

1 Bereaved Families of Cape Breton

Recognize You Are Not Crazy

– by Alan D. Wolfelt

“Grief is like a long, winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape.”

– C.S. Lewis

In all my years as a grief counselor, the most common question mourners have asked me is, “Am I going crazy?” The journey through grief can be so radically different from our everyday realities that sometimes it feels like being picked up and dropped onto the surface of the moon. The terrain is so very foreign and disorienting, and our behaviours seem so out of whack, that we feel like we’re going crazy.

This touchstone helps you be on the lookout for the trail marker that affirms your sanity: **Recognize You Are Not Crazy**. It’s an important trail marker, because if you miss it, your entire journey through the wilderness of your grief may feel like Alice’s surreal visit to Wonderland. Actually, your journey may still feel surreal even if you find this trail marker, but at least you’ll know in your head that you’re not going crazy.

Following are a number of common thoughts and feels in grief that cause mourners to feel like they’re going crazy. They may or may not be a part of your personal experience.

Time Distortion

“I don’t know what day it is, let alone what time it is!” This kind of comment is not unusual when you are mourning. Your sense of past and future may seem to be frozen in place. You may lose track of what day or even what month it is. Your inability to keep time right now isn’t crazy. It is common in grief, particularly in the early days and weeks after the death.

Self-Focus

Especially early in your grief, you may find yourself being less conscious of the needs of others. You may not have the energy to attend to all the needs of your children or other family members. The compulsion to focus only on yourself doesn’t mean you’re going crazy. Your mind and spirit are directing your attention away from others and into your self because you need this self-focus to integrate your grief. Later on you’ll be ready to reconnect with others and support them in their life trials.

Rethinking and Retelling the Story

Often when someone dies, you find yourself thinking about the circumstances of the death and the time immediately surrounding the death over and over again. You may feel like you can’t “shake” your memories of certain moments. You may also feel the need –almost a compulsion–to tell other people about these memories over and over again. I call this process “telling the story.” Telling the story isn’t a sign that you’re going crazy; in fact, it’s a sign that you’re doing your work of mourning. You tell yourself and others the story in an effort to integrate it into your life. What has happened to you–the death of someone you love–is so hard to fathom that your mind compels you to revisit it and revisit it until you’ve truly acknowledged it and embraced its presence. Telling the story helps bring your head and your heart together.

Sudden Changes in Mood

When someone dies, you may feel like you are surviving fairly well one minute and in the

depths of despair the next. Sudden changes in your mood are a difficult, yet natural, part of your grief journey. These mood changes can be small or very dramatic. They can be triggered by driving past a familiar place, a song, an insensitive comment or even a change in the weather.

Powerlessness and Helplessness

Your grief can at times leave you feeling powerless. While part of you realizes you had no control over what happened, another part feels a sense of powerlessness at not having been able to prevent it. You would like to have your life back the way it was, but you can't and you feel powerless in that knowledge. Also, you may wonder that if you had acted differently, you could have prevented the death. Your "if onlys" are often expressions of wishing you could have been in control of something you could not. Lack of control is a difficult reality to accept, yet it is one that over time and through the work of mourning you must encounter.

Grief Attacks or Griefbursts

A "griefburst" is a sudden, sharp feeling of grief that can cause anxiety and pain. Some people call them grief attacks. During a griefburst, you may feel an overwhelming sense of missing the person you loved and find yourself openly crying or perhaps even sobbing. As one woman told me, "I'll be busy for awhile and sometimes even forget he has died. Then I'll see his picture or smell his favourite food, and I'll just feel like I can't even move." Griefbursts are normal. When and if one strikes you, be compassionate with yourself. You have every right to miss the person who has died and to feel temporary paralysis or loss of control. Don't try to deny a griefburst when it comes on. It is probably more powerful than you are.

Crying and Sobbing

If you're crying and sobbing a lot, you may feel like you're out of control. Sobbing is like wailing and it comes from the inner core of your being. Cry, wail and sob as long and as hard and as often as you need to. Don't try to be strong and brave for yourself or others.

Linking Objects

Linking objects are items that belonged to the person who died that you now like to have around you. Objects such as clothing, books, knick-knacks, furniture, artwork and other prized possessions can help you feel physically close to the person you miss so much. If you like to hold, be near, look at, sleep with, caress or even smell a special belonging of the person who died, you're not crazy. You're simply trying to hold on to a tangible, physical connection to the person.

Identification Symptoms of Physical Illness

When you care deeply about someone and they die, you sometimes develop new ways to identify and feel close to that person. One way is by relating to the physical symptoms of the person who died. For example, if she died from a brain tumour, you may have more frequent headaches. Of course, checking for organic problems is important, but you also should be aware that you might be experiencing identification symptoms of physical illness. Your body is simply responding to the loss. As you do the hard work of mourning, however, these symptoms should go away. If they don't, find someone who will listen to you and help you understand what is happening.

Dreams

Keep in mind that dreams are one of the ways the work of mourning takes place. A dream may reflect a searching for the person who has died, for example. Dreams also provide opportunities—to feel close to the person who died, to embrace the reality of the death, or to

develop a new self-identity. Dreams also may help you search for meaning or explore unfinished business. Finally, dreams can show you hope for the future. On the other hand, you may experience nightmares, particularly after a traumatic, violent death. These dreams can be very frightening. If your dreams are distressing, talk about them with someone who can support and understand you.

Mystical Experiences

When someone you love dies, you may have experiences that are not always rationally explainable. That doesn't mean you're crazy. If you share these experiences with others, they may question your mental fitness. But I like to say that if you have mystical experiences, you're simply mystically sensitive. The primary form of mystical experience that grieving people have taught me about is communicating with the person who died. Some people find the experience hard to believe and they try to explain it away in a rational manner: "I must have been dreaming." Others try to distance themselves from the experience because they are taught that such things are impossible. I have listened to and learned from hundreds of people who have seen, heard and felt the presence of someone who has died. If you are one of them, you're not going crazy. You can still be very sane and exceedingly rational while at times experiencing and embracing mystical encounters. Who on this earth is to say what's real and what isn't? Certainly not I. Remain open to these experiences and be thankful for the comfort they provide.

You're Not Crazy, You're Grieving

Never forget that your journey through the wilderness of your grief may bring you through all kinds of strange and unfamiliar terrain. When you feel like you're going crazy, remind yourself to look for the trail marker that assures you you're not going crazy. You're grieving. The two can feel remarkably similar sometimes.