

Understanding Grief

BY KENNETH J. DOKA

“Our culture places great value on loving relationships—on getting along together, resolving conflicts within our families, showing affection, and offering support.”

As someone who shares in Hispanic/Latino culture (my mother's family was hispanic), I have long appreciated the issues that loss and grief create within that culture. Within Hispanic culture, family ties are strong and valued. Moreover, Godparents, while often family members, are also a way to tie good, loving friends into families. Those ties too, while rarely understood outside our culture (and a few closely related ones), are also strong and deep. Our culture places great value of loving relationships—on getting along together, re-

solving conflicts within our families, showing affection, and offering support. Losses hit us hard.

Some of these losses may not even involve death. We may grieve when relationships are shattered by divorce or separation.

“Grief brings many feelings—anger, sadness, guilt, loneliness, and yearning just to name a few.”

We can grieve the loss of the familiar. If we have just come to the US, we may have grief over that migration even as we embrace the promise and opportunities of the move. We can even grieve as we see the ties to our culture and language diminish over generations. These too are losses.

And so we grieve. This grief affects us, like others, in many ways. It may affect us physically. We can feel sick and unwell. We may be constantly tired, worn out. While the pain in our bodies may reflect the pain we feel in

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Learning to reach out in times of grief

BY LAURA OLAGUE

I am a Latina female living along the Texas /New Mexico border. I encounter many Latino families grieving the loss of a loved one through our children's bereavement center offering peer support services to grieving children and their families. I notice that as a culture, we sometimes experience more intense symptoms of grief that affect us physically, emotionally and spiritually as we have difficulty reaching out to persons for support or even to professionals for help. There are superstitions that hold many a family back from coming to terms with their loss. For example, I have heard Latino adults and children express that they are not able to talk of the deceased or even say their name as it doesn't allow their “spirit” to rest to which my response is, “how can you have any peace yourself if you cannot allow yourself to talk of the deceased?” “How can you let their spirit rest if you cannot rest?”

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Will I ever be the same?

Each day when we wake up, we make a mental plan of the activities we will accomplish that day. Many times, we anticipate an easy day: work, family and social activities. We carry on with the many responsibilities we have undertaken, we face the hardships of our daily lives without thinking that something terrible can happen.

Suddenly, the unthinkable happens and life, with its twists and turns reminds us that there are no guarantees. A loved one dies and that event shakes our life in a second transforming our serene and predictable reality into chaos.

Our hopes and dreams are replaced by grief and pain; these are the only feelings that fill our hearts for a long time. Our lives are shattered into a thousand pieces all spread out like a shipwreck. We lose control of our emotions and we become engulfed in the thick and heavy cloak of pain; we ask our-

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Many a Latino family experiences unresolved grief because they lack a support system of friends or family that they can comfortably go to for support. Even a simple cup of coffee and discussion of how they feel becomes impossible as persons feel judged and are less inclined to talk to anyone. As a culture, we are a close knit group of nuclear and extended family that find ourselves among many relatives yet emotionally alone. We have difficulty reaching out for help. I frequently find myself asking, “is there a friend that you trust or a “comadre” (godparent) who will listen? I would like to see more Latinos attend support groups as this could be the place where they could gain the much needed support they require but find that frequently, this is not the case. Many adults tell me that this is the equivalent of “seeing a shrink” and “what would the family think?” Consequently, the grief intensifies.

I remind many a Latino parent that they are the role model for their children and how they experience and express their loss directly impacts how their children will respond. It is important to set the example of reaching out for help so that their children can learn that it is okay and will do the same.

An important thing that we all need to do better is to tell our children the truth. In the Latino culture, it is common to “stretch the truth” by telling something that is more pleasant than actually what happened, especially regarding deaths where someone died tragically. We find that this comes back to bite us as children become angry at the lies that were told to them. As I tell many a family, if you start with the truth,

you can't go wrong. I have talked with children who were told that their dad or brother died of the flu or other illness only to find out that they were murdered or committed suicide. As I express to Latino parents, “how can you tell them to tell you the truth when you have not done that?”

Regarding helping your children when you are grieving, I make these suggestions:

- Invite your child to attend the funeral and tell them about what they will see
- Seek support for yourself and your child if you find that you are having difficulty with a loved one's death
- Tell your children the truth, you will be much better off in the long run
- Encourage your children to openly talk about the deceased rather than no longer mentioning the person who died. You will have much healthier children in the long run
- Remember that you are a role model for how your children will grieve. If you hold in expressing your loss and bottle up your feelings, odds are that your child will do the same which can result in emotional problems down the road
- Honor your loved one by acknowledging and celebrating their lives

HFA

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our heart, it is always important to check persistent symptoms with a doctor. Let him know, too, of the loss. Sometimes the death of someone we deeply love can addict our health. Even, especially in grief, we need to take good care of ourselves.

Grief brings many feelings—anger, sadness, guilt, loneliness, and yearning, just to name a few. In our culture, these emotions can be intense as we are a feeling people. Guilt can be particularly strong. Our ties are such that we often wonder if we have done enough.

Grief also influences the way we behave. We may want to withdraw from others—not having the energy to cope with the demands of life. Others may find themselves short-tem-

pered, always ready to explode at small irritations. Some may wish to keep themselves busy as a way of forgetting their loss and avoiding their grief.

Our concentration may be affected. We may find it hard to focus, even to think. We may even find that our beliefs are challenged. Grief affects every part of our being.

Grief is different for each of us. We are different; Our relationships, experiences, and our ways of coping are different as well. We cannot compare our reactions and how we choose to grieve with the grief of others around us—even those in our own families.

Every culture has strengths and limitations that influence the ways we face our grief. In Hispanic/Latino culture, the

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selves if we will ever be the same.

When a loved one dies, in the darkest moment of our lives, we start to grieve. Grief is a process that involves the thoughts and feelings people experience when someone they love dies. It is necessary so we can resolve our loss and reconnect with life. Although it is a personal and lonely journey; we need the support of family, friends and professionals, so our grief work is effective.

In this process there is no predetermined path. We create our own path. We have no compass to guide us through this dark and difficult journey and we can feel completely lost. We do not know where our footsteps will take us; the future is uncertain, blurry and grey; the past no longer exists but we would like to turn back and embrace it because we think it was better. The present frightens us because it is filled with emptiness, pain and sadness.

But in the midst of all this devastation, something inside us tells us that although we do not have a map, it is possible to find our way back home. We do not know how long this journey will take nor can we predict the difficulties we will encounter in our journey. We cannot be sure of what we will find once we go back home. It's possible that things will be the same, but nevertheless, we will be different from the experience we have gone through.

It is true that not all traumatic experiences are transformative, however the death of a loved one often involves deep changes in our beliefs, values, our perceptions of the world and the people around us. We reorganize our priorities and maybe become wiser because we understand that we cannot embrace life to its fullest if we do not accept death.

What do we need to learn from our grief process? An important part of grief is accepting and assimilating the death of our loved one. The time that it takes will be different for each person, depending on the circumstances of the death. When death is "anticipated" it's possible that the person starts her grief process before the death of her

loved one and at the moment of the death, she has already somehow begun to accept the final outcome.

When death is traumatic or violent, the acceptance process can take a very long time. The person can attempt to block the experience so she does not have to deal with it. This can result in delaying the grief process and subsequently, the assimilation of the loss.

Another important aspect of grieving is the formation of a new identity. This process begins when we create a new image of the world in which our loved one no longer exists. In time, we stop incorporating this person in our plans and our thoughts do not revolve around the things we could have done for him. As we adapt to the death of our loved one, we abandon expectations and slowly start to incorporate new roles, behaviors and relationships into our reality. The formation of a new identity also implies acknowledging the parts of our personality that are intact, in spite of the traumatic experience through which we have experienced. Our emerging identity allows us to adapt and reconnect to the world, developing a different relationship with our loved one, placing him in a new place in our life.

Will I ever be the same? Yes... and no. It is possible that we continue being the same, but perhaps we will never be the same person we were before the traumatic experience. We can recover some parts of our old self and rebuild ourselves, opening our hearts, so old and new feelings can coexist.

We can learn how to live in a world where the memories of our loved one are the fuel that feeds our personal and spiritual growth and keeps our hopes alive. **HA**

*Gisela Lejan, passionately involved in counseling and education for more two decades, is the author of the book *Searching for My Estrella Maili, Rebuilding my Life after the Death of my Daughter*. Gisela also collaborates with bereavement organizations in the US and abroad.*

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demands placed on men, *machismo*, can mean that men sometimes can try so hard to take care of their family, to be strong for their families, that they neglect their own grief. My uncles would always remind me that it is never unmanly to love, and to show that love. If we can be affectionate in life, we can share those affections, those feelings, in death. In such a way, we help our family by modeling our grief.

We have much strength as a culture. Our family ties are strong. We can grieve together. We often have a strong faith, even powerful rituals that support us in death. Many who are Catholic may find comfort in saying a Rosary or Novena or even offering Masses, especially at significant days such as the anniversary of the death. These rituals reaffirm the bond that is retained with the person who died. We know that the connections, the bonds we hold to the deceased will never end. These are powerful tools to assist us as we deal with loss.

We can learn from others too. Support groups and counseling can help us as we cope with loss. We need not do it alone. This is especially important if our

grief is causing us to neglect important roles that we may have in our family, in our work, or in school, or if our grief is causing harm to others or ourselves.

"Everyone," an old proverb states, "is like all others, some others, no other." This is certainly true in grief. Grief is the most human of all reactions. It is the price we pay for love and attachment. Yet, each culture shares its own way of life—customs, values, beliefs, and perspectives that shape how we as a people respond to loss. And we are all individuals with unique relationships and our own personal strengths and limitations. Grief reinforces the truth of this proverb.



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NOTES:

Author - Gisela Lejan - is spelled two different ways -- not sure which one is correct?