

Frontline

This newsletter is dedicated to professional caregivers. It is our hope that this newsletter will help you give comfort and strength to those you serve.

Summer 2013



By Dr. Earl A. Grollman

With Death Emerges Redefinition of Self

The familiar words of the Book of Ecclesiastes (3:28): “To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under the heaven. A time to be born, a time to die.”

So it is with each of us. There will be a time that we must bid farewell to those we love. There will be a time when they will say farewell to us. With loss comes grief, a process of the redefinition of the self.

Grief knows no barriers. It is not restricted to season nor differentiated between sexes, religion, status or wealth. Hopefully, the following thoughts might help our clients to cope more effectively as they search frantically for responses to their lingering heartaches.

“Why do I feel so rotten all over?”

Because the counselees loved so much, grief walks by their side. This intricate process affects them in so many ways – cognitively, physically, spiritually, behaviourally, as well as emotionally.

Emotionally. There could be the recurring feelings of despair: “Is this really happening?” “I feel so cheated, abandoned, empty, helpless, hopeless.” “My nerves are on fire.” “I just want to run away . . .” To deny normal emotions is to deny the possibility of healing.

Cognitively. Thoughts appear such as: “Why can’t I think clearly?” “If only I could turn the clock back.” “How can I go on?” “Am I losing my mind . . .” These reflections make the chest grow tight, constrict the throat and knot the stomach.

Spiritually. God and the meanings of life are often challenged during moments of anguish. Doubts are part of the cycle of faith. “Is there a God?” “If so, why has God forsaken me. . .” Through this lonely pilgrimage, there are those who discover beyond their brokenness that there are spiritual resources that may assist them in coping with hopelessness, guilt and depression.

Behaviourally. Profound emotional, cognitive, physical and spiritual stress can affect daily life with withdrawal from family, friends or business; boredom with activities that were once enjoyable; neglect of personal appearance; unexpected irritability with sudden outbursts of hostility; sleep difficulties; drug and alcohol abuse. When people ask: “Where does it hurt?” the bereaved want to scream, “Everywhere!”

“Why do moods shift and fluctuate unpredictably?”

Three words may be of assistance – orient, disorient, reorient. Let me explain: The original meaning of orient is east. Jews pray towards Jerusalem in the East; many Christian churches were



directed to Nazareth to the East; and Muslims, to Mecca to the East. The word orientation signifies a pointing to a direction as, for example, when compasses are oriented to the North. Today, the term is a metaphor for a clearer direction towards a thought or action.

When loved ones die, the bereaved may become disoriented. They feel lost in a strange and frightening universe. Once there was a devoted loved one at their side. Now there is no understandable course of direction. Grief asks: "How can I go on?" Disorientation cries: "Why go on?" Grief asks: "Will I ever laugh again?" Disorientation cries: "There is no laughter."

Mourners may have to reorient themselves to the uncertain pilgrimages ahead. In desperation, they may rush to make immediate changes in an attempt to regain their footing, such as selling their home, changing jobs or moving into a new community. Beware: such changes to the immediate environment may only cause more distress as well as disorientation. Remember the 23rd Psalm, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow..." In other words, we walk by taking baby steps until we become more secure.

Hopefully, the mindless confusions of the yesterdays may be transformed into tomorrow's thoughtful choices. Grief's pendulum swings from the stable orientation when their loved ones lived – through the agonizing disorientation of their intolerable loss – and now a slow, slow, step-by-step reorientation to rediscover their true self with fresh perspectives and resources.

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"Will I ever be my old self again?"

There was a discussion in my support group concerning the violent deaths of Dr. William Petit's wife and children. They recalled Oprah Winfrey asking Dr. Petit, "Will there be closure for you?" The doctor's response: "I don't think there's ever closure. There is a jagged hole in your heart; there's a jagged hole in our soul. Over time, the waves of goodness going back and forth may smooth the jagged edges a little bit but the hole remains."

The members of my support group were consoled by his statement. Time and time again, friends and family repeatedly asked them, "So much time has passed. Shouldn't you be back to your old self again?" But how can the bereaved explain that grief does not travel along a straight line – it does not gently dissolve and magically disappear. Grief clouds may ebb, but may never end. Closure is for real estate dealers, not for mourners!

With "jagged holes," in their hearts, mourners must make major adjustments to accommodate unforeseen conditions. Old dreams, goals and hopes must be modified to new realities. Former priorities must be re-evaluated for that which is no longer attainable.

The determination to work through grief is one of the most significant goals of healing. Courage is not the absence of fear, but the affirmation of life despite apprehension and uncertainty.

As Elizabeth Lesser has written in *Broken Open*, "You and I are the Phoenix. We, too, can reproduce ourselves from the shattered pieces of a difficult time. Our lives ask us to die and to be reborn every time we confront change – change within ourselves and change in the world . . . When there is nothing left to lose, we find the true self – the self that is whole, the self that is enough."

About the Author

Dr. Earl A. Grollman, a pioneer in crisis management, is internationally acclaimed as a writer and lecturer. A recipient of the Death Education Award by the Association for Death Education and Counseling, his books on coping with bereavement have sold close to a million copies.

For further information, visit www.beacon.org/grollman.



Touchstone Two (Part One)

Dispel the Misconceptions About Grief



by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.”

~ Robert Frost

As you journey through the wilderness of your grief, if you mourn openly and authentically, you will come to find a path that feels right for you – your path to healing. But beware – others will try to pull you off this path.

The reason that people try to pull you off the path to healing is that they have internalized some common misconceptions about grief and mourning. These misconceptions deny you your right to authentically express your grief and often cause unrealistic expectations about the grief experience.

As you read about this important touchstone, you may discover that you yourself have believed in some of the misconceptions and that some may be embraced by people around you. Don't condemn yourself or others; simply make use of any new insights to help you open your heart in ways that restore the soul.

Misconception 1: Grief and mourning are the same thing.

Perhaps you have noticed that people tend to use the words “grieving” and “mourning” interchangeably. There is an important distinction, however. We as humans move toward integrating loss into our lives not just by grieving, but by mourning. You will move toward “reconciliation” not just by grieving, but through active and deliberate mourning.

Grief is the constellation of internal thoughts and feelings we have when someone we love dies. Think of grief as the container. It holds all of your thoughts, feelings and images of your experience when you are bereaved. In other words, grief is the internal meaning given to the experience of loss.

Mourning is when you take the grief you have on the inside and express it outside of yourself. Another way of defining mourning is “grief gone public.” Talking about the person who died, crying, expressing your feelings through art or music and celebrating special anniversary dates that held meaning for the person who died are just a few examples of mourning.

It is essential to openly and honestly mourn your losses, expressing your grief outside of yourself. Over time and with the support of others, to mourn is to heal.

Warning: After someone you love dies, your friends may encourage you to “keep your grief to yourself.” If you were to take this message to heart, all of your thoughts and feelings would stay neatly bottled up inside you. A catalyst for healing, however, can only be created when you develop the courage to mourn publicly, in the presence of understanding, compassionate people. At times, of course, you will grieve alone, but expressing your grief outside of yourself is necessary if you are to slowly and gently move forward in your grief journey.

When you don't honour a death by acknowledging it, first to yourself and then to those around you, the grief will accumulate. Then, the denied losses come flowing out in all sorts of potential ways (deep depression, physical complaints, difficulty in relationships, addictive behaviours), compounding the pain of your loss.

Misconception 2: Grief and mourning progress in predictable, orderly stages.

The “stages of grief” concept was popularized in 1969 with the publication of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's landmark text, *On Death and Dying*. She listed the five stages of grief that terminally ill patients experience in the face of their own impending death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. However, Kubler-Ross never intended for her stages to be interpreted as a rigid, linear sequence to be followed by all mourners.

As a grieving person, you will probably encounter others who have adopted a rigid system of beliefs about what you should experience in your grief journey. And if you have internalized this myth, you may also find yourself trying to prescribe your grief experience as well. Instead of allowing yourself to be where you are, you may try to force yourself to be in another “stage.”

For example, the responses of disorganization, fear, guilt and explosive emotions may or not occur during your unique grief journey. Or regression may occur anywhere along the way and invariably overlap another part of your response. Sometimes your emotions may follow each other within a short period of time; or, at other times, two or more emotions may be present simultaneously. Remember – do not try to determine where you “should” be. Just allow yourself to be naturally where you are in the process.

Everyone mourns in different ways. Personal experience is your best teacher about where you are in your grief journey. Your grief is unique. As part of the healing process, the thoughts and feelings you will experience will be totally unique to you.

Misconception 3: You should move away from grief, not toward it.

Our society often encourages prematurely moving away from grief instead of toward it. The result is that too many mourners either grieve in isolation or attempt to run away from their grief. While the outward expression of grief is a requirement for healing, overcoming society's powerful message can be difficult.

I am often asked, "How long should grief last?" This question directly relates to our culture's impatience with grief. Shortly after the death, for example, mourners are expected to be "back to normal." Mourners who continue to express grief outwardly are often viewed as weak or self-pitying. The subtle message is: "Shape up and get on with your life." The reality is disturbing: Far too many people view grief as something to be overcome rather than experienced.

These messages, unfortunately, encourage you to repress your thoughts and feelings. By doing so, you may refuse to cry. Refusing to allow tears, suffering in silence, and "being strong" are often considered admirable behaviours. Many people have internalized society's message that mourning should be done quietly, quickly and efficiently.

This collaborative pretense about mourning, however, does not meet your needs in grief. When your grief is ignored or minimized, you will feel further isolated in your journey. Ultimately, you will experience the onset of "Am I going crazy?" syndrome. Masking your grief creates anxiety, confusion and depression. If you receive little or no social recognition related to your pain, you will probably begin to fear that your thoughts and feelings are abnormal.

Remember – society will often encourage you to prematurely move away from your grief. You must continually remind yourself that leaning toward the pain will facilitate the eventual healing.

Misconception 4: Tears of grief are only a sign of weakness.

Tears are often associated with weakness. The worst thing you can do, however, is to allow this judgment to prevent you from crying. While your tears may result in a feeling of helplessness for your friends, family and caregivers, you must not let others stifle your need to mourn openly.

Sometimes the people who care about you may try to prevent your tears out of a desire to protect you (and them) from pain. You may hear comments like, "Tears won't bring him back." Yet crying is nature's way of releasing internal tension in your body, and it allows you to communicate a need to be comforted.

The capacity to express tears appears to allow for genuine healing. I have even observed changes in physical expression after crying. Not only do people feel better after crying, they also seem to look better. Tension and agitation seem to flow out of their bodies.

You must be vigilant about guarding yourself against this misconception. Tears are not a sign of weakness. In fact, your capacity to share tears is an indication of your willingness to do the work of mourning.

Misconception 5: Being upset and openly mourning means you are being "weak" in your faith.

Watch out for those people who think that having faith and openly mourning are mutually exclusive. Sometimes people fail to remember those important words of wisdom: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

Above all, mourning is a spiritual journey of the heart and soul. If faith or spirituality are a part of your life, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you. If you are mad at God, be mad at God. Grief expressed is often grief diminished.

Similarly, if you need a timeout from regular worship, don't shame yourself. Going to "exile" for a period of time often assists in your healing. If people try to drag you to a place of worship, dig your heels in and tell them you may go, when and if you are ready.

Don't let people take your grief away from you in the name of faith.

About the Author

This article is an excerpt from Dr. Wolfelt's book *Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart*.

It is available for \$14 at www.centerforloss.com. Click on Bookstore. Dr. Wolfelt is an internationally-noted author, teacher and grief counsellor. He serves as director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is an educational consultant to funeral homes, hospices, hospitals, schools and a variety of community agencies across North America.



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