

Toward and Understanding of the “Going Crazy” Syndrome by Alan D Wolfelt, Ph.D

In the beautiful book, *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis wrote about his experience after the death of his wife. He stated, " An odd by-product of my loss is that I'm aware of being an embarrassment to everyone I meet...Perhaps the bereaved ought to be isolated in special settlements like lepers."

As he so appropriately teaches from this experience, society often tends to make the bereaved feel intense shame and embarrassment about feelings of grief. I'm not surprised that the most often-asked question I get from bereaved persons is, "Am I going crazy?"

Shame can be described as the feeling that something you are doing is bad. And you may feel that if you mourn, then you should be ashamed. If you are perceived as "doing well" with your grief, you are considered "strong" and "under control." The message is that the well-controlled person stays rational at all times.

Combined with this message is another one. Society erroneously implies that if you, as a bereaved person, openly express your feelings of grief, you are immature. If your feelings are fairly intense, you may be labeled "overly emotional." If your feelings are extremely intense, you may even be referred to as "crazy" or a "pathological mourner."

This article is to address this frequent question, "Am I crazy?" I have provided information about the normalcy of the disorganization and confusion that often comes when we mourn the death of someone loved.

Disorganization, Confusion, Searching, Yearning

Perhaps the most isolating and frightening part of your grief journey is the sense of disorganization, confusion, searching and yearning that often comes with loss. These experiences frequently come when you begin to be confronted with the reality of the death. As one bereaved person said, "I felt as if I were a lonely traveler with no companion, and worse yet, no destination. I couldn't find myself or anybody else."

This dimension of grief may cause the "going crazy syndrome." In grief, thoughts and behaviors are different from what you normally experience. It's only natural that you may not know if your thoughts, feelings and behaviors are normal or abnormal. The experiences described below are common after the death of someone loved. A major goal of this article is simply validate these experiences so you will know you are not crazy!

After the death of someone loved, you feel a sense of restlessness, agitation, impatience and ongoing confusion. It's like being in the middle of a wild, rushing river where you can't get a grasp on anything. Disconnected thoughts race through your mind, and strong emotions may be overwhelming.

You may express disorganization and confusion in your ability to complete any tasks. A project may get started but go unfinished. Forgetfulness and low-work effectiveness are commonplace for many people experiencing this dimension of grief. Early morning and late at night are times when you may feel most disoriented and confused. These feelings are often accompanied by fatigue and lack of initiative. Every day pleasures may not seem to matter any more.

You may also experience a restless searching for the person who has died. Yearning and preoccupation with memories can leave you feeling drained.

You might even experience a shift in perception; other people may begin to look like the person in your life who died. You might be at a shopping mall, look down a hallway and think you see the person you loved so much. Or see a car go past that was like the person's who died and find yourself following the car. Sometimes you might hear the garage door open and the person entering the house he or she had done so many times in the past. If these experiences are happening to you remember-You are not crazy! Visual hallucinations occur so frequently they cannot be considered abnormal. I personally prefer the term "memory picture" to hallucination. As part of your searching and yearning when you are bereaved, you may not only experience a sense of the dead person's presences, but you may also have fleeting glimpses of the person across a room. Again, remember those words-You are not crazy!

Other common experiences during this time include difficulties with eating and sleeping. You may experience a loss of appetite, or find yourself overeating. Even when you do eat, you may be unable to taste the food. Difficulty in going to sleep and early morning awakening also are common experiences associated with this dimension of grief.

You might find it helpful to remember that disorganization following loss always comes before any kind of re-orientation. Some people will try to have you bypass any kind of disorganization or confusion. Remember- it simply cannot be done. While it may seem strange, keep in mind that your disorganization and confusion are actually stepping-stones on your path toward healing.

If disorganization, confusion, searching and yearning are, or have been a part of your grief journey. Don't worry about the normalcy of your experience. It is critically important to never forget those reassuring words: You are not crazy!

When you feel disorganized, talk to someone who will understand. To heal, grief must be shared outside of yourself. I hope you have at least one person who you feel understands and will not judge you. That person must be patient and attentive so you may tell your story over and over again as you work to embrace your grief. He or she must be genuinely interested in understanding you. If you are trying to talk about your disorganization, and the person doesn't want to listen, find someone who will meet your needs better.

The thoughts, feelings and behavior of this dimension do not come all at once. They are often experienced in a wave-like fashion. Hopefully, you will have someone to support you through each wave. You may need to talk and cry for long periods of time. At other times, you may just need to be alone. Don't try to interpret what you think and feel. Just experience it. Sometimes when you talk, you may not think you make much sense. And you may not. But talking it out can still be self-clarifying at a level you may not even be aware of.

During this time, discourage yourself from making any critical decisions, such as selling your house or moving to another community. With the judgment-making difficulties that naturally come with this part of the grief experience, ill-timed decisions might result in more feelings of loss. Go slow and be patient with yourself. And remember—you are not going crazy!