



What Now:

A look at grief beyond the first year

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There is a story I often retell about a man I met in a support group just a few weeks after I was hired as a grief counselor for a local hospice. I had just graduated with a master's degree in counseling and at the time, admittedly, I did not know much about grief. I asked a grief counselor at another hospice if I could sit in a few of her support group sessions so that I could learn how to run my own. Ten years later, I can honestly say I have learned a lot about grief; some from the books and journals I've read, but mostly from the people I have sat with and listened to individually and in groups all these years. Maybe the man made such a lasting impression on me because I felt so insecure in my new roll; but then again, maybe not. I am inclined to think it is because his insight continues to ring true, and I hear it echoed in the conversations I have with others when they have gained some perspective on their loss. He said, **"I've learned that you don't get over grief, but you do get better at it."**

Many people in our culture use words like *acceptance*, *healing*, *recovery*, *resolution*, or *closure* to suggest those who are bereaved will eventually *get over it*, *let go*, and *move on* with life. While the average person on the street might say grief lasts maybe six months or a year, amongst counselors who specialize in supporting the bereaved there is a general consensus that there really is no identifiable end to grief, nor do we talk about grief in terms of stages anymore. Instead, (and you can check this against your own experience) grief would be better understood to be *intermittent* or *episodic*, which is similar to what people commonly say; "Grief comes and goes in waves." Soon after the death of a loved one, I will hear people report that their loss feels constant,

overwhelming, or all-consuming. As time passes one can expect those waves of grief will become less frequent, less intense, and more manageable. At least that is true for the majority of people.

I bet that somewhere in your experience you have met or heard of a person who has not been able to cope with the loss. Perhaps even years later they seem stuck in the past and unable to enjoy the present. For them life seems frightening and meaningless without the person who died. Let me make it clear this is not the kind of grief to which the man in the support group was referring. My experience and the research I have read suggests that maybe ten percent of the bereaved do seem to get stuck in their grief, with no clear indications that anything is going to change without some kind of intervention.¹ Unfortunately, this ten percent of the population are often the least inclined to reach out for professional help.² The good news is that the rest of the bereaved eventually, in the language of grief educator, William Worden, *learn to adjust to life without the deceased*.³ I believe the man in the support group was trying to emphasize that in his experience, although a person can learn strategies to adjust to life without the loved one, and will eventually return their attention to the business of everyday life, there is no reason to think that there is something wrong if you never stop missing the one who died.

I will use my own father to emphasize this point. Although my mother died over twenty-five years ago, my dad admits (with glassy eyes and with words that seem to get stuck in the back of his throat) that he still thinks about her every day. Does that mean that he is stuck in his grief? Absolutely not, it means that he will forever miss the high school sweetheart who became his wife and the woman with whom he raised nine children! Today, he laughs easily, enjoys his grandchildren and is involved in his community. He has adjusted to life without her, but obviously he still misses her.

Unlike my father, I cannot say that I think of my mom every day. When I think about my childhood she looms large in my memories, but I've lived over half my life without her. When I think about the major events in my adult life, she was not physically present so I do not associate her with those memories. The times I miss her are usually around the holidays, family events, and those little in-between moments when I hear a song, or smell the perfume of her favorite flower, or when my eye catches something that I know she would have just loved. I still wish she were here to celebrate life's major accomplishments, and no doubt there is a little boy inside of me that will always want his mommy on those occasions when he stumbles and skins his knee on the journey of life. In all of these moments I feel a twinge of grief, and I miss her, and I wish she were here to share in my joy or speak those consoling words that only your mom can speak. Her wisdom continues to guide me through major life decisions because I think about how she would have handled it. Half of my genes are hers and most of my values she passed onto me. No doubt, in subtle and overt ways, she was a great influence on that boy who became an adult, and continues to inform the adult who became a grief counselor.

Progress on the grief journey offers its own challenges. Grief looks different at month three than it did when it was raw and new, and it typically changes incrementally with the

passing of each month. One can imagine then, that the strategies for coping will have to evolve with the passage of time. When some people notice that grief no longer dominates their every thought, they report feeling guilty or they think they are being disrespectful to the person for feeling better. Many are fearful they will somehow forget the person who died. And yet, after having lived with the loss for a while, most people come to the realization that even though some of the details may fade, the love that underlies those memories never dies.

I've come to the conclusion that the traditional definition of grief is much too narrow. From my perspective, grief is bigger and more complex than just the sad emotions a person feels after someone dies. Despite what Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross who popularized the *5 stages of loss* has said, grief is never as neat or as organized as a series of steps or stages.⁴ The best definition I can come up with describes grief as, *our embodied response to loss*. That means **grief includes all the emotions, (not just the sad ones) all the thoughts, (memories, strategies for coping, prayer, questions about the meaning of life and death, any resolutions we might make for the future) and all the physical symptoms (tears, fatigue, disorientation, sleep loss, chest pain) that we associate with loss, over the course of a lifetime**. Why, because grief is not an isolated event; one moment, one thought, one emotion is

connected to the next. It is encoded in our brains, tattooed on our hearts, and wrapped in a vessel made of bone and blood and flesh. It might be better to think of grief as one of the many strands that are woven into the very fabric of life.

What can you expect your grief to look like beyond the first year?

Because every person's story is unique, someone like me cannot predict how long it will take you to *get back to normal*. Grief never happens in isolation. Sometimes we find ourselves also dealing with other stressors such as: personal health concerns, family conflicts, financial or legal troubles. When a person dies there will also be multiple losses that you have to learn to experience at the same time like: a loss of identity, a loss of security, the loss of a dream or hope for the future. How long it takes to adjust to the death of a loved one will depend on what else you've got on your plate and what kind of resources are available to help. All things being equal, I would like to believe you are now able to say with some degree of confidence, "It feels like the worst part is behind me." Having experienced a year of *firsts*, you are learning to adjust to this new reality and although you know you may not be out of the woods yet, you have possibly heard yourself say, "I can't quite explain it but it feels like some kind of shift has taken place." When I asked a man whose wife died three years ago what advice he would offer to you, he said, "I realized that first year all I was doing was holding

onto walls...having survived all those firsts, I want to tell them that people forget to warn you there will also be the seconds and thirds and fourths." His new wife, who had also been widowed a few years before, chimed in from the other room, "But be sure to tell them that it does get better!"

Beyond the first year you can expect that eventually there will be long stretches of time when your days will not be dominated by the loss. Before you know it, days turn into months and months turn into years. Gradually, the weight of loss lightens, you find ways to adjust to life without them, and you begin to notice again the beauty that surrounds you. Nevertheless, I would be doing you a disservice to suggest that at some point you will be done with grief. As I suggested earlier, we will grieve again, to a greater or lesser degree, on holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries, at weddings and graduations, at a naming ceremony, a birs, a bar(bat) mitzvah, at a baptism or a confirmation, because that special someone is not there to share in the joy. These are the bitter-sweet moments, when we recall a memory that puts a smile on our faces and brings a tear to our eyes. In times of accomplishment and times of crisis, we will long for their hugs and wish we could hear their words of encouragement. There are also those in-between moments when something triggers a memory and you are forced to acknowledge the loss once again. On these occasions we stop, look back, then to the future, and make an assessment of how we are doing at that particular moment in

time. Of course we are going to miss them in all the peaks and valleys of life. Even so, when we reach one of these mile markers, my hope is that each of us will also be able to add, "...but I'm doing OK." If not, the good news is that there are people like me who can help.

Some will say little of what I have written so far relates to their experience of grief. When asked, they would probably argue they have gotten over the loss; that they are done grieving. While I would probably want to check back with them in a year or two, it would be wrong for me to disagree or try to convince them otherwise. For some the dominant feeling was a sense of relief that the loved one is no longer suffering or perhaps they did not have that close of a relationship with the deceased to begin with. Others say their grief is tempered by their belief they will see their loved one again or that their faith offers them great consolation. Still others find that their existing internal coping skills and external supports are sufficient to deal with the current life crisis. In each of these cases, it does not mean that they won't feel sad or they don't miss the loved one who died, it simply means they have not been overwhelmed by the loss to the point where they felt the need to reach out for additional support.

We get better at grief for at least the following three reasons: 1. The more times we do something the better we get at it. That's true for baseball and ballroom dancing; it is also true for grief. We usually learn by trial and

error which coping strategies will work and which ones don't. We learn who we can depend on and who we can't. 2. The first time you got hit with one of those waves of grief, it most probably wiped you out. But by the tenth time or perhaps the umpteenth time you eventually came to the realization that those tears don't last forever, eventually you dry your eyes and get back to work. 3. Having learned to negotiate the waves of grief you gain confidence in your ability to survive, so you don't freak out (as often or as much). Like the man in the support group said, "We don't get over grief, but we do get better at it."

As with any other experience, people tend to revisit past losses in an attempt to figure out how to cope with the current loss. When the second parent dies, adult sons and daughters will re-examine the death of the first parent to gain insight into how to cope. They will often say something like, "I feel like I am grieving as much or more for my father who died twenty years ago as I am for my mother who died just this past month." Parents who have experienced the death of a child or adolescent describe grieving again each time one of their child's friends or age mates graduate, get married, or has a baby of their own. One widow who I met in my early years as a grief counselor called me up recently and asked if we could meet again. As it turned out she was facing a serious health crisis of her own. She said, "I am realizing that I am missing him all over again, and even though I know it is not rational, I figured out

that I am mad at him for leaving me to face this surgery all alone; after all, I was there for him, why can't he be here for me!" Later on in our discussion she went on to say that she came up with an idea that offers some comfort. She said she decided to put her wedding ring back on for a while because it reminded her that he was still present to her in some way. Finally, as we age and are confronted with our own mortality, we will review our whole life and revisit all our joys and all our sorrows in the hope of putting life into perspective. We will grieve the bad choices, the regrets, and missed opportunities. We will use our experience of previous deaths to inform ourselves about the eventuality of our own.

I find that taking this longer (and unconventional) view of grief can liberate us from the burden of judgments and self recrimination. There is nothing wrong with those who refuse to erase the memory of their loved one from their lives. Grief is hard enough, why must we also place upon the shoulders of those who grieve the added weight of urgency to get over it and move on? What's the rush? Do not those to whom we have opened the door of our hearts deserve a permanent place of remembrance? Believe me when I tell you, you never have to *move on*, but given time and reflection, not to mention the support of family and friends, we can all learn to *carry on* without them.

I've noticed that once we get past the really rough spots, we may come to realize how grief also includes some hidden treasures that are ours to keep.

Because the person who died did all the cooking, managed the checkbook or cut the grass, we end up either paying someone else, or we're forced to learn how to do those tasks on our own. Surprised, we discover that it actually is possible to *teach an old dog new tricks!* On such occasions we can pat ourselves on the head for tackling challenges small and large. Perhaps out of the pain and suffering we are left with a sense of gratitude for the kindness of friends and strangers. Having lived with loss, we might also learn the true meaning of compassion as we begin to wade into the suffering of others and extend a helping hand to lift up those in need. Confronted with human mortality and the fragility of life we might be invited to explore our spirituality more deeply or search for answers to some of life's big questions. Who knows what other gifts embracing your grief has to offer, you've got a lifetime to find out.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and outspoken critic of Hitler during World War II. Imprisoned in Tegel prison, he wrote these words to a friend shortly before his execution on April 9, 1945. I would like to think that if our deceased loved ones could speak to us from beyond the grave, they would want to leave us with something similar to these consoling words:

Nothing can take the place of someone that we love, it would be wrong to try to find a substitute. We must simply hold out and see it through. That sounds very hard at first, but at the same time it is a great consolation, for the gap, as long as it remains unfilled, preserves the bond between us. It is

nonsense to say that God fills the gap. He does not fill it. But on the contrary, He keeps it empty and so helps us to keep alive our former communion with each other, even at the cost of pain. The dearer and richer the memories the more difficult the separation, but gratitude changes the pangs of sorrow into tranquil joy. The beauties of the past are not borne as a thorn in the flesh but as a precious gift in themselves. We must take care not to wallow in our memories or hand ourselves over to them, just as we do not gaze all the time at a valuable present, but only at special times, and apart from these to keep them simply as a hidden treasure that is ours for certain. In this way the past gives us lasting joy and strength.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer⁵

NOTES:

1. Bonanno, G. (2009). *The other side of sadness: What the new science of bereavement tells us about life after loss.* New York: Basic Books.
2. Thanks to grief researchers like Holly Prigerson, Ph.D. and Catherine Shear, M.D., clinicians are beginning to understand why some people seem to have a harder time.
3. Worden, J. W. (2002). *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy.* (3rd ed.). New York: Springer.
4. For a comprehensive critique of the "5 stages of grief," see Doka, K. and Tucci, A. editors. (2011) *Beyond Kübler-Ross: New Perspectives on Death, Dying and Grief.* Washington D.C.: HFA.
5. Bonhoeffer, D. (1971). *Letters and papers from prison.* (Enlarged ed.). New York: Macmillan Publishing.