

We all grieve

BY KENNETH J. DOKA

Whenever we face loss, we experience grief. Our reactions are unique and individual; none of us experiences grief in the same way.

Not only are we different, but our losses are different as well.

Some may grieve a spouse, others a child, parent, brother, sister, or friend. Each of these relationships is unique. Some may have been close; others may have had tension or conflict. Circumstances may differ. Some losses are sudden while others follow a prolonged illness. And, we may each be able to draw upon different levels of support.

As we experience loss, we may need to remind ourselves of these basic facts. Sometimes we torture ourselves wonder-

ing why we do not respond as others, even our family members, do. But each of us is different.

We may feel angry—angry at God, angry at the person who died, or perhaps angry at someone who we feel is not responding the way we would like him or her to respond. We may feel guilt, too. Is there something we could have done differently, or maybe we could have done more? We may even feel responsible for the loss.

Other emotions are common. Feelings of sadness, longing for the person's presence, jealousy of those who have not experienced our profound loss, or even relief that a prolonged illness has ended—all these feelings may trouble us, but remember that they are normal and

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“I often describe grief as a roller coaster. It is full of ups and downs, highs and lows.”

How long does grief last?

BY JUDY TATELBAUM

Everyone who has ever grieved wonders, “How long will this grief persist? How long must I feel sorrow and pain?” We don't like feeling uncomfortable. We detest that complex mix of feelings that grief engenders. We may feel like victims of our feelings, wishing they would just disappear.

As a culture, we want everything to be quick and easy. We don't savor feelings any more than we savor the wide range of our varied life experiences. Like all else that we hurry through in life, we may be obsessed with getting through our pain as quickly as possible.

How long does grief take? The real answer is that grief takes as long as it takes—a week, a month, a year or more, depending on whom we have lost and how this death affects us. Grief is a process we must move through, not over or around. Even when we can temporarily deny our pain, it still exists.

It will eventually erupt in some way, maybe at an inappropriate moment or during another event or illness. It is a ways

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LETTERS

Am I losing my mind?

Q: *Since my husband's recent death, I've been doing strange things. I cry for no reason whatsoever as I wander aimlessly around the house. Sometimes I set an extra place for him at the table. When the telephone rings, I think that he is calling me. I've become so absent-minded that I renewed a subscription for his golf magazine and I don't even play the game. I listen for his footsteps, especially in the evening, when he would normally return from work. My thinking and judgment seem so impaired that I feel like I am falling apart. Am I going crazy?*

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In the beginning: the gift of spiritual coping tools

BY SISTER MARILYN WELCH

The early days of the grieving process are always difficult. A wide variety of emotions overtake our lives when the process of coping with loss begins. It can be surprising when the initial period of loss is so confusing and painful. In a spiritual sense, one can experience powerful adjustment periods that help the griever accept the fact of death. These adjustment periods become gifts when viewed as spiritual tools rather than pain to be avoided.

The Gift of Tears. Persons who are grieving often find crying disturbing. Many times, much effort goes into not showing the pain, as we judge tears and crying to be a sign of weakness. “Adults don’t cry in public!” “Big boys (and men) don’t cry!” “I wish I wasn’t so emotional!” “She’s holding up so well!” These are merely a few ways that our society devalues the gift of tears. It might be helpful if we understood tears are merely another form of language. Tears are the first form of language that we used upon entering this world. It is only the heartless individual who could ignore the cries of an infant or child. In our adult life we often shed tears

when what we have to say is beyond the scope of ordinary language. Maybe tears are God’s gift to us when we cannot adequately express what we feel in our hearts.

The Gift of Numbness. The initial days after a loss are filled with emotion and activity. Describing this time as a “flood of emotions” is probably an oversimplification. Feelings of loss, disbelief, anger, fear, guilt, loneliness, and anxiety are but a sampling of possible reactions. This combination of emotion is just too much to understand and assimilate. For most individuals, this period is like a spiritual tranquilizer. In other words, God understands the limitations of the human heart and allows us the ability to “numb out” when the reality of loss is just too great for the moment. This early gift of numbness enables us to get through the initial days. As time begins to pass, each of these emotions will again appear when it is possible for us to deal with them.

The Gift of Companionship. One of the most important gifts bestowed upon those who grieve is the company of friends and family. There is normally a genuine outpouring

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natural responses to grief. Grief may affect us in other ways. Sometimes, the experience of grief may be physical: aches and pains in our bodies, difficulty eating or sleeping, fatigue or restlessness. We may constantly think of the person, even replaying in our mind some final episode or experience. Grief can affect our spiritual selves. We may struggle to find meaning in our loss; our relationship with our God may change.

I often describe grief as a roller coaster. It is full of ups and downs, highs and lows—times that we may think we are doing better and times that we are sure we are not. The metaphor reminds us that our sense of progress may feel very uneven.

But there are things we can do to help ourselves as we experience grief. First it is important to accept the fact that we are grieving. Then we can take time to grieve, to realize

that life will be different and sometimes difficult. We need to be gentle with ourselves.

Second, we can learn from the ways we have handled loss before. We need to draw on our resources—the coping skills we have, our own sources of support, and our spiritual strengths. And from earlier experiences, we can learn the mistakes we need to avoid.

We do not have to struggle alone. We can share our grief with family and friends. We can seek help from clergy or counselors. Hospices and funeral homes may be able to suggest mutual support groups, and librarians and bookstores can point us to books that can assist us as we grieve. 

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Two months later

BY JANE YOLEN

My friends expect me to be over
the worst of the grief;
that writing, the dinners, the occasional lunch,
meetings, a movie or two,
work on our daughter's house,
two conferences in states far away
will scab over the deep cut
below my breastbone
where your death removed my heart.

The heart, like a phantom limb,
still hurts, throbs, aches, agonizes
over familiar things. Your shirts
hanging still in the closet,
the dozen or so hats you loved,

shoes two sizes big for me,
three sizes small for our sons.
I cannot yet bear to give them away
to the homeless, the shelters,
the needy, when my need
for you is still so great.

Do not help me to forget.
Help me to remember.

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Choosing your helpers

BY PAUL IRION

Grieving is an intensely personal experience, but we cannot do it alone. Shortly after the death, people send cards, bring food, offer condolences, and come to the viewing or the funeral. You know from your own experience that such support really helps.

You want and need special people who will stand beside you as you struggle through the weeks and months following the death of a loved one. You want someone who will understand what you are experiencing—someone who will be patient when you're slow to snap back to your old self. At this point in your grieving you may look for the kind of companions who help you most effectively grieve. You may seek out a good friend with whom you can share your pain. If your struggle is extreme: if you are having trouble eating or sleeping or if you feel overwhelmed by the adjustment, you may want to contact someone with professional experience in coping with grief.

You need to know what you are looking for—who can best provide the help you need. You need the kind of helper

who understands what it is to grieve and who will be willing to hear you tell what you are going through without judging you. You'll want someone who doesn't shower you with "pat answers" and clichés. An effective helper will take the time to be with you as you slowly move through your grieving.

Many of you probably are wondering: how do I find such a helper? In many instances, people will turn to a good friend, a close family member, or their pastor, priest or rabbi. These helpers can work with you to dispel the loneliness you may be feeling. They will provide an opportunity for you to release some of your strong feelings into words. They will support you as you work your way back into your regular daily activities: shopping, taking care of your business affairs, getting back into social relationships.

While you will want someone who knows what it is to grieve, it is best not to turn to someone who is mourning a recent death. They have their own grief work to do and may not be able to respond helpfully to your needs. Most hospices wait until people have mourned for at least a year

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LETTERS

Am I losing my mind?

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A: These symptoms are not a sign of mental illness and you are not alone; many grieving people experience similar indications. When asked to comment on her adjustment to widowhood, the late-distinguished actress Helen Hayes remarked, “I was just as crazy as you can be and still be at large.”

It is natural to be overwhelmed when your husband has just died. Your mind is naturally preoccupied with your devastating loss. Confusion, aimlessness, and constant weeping are all indicators of your pain and despair. When absence becomes the greatest presence, you have transformed the past into the present. By wishing and daydreaming, you have attempted to bring your loved one magically back to life.

Your brain has not been damaged. You are emotionally and physically depleted. Death has wounded you. There is probably no crisis more stressful than the loss of life of

someone you loved.

Forgive yourself when you are not as reliable and responsible as you once were. Give yourself permission to be inconsistent and unpredictable without punishing and criticizing yourself. Develop an acceptance of the brief periods of irrational feelings and chaotic bewilderment.

If it would ease your mind, you might consult a grief counselor or seek help from a support group. In most cases, these strange actions and thoughts are temporary. They gradually fade and disappear as you continue your journey through the mourning process.

Incidentally, Helen Hayes, who was “as crazy as can be and still be at large,” later returned to acting. She brought new life into the theater for decades.

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Earl A. Grollman, DHL, DD, is a rabbi, a pioneer in the study of death and dying, and the author of 26 books on crisis intervention.

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before accepting them as volunteers.

If you need special help because you feel stuck in the grieving process after some months, do not hesitate to seek professional grief counseling. If, some months after the death of your loved one, you are still grieving the way you were right after the death—if you are still feeling overwhelming sadness, if you are still having difficulty sleeping, if you can't make decisions or just can't get going every morning—you may want to talk with an experienced grief counselor.

To locate such a helper in your community you might ask the bereavement worker in your hospice for the names of grief counselors who have been helpful to their mourners. Or you might ask your physician or a school guidance counselor for names.

If you are part of a faith community, it is natural to turn to your clergy person. Most clergy can be helpful in giving support to those with uncomplicated grief but may not be prepared to deal with grief that goes on and on. You will need to know whether or not the clergyperson has the patience or the time to work with you over an extended period. Recognizing that not all clergypersons are equally effective pastoral counselors, how does one know if a particular mem-

ber of the clergy is a competent counselor? Many have had limited or no training in counseling; others are well-trained.

You need to know something of the counseling experience of the clergyperson to whom you turn. You will want to know that they have had extensive training under competent supervision. For example, the most highly trained clergy will usually be members of one of the following organizations: The Association for Death Education and Counseling, The American Association of Pastoral Counselors, The Association of Clinical Pastoral Education, or The American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy. If your own minister does not have special training in dealing with complicated grief, he or she should be happy to refer you to a colleague with such training.

It is a sign of strength to seek out a helper. It means you are ready to move forward and will take the steps to grow through your grief.

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Paul E. Irion is Emeritus professor of Pastoral Theology at Lancaster Theology Seminary of the United Church of Christ, and was the Founding President of Hospice of Lancaster County.

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Processing loss

BY CHARLES CORR

It has been said that every death feels like the end of the world to someone. That is undoubtedly true. The death of a significant person in our lives marks the end of the world as we have known it. It may not have been the only world we've ever known, but it's likely to be the world in which we've most recently learned to find comfort.

For that reason, it is important to look back on the world that has now ended, to explore what has been lost, and to realize fully—perhaps for the first time—what we have come to take for granted. Professionals call this “processing our losses.”

As we do this, we typically come to realize the legacies and the memories that remain with us from the world that has recently ended. These are the treasures that have become part of us, treasures that can be enriched by others who share with us their memories and their legacies of the person who died.

While we engage in this process of looking backward,

most bereaved people find themselves beginning to become involved in looking forward into the new world that now faces them. After all, we retrieve precious parts of the past not merely as a kind of personal archeology, but for the sake of keeping them with us in our onward journey in life.

Looking to the future can test our courage. There are challenges with which we must cope and new realities to which we must adapt. Doing so is not a betrayal of the world that has ended for us. It is a recognition that we are still alive and that the person we loved would surely not want his or her death to lead to the destruction not only of the world we shared together, but of all the future possibilities for goodness, meaning, and love in our lives. 

Charles A. Corr, PhD, is a volunteer with Suncoast Hospice and formerly chaired the International Work Group on Death, Dying, and Bereavement.

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better to admit our strong feelings, to feel them, and to move through them in order to move beyond them.

What does getting over it mean? It means not being forever in pain over our loss. It means we don't forget or stop loving the person we lost. We do not always have to grieve; we can remember without pain.

Too often we hear the awful message that we never stop grieving, never get over our loss. When we have no tools for overcoming sorrow, and when the world tries to shut us up, grief does go on longer. The belief that we will never recover from a loss can become a self-fulfilling prophecy if we let it. When we believe we can recover, we do. It is important to trust that grief is not forever.

I believed I would grieve forever when my brother died. I kept sorrow alive for fourteen years by believing it was endless. I didn't know how to stop my grief. Grief that persists for years can keep us living in the past, from loving the people who are still alive. I was stunted by my grief, afraid to trust, afraid to commit, afraid to have children I might lose. It wasn't until a good therapist helped me express fully how much this loss hurt me that I was able to stop grieving.

No matter how much we may hurt today, we must remember that grief is temporary. Mourning does not have

to last forever. We can finish crying and express all our many feelings around this loss.

We can find in ourselves the courage to recover and heal. We can begin to live fully and love again. 

*Judy Tattelbaum, MSW, is a psychotherapist, public speaker, and author of *The Courage to Grieve*, and *You Don't Have to Suffer*, as well as videos *The Courage to Grieve* and *The Courage to Grow*. She trains people in dealing with catastrophic illness, grief, death, and dying.*

Reader's Check-In

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In the beginning...

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of love and support toward those who lose a loved one. Visitations at the funeral home and the family residence following a notification of death frequently surprise the bereaved. Food and flowers are expressions of care and concern, attempting to meet basic needs for nurturing and support. It is important to recognize this important spiritual support.

Most people learn about the love of God through the expression of loving people on earth. If we ask, "Where is God when I am in so much pain?" the answer could be found in the visit, the phone call, the sympathy card, and yes, even the tenth meat tray or casserole. Grieving individuals need to remember the visits and the offers of help and utilize them to bring spiritual consolation and support.



Sister Marilyn Welch, CCW, is a victims' advocate and the Coordinator of Protecting God's Children.

Sources of Grief Support:

Reach out to your clergy person or counselor.

Ask your funeral director if they have suggestions for support groups.

Contact a hospice in your area and ask to speak to their bereavement coordinator for resources.

Activities such as journaling, drawing or making a photo book may provide comfort in your grief.

Ask your librarian or bookstore for suggestions of books to help with the grieving process.

Subscribe to *Journeys: A Newsletter to Help in Bereavement*.

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