

The Dark Side of Grief
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As bereavement coordinator for our hospice program, I have learned that as significant part of moving through sorrow can involve addressing the uncomfortable and unresolved aspects of relationships. This is the dark side of grief.

I have heard about a spouse's unfaithfulness during marriage, of devotion to work with no time for family, and of drinking problems that affected the family economically as well as emotionally. This is the turbulent side of grief!

Children have acknowledged to me abuse by the person who dies, a feeling of "never measuring up," or having little respect for the lifestyle of the person who died; a feeling of never being loved by a parent and having spent an adult life striving for that approval and love. This is the shadow side of grief!

In order to allow the burden of such feelings to be released, and before our lives can move on in healthy ways, we must responsibly take care of ourselves. A strong beginning is a willingness to build a trusting relationship in which pain can be safely disclosed. Seek professional help through counseling; talk to a valued and trusted friend, clergy or spouse; and obtain literature to educate yourself toward a better understanding of the situation.

Developing a course of action to help move through pain and secrets to a place of resolution and healing can be holy work secrets can only be damaging—particularly for the person who is caught in the web of shame or guilt over past events or assumptions. Even if others find it difficult to accept what is said, such steps are important in the work of grieving and movement toward greater emotional health if they are done without harm to self or others.

Here are some steps that might help:

Acknowledge the painful truth of feelings

Janet, a woman in her mid-sixties, had cared for her ninety-five-year-old, verbally abusive mother for twenty years. Janet had lost her husband. His illness had come before they could realize their dreams of travel after the mother's death. She confided her lifelong pursuit of her mother's withheld love that included bringing her mother into their home and providing for her total care.

Janet spoke of knowing her mother had been sexually abused by Janet's grandfather, and even though she had some grasp of how such trauma had shaped her mother's life, Janet's pain was legitimate and far-reaching.

As she sobbed her story, she mourned her husband's death and the death of their hoped-for life together, as well as the grief of never being able to acquire her confused and mentally deficient mother's love. Her sharing was a beginning. She was able to feel; and acknowledge her pain.

Tell someone you trust about your pain

Susan, who had lost her husband after a three-year bout with cancer, came to our support group with pent up anger she was not aware of. As her trust was built in the group, she was able to share that her husband had continued to fight his disease for two years and nine months with hope about the outcome.

But, three months before his death, George said he was tired and could not fight any longer. Susan appeared to be resigned to his impending death and moved through the time both before and after his death with apparent acceptance. Nine months later, in our group, she was able to be in touch with her anger towards George for dying. Susan had been very dependent on George and felt alone and floundering as she dealt with house, car, yard and a myriad of other responsibilities that were now hers.

As we shared one another's stories, she was given new insights into her experience. One night as she sat in her living room watching but not comprehending the program on TV, her spinning thought took her closer to her anger. She vehemently rose from her chair, and with body rigid, she raised her fists over her head and shouted to the ceiling/heavens, "George, I'm so angry with you for dying and leaving me alone!"

She found that her body and mind immediately relaxed and when, in a voice of acceptance, she said aloud, "But I forgive you," she came to a place of greater peace. This was a turning point in her grief journey.

Safely, share feelings of guilt and anger

Forty-year-old Clara, whose mother died in our hospice program, spoke of her mother's constant criticism. Her mother felt that Clara could never do anything right, even peel potatoes! Clara had moved away from the state where she had lived "just down the road" from her mother (who used to keep an eagle eye on Clara's comings and goings and exhibited great control over her daughter's activities).

Clara felt that her very religious and self-righteous mother was watching her from Heaven and even now condemning all that Clara did.

It was suggested that Clara talk with her sister for some clarity of her perceptions. She and her sister were somewhat estranged because the sister had been mother's "favorite." It took great courage for Clara to do this, but her willingness to disclose her own pain allowed her to learn that her sister also had pain in her relationship with the mother. The two of them were able to share a closer bond as they discovered a more common history than either had known existed before.

Attend a support group

After her mother died, Barb called our office. Her mother has been in a hospice in another state, and they had advised barb to find a support group. Thought she was depressed, had no motivation or energy for anything, and life had little meaning for her, she was able to share he story as her trust in the group was building.

While her mother had been ill with cancer and was dying, her alcoholic father became ill. The family dynamics were not good, and barb had the sole responsibility for their care. Her siblings agreed. She traveled weekly from another state to be attentive and to make decisions.

As her father's illness progressed, barb felt she could not manage care for both parents, and she elected to place her father temporarily in the hospital nearby. Within a few days, he dies, and her mother died a month later. Barb felt intense guilt over placing her father in the hospital because he died alone, and she felt responsible for her mother's death that occurred so quickly after the loss of her mate.

Barb talked and talked! Telling her story released part of her guilt. She also heard the painful stories of others and could place her situation in a more balanced context.

Through the weeks, she learned new insights about her situation and was able to verbalize ways in which she had sabotaged herself. The group supported her, called her gently to account and encouraged her as she attempted different ways of behaving in her family. Barb grew stronger because of her involvement in the group.

Believe that you are worth taking action for

Ralph and his wife, Gladys, took care of their thirty-five-year-old son who was dying of AIDS. They were in their mid-seventies, and Hal, who had been living away for many years, now had come home to die. This situation was very hard for Ralph to accept. He did not want anyone to know about his son. Both Ralph and Gladys were extremely guarded in letting others into their circle of knowledge about the illness. Shame was a part of their experience.

As they moved through the illness with Hal, Ralph came to a new awareness about himself and his son, and their relationship grew. They were able to acknowledge to their clergy and some friends what was occurring in their lives and gain support from others.

They lovingly cared for their son and the interaction between father and son developed into a closeness that had not been present before. Ralph rose above the stigmas he had previously held to recognize his son's intrinsic worth as a person and, therefore, his own worth was enhanced. He grew because of his experience.

The dark side of grief is a present in our world. It is not something that always touches other and rarely ourselves. At some point, such shadow experiences will befall us, and knowing how to deal with this aspect of life can be just as important as the difficult but less turbulent experience. Knowing that we will face such passages and gaining some skills in meeting them can only bring us greater physical, mental and spiritual health.