



The Three “R’s”

Resources for negotiating the ever changing currents of grief
by Thom Dennis, LCPC

For most of us, grief is uncharted territory. When a loved one dies, we enter into some of life’s most turbulent and troubled waters. It is important to find people and resources who can help us find our way through these rough times.

As a grief counselor, I sometimes think of myself as a seasoned river guide. I have accompanied people down this wild river ride many times before and although every person’s experience is unique, I have picked up a few tips along the way that you may find helpful. I have learned that what most people need falls into one of three general categories; I call them the Three R’s of Grief.

1. Re-education

In our culture, there are a lot of misconceptions about grief. Consequently, many people suffer from judgments or unrealistic expectations that make an already difficult situation even worse. I find that if I can correct some of the misinformation about grief, it lowers the person’s stress level and allows them to focus their attention on what they can do to make their experience of loss more manageable.

2. Reassurance

Everybody, and I mean everybody, asks me in one way or another, “Is it normal to feel this way?” I encourage people to remove the word normal from their grief vocabulary. Instead, I prefer the word common. Normal has many meanings but in the back of our minds one point stands out; the opposite of normal is abnormal. I am inclined to believe that on some level people are really thinking, “If the way I am grieving is not normal then there must be something wrong with me!” The truth of the matter is, it is this situation that is crazy, not you. And yes, it is common for people to feel this way! When we grieve, the difficulties we face are compounded by the fact that it is hard to concentrate and we have less emotional energy. I find that people already have many coping skills that can be applied to this new stressful situation. They just need to be reminded of that fact. And even if they don’t have pre-existing coping skills, I remind them that they are not alone, that there are other people who can help them find their way.

3. Resources

Wouldn’t it be nice if grief came with a map or a set of instruction booklets? The fact is, there are tons of books and other resources people can turn to, but it is hard to know which ones are right for you. Because the currents of grief are constantly changing, I cannot predict at any particular moment what kinds of resources you

will need. However, I think it helps to ask the following question:

If grief were a river, what would I need for the trip?

Imagine you are planning a whitewater rafting trip. Although every person's experience will be different, I think everything a person needs for the journey probably falls in to one of the following four categories.

Companions

None of us can make it on our own. We need people who can help us; friends, family and co-workers. Sometimes, through no fault of their own, these people are not able to help us in the way we need. This might be the time to call upon the support of a seasoned river guide. Whether it is a counselor, grief support group or simply the widow who lives down the street, it is invaluable to talk with someone who knows something about grief.

When we grieve, we need a boatload of support. Think of all the groups that you belong to and consider every individual in each of those groups.

Don't forget unconventional sources of support; the family pet, internet chat rooms or grief blogs and never underestimate the power of prayer. Figuring out who to call is only the first step. The really big challenge is asking for their help.

Sandbars

No one can grieve 24/7. It is essential to occasionally take a break from grief. Look for

places that you can rest along the way. Your wounded heart is going to need extra sleep to recuperate and heal.

Don't expect yourself or anyone else who is grieving to carry on with business as usual. Go to the movies, read a novel, take the dog for a walk. Take small breaks throughout the day and schedule a real vacation.

Don't worry, you are not avoiding your feeling if in the depth of winter you take your journal and go grieve on a beach for a week or two.

You don't drown by
falling into water,
you drown by
staying there.
Robert Allen

Food for the journey

If you were embarking on a river expedition you would need to take along some supplies. Your survival will depend on getting proper nourishment. Think in terms of things that will feed your body, mind and spirit. It is always important to eat a well balanced diet and to exercise, but now it is more important than ever. Some people consider chocolate to be a major food group. I'm told that chocolate actually creates endorphins, the feel good chemicals of the brain. If you need permission to give yourself a treat once in a while, consider it granted; but remember, all things in moderation. (S'mores anyone?)

No one knows better than you what you need, so stop and listen to the yearning of your soul. Consider getting that massage, buy that CD, take a class, and find a group of like-minded individuals. Feed yourself first.

Provisions

Provisions are all of the resources that you can either rent or buy to make your grief journey more manageable. On a river, you will need a boat, a paddle and remember to never enter the water without some type of flotation device. The same can be said of grief.

Provisions are the books on grief, the home security system and the kid next door who can mow the yard. Look for things that say, "free," but do not be afraid to spend a little extra money on any activity that will make those long evenings and weekends more bearable.

One final thought. A man in a support group said it best; "I don't think grief ever goes away, we just get better at it."

The death of your loved one leaves a hole in your life that can never be filled. From my perspective grief lasts a lifetime, but trust me, it will be transformed over time. If you hang in there, you will get better at negotiating the currents of grief. The rapids of grief will give way to calmer waters and you will again be able to return your focus on the events and scenery of everyday life.