

## **Dispel the Misconceptions about Grief: Part 2**

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In the last newsletter we explored some of the most common misconceptions about grief and how those misconceptions can pull you off the path to healing. Following are five more misconceptions.

#### **Misconception 6: When someone you love dies, you only grieve and mourn for the physical loss of the person.**

When someone you love dies, you don't just lose the presence of that person. As a result of the death, you may lose many other connections to yourself and the world around you. Sometimes I outline these potential losses, or what we call "secondary losses," as follows:

##### **Loss of self**

- Self ("I feel like part of me died when he died.")
- Identity (You may have to rethink your role as husband or wife, mother or father, son or daughter, best friend, etc.)
- Self-confidence (Some grievors experience lowered self-esteem. Naturally, you may have lost one of the people in your life who gave you confidence.)
- Health (Physical symptoms of mourning.)
- Personality ("I just don't feel like myself...")

##### **Loss of security**

- Emotional security (Emotional source of support is now gone, causing emotional upheaval.)
- Physical security (You may not feel as safe living in your home as you did before.)
- Fiscal security (You may have financial concerns or have to learn to manage finances in ways you didn't before.)
- Lifestyle (Your lifestyle has changed and no longer feels safe.)

##### **Loss of meaning**

- Goals and dreams (Hopes and dreams for the future can be shattered.)
- Faith (You may question your faith.)
- Will/desire to live (You may have questions related to future meaning in your life. You may ask, "Why go on...?")
- Joy (Life's most precious emotion, happiness, is naturally compromised by the death of someone we love.)

Allowing yourself to acknowledge the many levels of loss the death has brought to your life will help you continue to stay open to your unique grief journey.

#### **Misconception 7: You should try not to think about the person who completed suicide on holidays, anniversaries, and birthdays.**

As with all things in grief, trying not to think about something that your heart and soul are nudging you to think about is a bad idea. On special occasions such as holidays, anniversaries such as wedding dates and the day the person died, and your birthday or the birthday of the person who died, it's natural for your grief to well up inside of you and spill over—even long after the death itself.

It may seem logical that if you can only avoid thinking about the person who died on these special days--maybe you can cram your day so tight that you don't have a second to spare, then you can avoid some heartache. What I would ask you is this: Where does that heartache go if you don't let it out when it naturally arises? It doesn't disappear. It simply bides its time, patiently at first, then urgently, like a caged animal pacing behind bars.

No doubt you have some family and friends who may attempt to perpetuate this misconception. Actually, they are really trying to protect themselves in the name of protecting you.

While you may feel particularly sad and vulnerable during these times, remember ☺ these feelings are honest expressions of the real you. Whatever you do, don't overextend yourself during these times. Don't feel you have to shop, bake, entertain, send cards, etc. if you're not feeling up to it.

Instead of avoiding these days, you may want to commemorate the life of the person who died by doing something he or she would have appreciated. On his birthday, what could you do to honor his special passions? On the anniversary of her death, what could you do to remember her life? You might want to spend these times in the company of people who help you feel safe and cared for.

**Misconception 8: After someone you love dies, the goal should be to "get over" your grief as soon as possible.**

You may already have heard the question, "Are you over it yet?" Or, even worse, be told, "Well, you should be over it by now!" To think that as a human being you "get over" your grief is ludicrous! You don't get over it, you learn to live with it. You learn to integrate it into your life and into the fabric of your being.

We will talk more about this important distinction in Misconception ten. For now, suffice it to say that you never "get over" your grief. As you become willing to do the work of your mourning, however, you can and will become reconciled to it. Unfortunately, when the people around you think you have to get over your grief, they set you up to fail.

**Misconception 9: Nobody can help you with your grief.**

We have all heard people say, "Nobody can help you but yourself." Or you may have been told since childhood, "If you want something done right, do it yourself." Yet, in reality, perhaps the most compassionate thing you can do for yourself at this difficult time is to reach out for help from others.

Think of it this way: Grieving and mourning may be the hardest work you have ever done. And hard work is less burdensome when others lend a hand. Life's greatest challenges ☺ getting through school, raising children, and pursuing a career ☺ are in many ways team efforts. So it should be with mourning.

Sharing your pain with others won't make it disappear, but it will, over time, make it more bearable. By definition, mourning (i.e., the outward expression of grief) requires that you get support from sources outside of yourself. Reaching out for help also connects you to other people and strengthens the bonds of love that make life seem worth living again.

**Misconception 10: When grief and mourning are finally reconciled, they never come up again.**

Oh, if only this were so. As your experience has probably already taught you, grief comes in and out like waves from the ocean. Sometimes when you least expect it, a huge wave comes along and pulls your feet right out from under you.

Sometimes heightened periods of sadness overwhelm us when we're in grief--even years after the death. These times can seem to come out of nowhere and can be frightening and painful. Something as simple as a sound, a smell, or phrase can bring on what I call "grief bursts." My friend Ken loved the Wisconsin Badgers football team. Every time I see something on TV about that team I have a grief burst.

Allow yourself to experience grief bursts without shame or self-judgment, no matter where or when they occur. Sooner or later, one will probably happen when you're surrounded by other people, maybe even strangers. If you would feel more comfortable, retreat to somewhere more private, or go see someone you know who will understand, when these strong feelings surface.

You will always, for the rest of your life, feel some grief over this death. It will no longer dominate your life, but it will always be there, in the background, reminding you about the love you had for the person who died.

Keep in mind that the misconceptions about grief and mourning explored in this chapter are certainly not all the misconceptions about suicide grief and mourning.

When surrounded by people who believe these misconceptions, you will probably feel a heightened sense of isolation. If the people who are closest to you are unable to emotionally and spiritually support you without judging you, seek out others who can. Usually, the ability to be supportive without judging is most developed in people who have been on a grief journey themselves and are willing to be with you during this difficult time. When you are surrounded by people who can distinguish the misconceptions of grief from the realities, you can and will experience the healing you deserve.

### **Realistic Expectations for Grieving and Mourning**

- You will naturally grieve, but you will probably have to make a conscious effort to mourn.
- Your grief and mourning will involve a wide variety of different thoughts and feelings.
- Your grief and mourning will impact you in all five realms of experience: physical; emotional; cognitive; social; and spiritual.
- You need to feel it to heal it.
- Your grief will probably hurt more before it hurts less.
- Your grief will be unpredictable and will not likely progress in an orderly fashion.
- You don't "get over" grief; you learn to live with it.
- You need other people to help you through your grief.
- You will not always feel this bad.