

Embrace the Uniqueness of Your Grief

-- Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt

In life, everyone grieves. But, despite what you may hear, you will do the “work of mourning” in your own way. Be careful about comparing your experience with that of other people in how long your grief should last. Just take a “one-day-at-a-time” approach. This touchstone invites you to explore some of the “whys” of your journey through the grief wilderness.

Why #1: Your relationship with the person who died

Your relationship with the person who died was different than that person’s relationship with anyone else. For example, you may have been extremely close, or “best friends,” as well as husband or wife. Perhaps you loved the person who died, but you had frequent disagreements or divisive conflicts. Or maybe you were separated by physical distance, so you weren’t as close as you would have liked.

The stronger your attachment to the person who died, the more difficult your grief journey will be. Ambivalent relationships can also be particularly hard to process after a death. You may feel a strong sense of “unfinished business” – things you wanted to say but never did.

Why #2: The circumstances of the death

How, why and when the person died can have a definite impact on your journey into grief. Was the death sudden or anticipated? How old was the person who died? Do you feel you might have been able to prevent the death?

A sudden, unexpected death obviously does not allow you any opportunity to prepare for what was about to happen. But are you ever “ready” for that moment at all? After a death due to illness, friends and family members often tell me that they were still, in a sense, shocked by the death.

The age of the person who died also affects your acceptance of the death. When a child dies, the natural order of the world is turned upside-down. Or your grief might be heightened when someone dies in what was thought to be the “prime of life.”

You may also be asking yourself if you could have done anything to prevent the death. “If only I had got him to the doctor sooner,” you may be thinking. Or, “If only I had driven instead of her.” The “if-onlys” are natural for you to explore, even if there is no logical way in which you could be held responsible for the death.

Why #3: The ritual of funeral experience

Decisions you make relating to the funeral can either help or hinder your personal grief experience. There is no right way to have a funeral. We do know, however, that creating a meaningful ritual for survivors can aid in the social, emotional and spiritual healing after a death.

The funeral is a time and a place to express your feelings about the death. The funeral can also serve as a time to honour the deceased, bring you closer to others who can give you support, affirm that life goes on and give you a context of meaning that is in keeping with your own religious, spiritual or philosophical background.

Why #4: The people in your life

Mourning requires the outside support of other human beings in order for you to heal. Without a stabilizing support system of at least one other person, the odds are that you will have difficulty in mourning. Healing requires an environment of empathy, caring and gentle encouragement. Sometimes other people may think you have a support system when, in fact, you don't. For example, you may have family members or friends who live near you, but they have little compassion or patience for you and your grief. If so, a vital ingredient to healing is missing.

Why #5: Your unique personality

What words would you use to describe yourself? What words would other people use to describe you? Are you serious? Silly? Friendly? Shy? Whatever your personality, rest assured it will be reflected in your grief. If you are quiet by nature, you may express your grief quietly. If you are outgoing, you may be more expressive.

Why #6: The unique personality of the person who died

Just as your own personality is reflected in your grief journey, so, too, is the personality of the person who died. What role(s) did he or she play in your life? Was he the funny one? Or was she the responsible one? Personality is the sum total of all the characteristics that made this person who he or she was. The way she talked, the way he smiled, the way she ate her food, the way he worked – all these and so many more little things go into creating personality. It's no wonder there's so much to miss and that grief is so complex when all these little things are gone all at once.

Why #7: Your gender

Your gender may not only influence your grief, but also the ways in which others relate to you. While this is certainly not always true, men are often encouraged and expected to "be strong" and restrained. Typically, men have more difficulty in allowing themselves to move toward painful feelings.

Women sometimes have a hard time expressing feelings of anger. By contrast, men tend to be quicker to respond with explosive emotions. And because men are conditioned to be self-sufficient, they often resist accepting outside support. But sometimes too much is made of the differences between genders and not enough is made of the capacity to grieve and mourn. Willingness to mourn often transcends gender.

Why #8: Your cultural background

Sometimes it's hard for North Americans to articulate what their cultural background is. "My mother is half Irish, a quarter Mexican and a quarter I don't know what." How does

this mixture influence your grief? When I say culture, I mean the values, rules (spoken and unspoken) and traditions that guide you and your family. Often they have been handed down generation after generation and are shaped by countries or areas of the world your family originally came from. Your cultural background is also shaped by education and political beliefs (religion, too, but we'll get to that in a minute).

Why #9: Your religious or spiritual background

Your personal belief system can have a tremendous impact on your journey into grief. You may discover that your religious or spiritual life is deepened, renewed or changed as a result of your loss. Or you may well find yourself questioning your beliefs as part of your work of mourning. When someone you love dies, some people may feel very close to God or a higher power, while others may feel more distant and hostile. You may find yourself asking questions such as, "Why has this happened to me?" or "What is the meaning of this." You may, however, not find the answers to all your questions about faith or spirituality.

Why #10: Other crises or stresses in your life right now

Although we often think it shouldn't, the world does keep turning after the death of someone loved. You may still have to work and manage finances. You may have children or elderly parents to care for (or both!). You may have too many commitments and too little time and energy to complete them. Whatever your specific situation, your grief is not the only stress in your life right now. Take steps to de-stress your life for the time being, if at all possible. Now is the time to concentrate on mourning and healing in grief.

Moving from Whys to Whats

Why your grief is what it is may be helpful for you to consider, but what is even more fundamental is what your thoughts and feelings are. What are you feeling today? A big part of healing in grief is learning to listen and attend to your inner voice.

"At bottom, every man knows well enough that he is a unique human being, only once on this earth; and by no extraordinary chance will such a marvelously picturesque piece of diversity in unity as he is, ever be put together a second time." – Nietzsche