



## BEYOND ACCEPTANCE

Integrating the experience of loss as life moves forward

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How long does grief last; six months, a year, eighteen months, three to five years?

Arguably, most people would probably say grief lasts six months or maybe a year at most. However, my response to this question might surprise or even frighten you. I am inclined to believe that your grief will last a lifetime.

One quick word of caution: this does not mean that I am suggesting the way you feel right now is the way you will feel forever! Grief changes over time. Grief looks and feels different at six weeks or six months than it will at six or sixteen years. Despite what the “experts” might say, when you ask people who have experienced a profound loss, they will tell you that the feelings may change or dissipate, but they never really go away. The reality is that we continue to mourn beyond the first year and the task of adapting to life without the loved one remains an on-going challenge.

Perhaps the error that most people make, starts with the assumption that grief is over when you stop feeling sad.

Grief is much more complex than just the feelings of sadness and yearning we feel when someone dies. Grief involves *all of the thought, emotions and bodily sensations that we associated with the death of a loved one over the course of a lifetime*. The loss will have physical, mental and spiritual consequences. It may require adapting to changes in economic status and in social relationships. It may challenge our sense of identity and sometimes forces us to reevaluate the way we look at and live our lives. Like the ripples on a pond, the effects of grief extend long after the actual death.

Even many years later we experience what might be called, “grief spikes.” These intense emotional reactions occur when a significant family event occurs such as a birth, graduation or wedding, when someone else dies, and whenever we face a new crisis or challenge. On these occasions we are reminded of how much we miss the deceased and how drastically life has changed. We may get angry at the loved one for leaving us to deal with the problem on our own. After a period of feeling sad, we usually resolve to carry on as best we can. Finally, even though most people manage to successfully reorganize their lives and adapt to life without the

loved one, it is normal to still miss or think about them, possibly every day for the rest of your life.

For example, my father has been a widower for over twenty years. He is retired and enjoys spending time with his grandchildren. He is in good health and is actively involved in his community. By all accounts he is doing great, but he tells me, “Not a day goes by that I don’t think about your mom.” Rather than this being an indicator of unresolved or pathological grief, I think it is normal, even appropriate. It is a testament to the relationship they had and a sign of their undying bond of love.

Even those who shy away from putting a timeframe on grief still maintain that the grieving period will eventually end. Perhaps it is because human beings need closure, we need reassurance that the sadness will end and life will return to “normal.” Of course some losses will be harder than others. We will not grieve for every person in the same way; depending on the nature of the relationship, the impact of the loss will vary. The term they most commonly associate with an end to grief is *acceptance*. It is important to point out that acceptance is not something that happens all at once. Initially there may be a period of shock or denial. This period functions as a defense mechanism, it is the mind’s way of protecting itself from news that is potentially too overwhelming. Denial is actually a helpful coping tool that functions as a kind of circuit breaker. With time, when your subconscious mind thinks you are ready to absorb the full impact of the loss, the denial will dissolve.

Participation in funerary rituals, the condolence of friends, and doing all the seemingly endless paperwork associated with a death helps to underscore the reality of the loss. But just because

your head knows they died, doesn’t mean that your heart is ready to accept it. Even months later I hear people say, “I know he’s gone but sometimes I say to myself that he’s just on a long vacation and will be coming home soon. I know it’s not true, but it helps a little bit.”

It is not uncommon for those who mourn to report that they cannot get the final dying scene out of their mind. The seemingly endless replaying of the events surrounding the death, as painful as it is, actually helps to facilitate acceptance on a heart level. It is as if our minds keep pushing the rewind button so that we can examine the traumatic event from every possible angle. With time we are usually able to *accept* the fact that they are truly gone and there was nothing we could have done to change the outcome.

Consider all of the firsts; the first social event without him or her, the first birthday, the first anniversary, the first holiday, etc. What people often forget about are the seconds and the thirds and so on. Coming to terms with the reality of the loss is not just about accepting the reality of their death, it is also about accepting the reality that you have to face a future without him or her. In fact, every novel situation (regardless of how proximate it is to the time of death) presents us with the reality of the loss. On these occasions we are confronted with the question of how we will manage the situation without them. Each time, we have to accept the fact all over again, that the loved one is not there to help us talk it through. These situations can cause us to feel sad, angry, anxious, hurt, cheated, insecure or vulnerable or all of the above. One widower said, “I know she’s gone but I don’t have to like it.” Given all these examples, I think we can only conclude that acceptance is open ended, that it happens over an extended period of time, and on multiple levels.

From my perspective, instead of calling it acceptance, a better term for describing the coming to terms with the loss is **integration**.

Integration, or more appropriately, **integrating**, means, “*the act of combining, mixing or mingling one or more things so that they become something new.*” In the case of grief, we are trying to take in, to absorb, the full extent of the loss. We try to make sense of it from each new vantage point as we move further downstream. It is as if we ask ourselves at every bend or fork in the river, “how do I feel about it now?” We realize that we still miss them. But at the same time we usually resolve to keep moving (because we have no choice). At times we might also feel a sense of pride for managing to cope on our own or feel diminished because we are still having a hard time living without them.

Among those who want to confine grief to a specific time period, there is a lot of well intentioned advice about the need to “let go,” and “move on.” From my perspective, it is really not about letting go; the sad reality is that they are already gone. It is not about your need to move on, time moves on whether we are ready or not.

Integrating the loss involves finding something to hold on to while simultaneously adjusting to whatever else life has to throw at us. In effect we are constantly creating a “new normal.” In that sense, the task of integrating a loss is ongoing. The good news is, it will not be all misery and gloom. As we move further downstream, there may still be moments of sadness, but there will be plenty of happy new memories created as well. Over time we may not even notice the subtle adjustments that are required. We get better at something the more we do it. A man in a support group said it best when he concluded, “You don’t get over grief, you just get better at it.”

As we grow older and approach the end of our own journey, our thoughts naturally gravitate toward our own mortality. We use previous losses as a reference point. We engage in a activity called, *life review*. This is an extended period of time where we look over the whole course of our life journey and think about the choices we have made. We examine the people and events that have impacted us, and we will grieve again whatever needs to be grieved. The goal of a *peaceful death* will depend on our ability to

accept the good and the bad and to conclude that we did the best we could, given the circumstances. We will also use our previous losses as a guide for informing our own advanced directives. And depending on our faith perspective, we may imagine or look forward to the time when we will rejoin our loved ones who have preceded us in death.

You may not think so now, but many people say it is strangely comforting to learn that grief has no timeframe. They say it seems disrespectful to suggest that six months or a year is enough time to grieve someone they have invited into the secret recesses of their hearts. We are talking about people who have had a central role in our lives, in many cases they are someone with whom we have shared a lifetime. Grief should never be measured in time. Like love or ambition or rage, grief is one of the currents that propels us further down stream. Instead of wondering when it will be over, we might be better served by asking the question, if grief were a river, what will I need for the trip?