

Ask an Expert

Question

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?

Answer

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 ...continued on p. 2

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We all grieve

by Kenneth J. Doka, PhD, MDiv

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 wondering 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. Feel-

ings 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 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



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"How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard."

— A. A. Milne, *Winnie the Pooh*

How long does grief last?

by Judy Tatelbaum, LCSW

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 always 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 14 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.

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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.

■ **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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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 Tatelbaum**, MSW, is a psychotherapist, public speaker, and author.



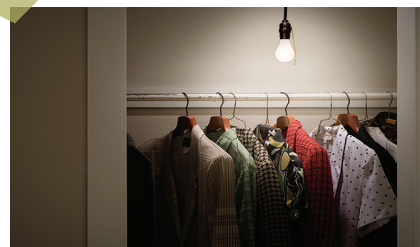
Exercise, such as a daily walk, can help ease your grief journey.

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.

■ **Jane Yolen**, from *Things to Say to a Dead Man: Poems at the End of a Marriage and After*. Copyright © 2011 by Jane Yolen. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of Holy Cow! Press, www.holycowpress.org.

Survival tips for grief

Ease your journey

Allow your grief. Appreciate and accept your grief. You may feel sad, angry, or filled with remorse or longing. These feelings are natural.

Express your grief. Empty out your feelings. The more you express your pain, the more you free yourself from it.

Be patient with yourself. Grief takes time. Moving forward is not quick, but it is possible. Trust that you can and will cope with your loss.

Keep busy. You cannot dwell on your sorrow every waking moment. Friends and activities can help control your suffering.

Keep a journal. Some feelings may be too hard to speak aloud. Journaling can serve as a release as well as a meaningful self-expression.

Exercise daily. Through exercise, you build your physical strength, release tension, enliven yourself, and keep yourself well.

Be willing to change things. It's natural to want things the same as they were. Although it isn't easy, remember you can go on with your life, and take care of yourself in the process.

—HFA's grief experts

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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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