in a train crash, on his way to visit her. He had called as the train was leaving the station and so she knew he would be arriving shortly. When he failed to arrive, she tried to phone him. She thinks she must have dialled at least 50 times after she had heard on the news that there had been a serious train crash and she was certain he was on that train. She phoned his family, and her own family tried to find out if he was among the casualties admitted to hospital. C recalls that she told herself during those hours: 'He's a medic. He's helping. That's why he doesn't answer.' Eight hours later, C learned that he was the last victim to be pulled from the wreckage. She rushed to be with his family but his neighbours thought she was from the media and refused to allow her into the house until her identity was confirmed, adding to her distress.

C recalls this as being a very traumatic time. She was unable to function and believed that she had created problems for her family as she was responsible for several hours of the daily care of a sibling who was chronically ill. Now both of them needed care and she felt that she was an additional burden on her parents. Her parents wanted to help but did not know how. She recalls wanting to see her late boyfriend's clothing and smell his aftershave and began to wonder if she was mentally unbalanced.

She was contacted by The Amuta and by a friend that she had not seen for many years who had also been helped by The Amuta. She initially resisted the idea of attending group sessions but, with their encouragement, reluctantly agreed. This experience was profoundly influential in her recovery. For the first time, she felt that her grief received recognition, legitimacy and understanding. She attended The Amuta for one year and remains close friends with the group members. For C, The Amuta was a 'lifeline', offering the ongoing support she felt she needed. She believes that her parents would have been helped if they had been able to attend a support group for the bereaved. She also believes that the memorial ceremony is very important – that it is a day when she can join with other mourners and remember.

'If we didn't have that ceremony, an official recognition, it would be like saying it didn't matter – but it did matter. It changed my whole life and not to remember would be denying the meaning of that relationship and the sense of loss.'

All of the interviewees talked about the importance of having a time and place for remembrance, for acknowledgement of loss and for preserving the memory of the loved one in different ways and forms, including speeches, artwork, music and a wall where photos of the dead partner can be placed.

### Conclusion

It is clear from their accounts that these young people went through a period of profound grief that was no less intense than if they had been formally married to their partner. The support they received was important in legitimising their grief, providing them with professional and peer support and a social network, and giving them an opportunity to commemorate their dead partner in an act of collective remembrance.

The Amuta believes that all professionals working in bereavement can contribute to the recovery process by validating these non-officially sanctioned relationships and providing appropriate and acceptable support.

The Amuta provides a unique service born of necessity

and developed to meet the needs of a previously overlooked and excluded group of mourners. By offering non-judgmental support and acknowledgement of the trauma of their loss, we can provide validation for their feelings and the status of their relationship, and emotional support to help these young people regain hope and go on to develop healthy and positive relationships in the future. ■

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