



Grief

The importance and challenging blessing of mourning

When talking about the gift of life in the Kingdom of God, Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn...” Blessed? Really? Yes! The journey of mourning is a blessing, as many can attest. Suppressing it or pretending not to grieve is unhealthy and in the end, more painful. More positively, mourning is a sign of love and a relationship that made a difference in someone’s life. How sad it would be for no one to miss us when we died or for someone else to die and there be no one who noticed. Mourning is the end of all relationships. Embracing it fully is of paramount importance as we live on.

Our Web: An imaginative look at grief inside us

Picture this: our psyche and our souls like a spiderweb of interconnected ideas of who we are, what we do, what we believe, and who we love. The major strands that emanate from our center are people, places, and things that make up the frame of our unique personality. Those strands are intersected with experiences, ideas, and memories of how we define those parts of ourselves. When a major strand is lost (or yanked, in death or loss), all of the smaller connections are broken. We literally lose who we are as a person. That explains why we are so disoriented.

How do we repair our web?

We begin the healing process by naming the strands that are broken. When we know what we miss or need, then we can set out to reconnect those strands with someone or something else. This may be as simple as someone to clean the gutters or mow the lawn. But what about missing the person themselves?

When someone we love dies, they cannot be replaced. Healing is a similar process. Our painful longings are each something that we loved about the person. We begin to gather those memories and instead of replacing them, we weave together a story of who they were within our hearts and minds. This is more than a newspaper eulogy. Note that a spouse’s web will be spun differently from a son’s or a daughter’s web. Grief is very personal and rarely looks and sounds like someone else’s. For that reason, it is helpful to do this grief work with someone other than family.

We need someone outside the family and close circle of friends to listen to the retelling of the death and what that person’s life meant to us. The individual needs to be a good listener and one who listens without judgment or intent of fixing the griever. Reweaving our web story takes repetition. A helpful confidant will not mind hearing the evolving narrative being repeated over and over again. They need to be able to gently point out additions or subtractions from the account. These are to be celebrated as hallmarks of the healing web. They indicate progress. In the end, there will reside within us a lasting narrative in which we find comfort retelling for a lifetime and even adding new insights as the years go by.

Commonly Asked Questions

1. How long does it take to heal from grief?

In one sense we never stop missing someone we loved. There will always be pangs of grief. But usually that question means, how long will I be like this? When will my life pick up again at a normal pace and when will I be less exhausted? That depends on how intertwined the lives are. Eighteen months is a time-frame that is mentioned quite a bit, but too haphazardly. It takes as

long as it takes. But this number is mentioned here to ward off well-meaning friends who say that we should be better in a couple of weeks or months.

2. What are normal grief symptoms?

They fall into four parts of our being:

- I. Emotional Reactions: sadness, fear, anger, worries about having a nervous breakdown (from the stress level), dramatic mood swings, guilt, loneliness, shock, numbness, sense of relief that a long-time illness is over
- II. Physical Reactions: sympathetic pain for the deceased' illness, loss or increase in appetite, sleepiness or sleeplessness.
- III. Spiritual Reactions: loss or increase of faith, anger at God, avoidance of the church.
- IV. Psychological Reactions: dyslexia in writing numbers or words, making a plan and your brain recording it as a memory, dreams and nightmares, seeing the deceased as a ghost (our brains project a memory), disorientation.

3. What is an unhealthy reaction?

Grief is healthy and normal. Depression is not. The latter requires a doctor's diagnosis, treatment, and possibly medication. One caution here is that doctors trying to be compassionate will sometimes prescribe a sedative to numb the griever's feelings within days of the death. This prevents them from experiencing the loss at the funeral and postpones the beginning of healthy grieving. It can be important for family members to bear the pain if they are able. It is a sign of deep love for the deceased.

4. What kind of personal care can we do for ourselves?

- a. Meals: Overeating and undereating are both normal grief reactions. Moderate overeating by eating smaller portions and reducing snacks. If you have no appetite, make yourself eat something three times a day at mealtime. To compensate for the unbalanced meals, take a multi-vitamin with minerals every day.
- b. Sleeping: Most people need a nap midday in the first few months. This rests the brain and allows it to reset. It doesn't need to be long. If you have insomnia, at least go to bed and rest your body. Consult your doctor to see if a sleeping pill is advisable. As for oversleeping, decide on a time to go to bed and a time to rise. If that doesn't work, keep a record of your hours of sleep so you can mark your progress of needing less sleep. It is important to encourage ourselves in any way that works.
- c. Exercise: If you exercise regularly, continue your routine. If you don't, start small with a walk around the block, perhaps with a friend, or by listening to music. Cleaning the house or the garage can be good exercise. Find ways to be on your feet!
- d. Anger: Tell your confidant or tell a photo of your loved one how angry you are that they left you. Or you can tell God. God understands and so does your loved one. If alone, punching pillows is a great way to focus your anger.
- e. Spirituality: 1. Go to church; don't go to church. Don't decide until the day and time to go. You may even get to the front door and turn around and go home. The right time will come. 2. Your prayers may change to meditation in which, instead of talking to God, you sit quietly and allow your thoughts to flow in and out. As you practice this time of listening, wait for a sense of peace. 3. A crisis of faith is common. Most often this crisis centers around prayers that didn't work to save your loved one. There are other ways to think about how prayers work and don't work. Talk to a faithful friend with a different perspective than yours or make an appointment with your spiritual leader.
- f. A new schedule: Grief blinds us to the day ahead. We live into a new pattern of living by putting one foot in front of the other each day. In the evening, we can look back and see how our time was spent. There, we receive a glimpse at what the days to come will be like, at least partially.

- g. Energy level: Grief work is exhausting. Even if we are not exerting much energy, our racing brain can tire us out. Energy levels will return in time, but in the meanwhile, it is prudent to get up and do the most important things first, so that they are done when you reach your limit for the day. There will be occasional days when you can live and work from morning to night, but that does not mean that the next day will be the same.
- h. Books on Grief: To reiterate, every healing process is unique. Some might take comfort in reading about other people's grief journeys via memoirs or online journals. There are also academic books about grief that can be informative, such as William Worden's texts. Regarding children and grief, two books that continue to be helpful are, "Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children" by Bryan Mellonie & Robert Inghen; and "Badger's Parting Gifts" by Susan Varley.
- i. Journaling: Not all of us are big talkers. For introverts and more quiet individuals, journaling is a wonderful way to do griefwork. The entries remain private and are a lasting record of one's healing process. Rereading the reflections will help the writer see how they are progressing in the process of healing.
- j. Memorialize: Don't skip a funeral or memorial service. That is when the healing begins as stories are shared and blessings celebrated. And mark the anniversaries of their birth and their death. Some families light a candle on those days and at Christmas and Easter. Some have a memorial jar in which children and adults can add a slip of paper with a favorite memory. It doesn't need to be elaborate, but it feels good and right to say their name aloud again in the house and to give thanks to God for them.
- k. Change: Expect your life to change. You will only know how by looking back. You will become more aware of what is important to you and how you want to spend your time and money. There may be people with whom you want to spend more time and others less. You will be much more aware of who you are and what you have to offer others.

Grieving is a universal, human experience. While we will all experience grief in our lives, it is also a unique journey each time. Mourning is a sign of love and this wisdom is embodied in Jesus' words in Matthew 5:4, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." Amen.

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