



## 10 Hard Truths of Grief

By Thom Dennis, D. Min., LCPC, CT

At first glance, this list of the ten hard truths of grief won't offer much comfort. It might even feel like pouring salt into an open wound. You may be wondering, "What's the value in reminding me that grief is hard? That point has already been made abundantly clear!"

At the risk of re-stating the obvious, I suggest that even amidst the pain, giving voice to the groaning of the heart can promote healing. You've heard the saying, "The truth hurts." No doubt you've also heard, "The truth can set you free." By naming these truths you have got the first tool to start dealing with your heart ache creatively. By naming them you can also enter into a dialogue with others and learn some new strategies to cope.

### 1. Some things are beyond our control

We would all prefer to live with the illusion that we are in control of our own lives but a sudden change in the weather, an unwelcomed diagnosis or a random act of violence reminds us that no one is the master of their fate. The truth is: in this life

there is very little of real consequence that you have any control over. The challenge is to accept this reality and refocus your attention on what is within your power to change. You can acknowledge your feelings and choose how you are going to respond to whatever life has to throw in your direction.

### 2. There are consequence to being mortal

In our office there is a beautifully illustrated book entitled, *Lifetimes*, by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen. We use it to explain death to children. When it comes to grief, we are all little children needing comfort, reassurance and gentle age-appropriate explanations. The sad truth is people die. In fact, everything dies. Death is a natural part of life. As much as we would like to believe our parent, spouse, sibling, child, friend or loved one will live forever, they too will eventually die. In the end, even you will die. It's not fair, it's never fair but its part of being mortal. And perhaps, it's for the best that nothing mortal lasts forever. Like the changing of the seasons our passing makes room for new life.

### 3. It's supposed to hurt

Leo Buscaglia, the “Love Doctor,” once said, “the opposite of love is not hate: the opposite of love is apathy.” To say it another way, apathy means, “I don’t care.” The reason grief hurts so much is because you care deeply for the person who died. If you didn’t care, it wouldn’t hurt so much. The more you love, the more it’s gonna hurt. The two seem to be unalterably linked. To look at it in a slightly different way, the pain you feel is love’s testament to the bond you share. Should we guard our hearts against the depths of loss we would never have the opportunity to experience the lofty heights of love.

#### **4. Life will never be the same**

The death of a loved one not only leaves a hole in your heart that can’t be filled, it also impacts practically every other aspects of your life. Widows and widowers report changes in their social relationships. Adults whose parents have died say they also lost their best friend or most trusted advisor. Family dynamics invariably shift when one person in the equation is taken away. The economic impact of a death can also have lasting effects. Even when you feel like you’ve adjusted to an environment without the deceased and life has returned to some degree of “normal,” sadly, life will never be the same again. It may be helpful to remember that living always requires adapting to some sort of change. Finding a reason to embrace life after the death of a loved one may be challenging.

Acknowledging that life will never be the same doesn’t mean that the future will be all bad.

#### **5. The rest of the world doesn’t share your grief**

Beyond the circle of your acquaintances, the rest of the world won’t know your loved one has died. The people you encounter on a daily basis will be focused on their own wants, oblivious to your needs and

concerns. Your creditors will still require you to meet your financial obligations. Your boss and customers will still require a certain level of job performance. Your neighbors will still be annoying. Your children will still need every ounce of what remains of your patience and praise. On the flip side, it’s a good thing that the stock market, oil prices, and the weather do not depend on the rise and fall of your moods. Even though you are grieving, it’s good news that babies are being born, and the sun will rise tomorrow morning.

#### **6. People say dumb things**

My list of the top ten most shocking and outrageous things people say to the newly bereaved is worthy of the David Letterman Show. Except, in this case the response would be gasps not laughs. From coworkers suggesting that “things could be worse,” to neighbors wondering if you plan to sell your house, I’ve come to the conclusion that most people simply don’t think before they open their mouths. People just don’t know what to say so they try to “wing it.” Either they say something inappropriate or they error on the side of not saying anything at all. (I’m not sure which is worse.) You have the right to educate them about the comments they make but if you can see these blunders as fumbled attempts to offer comfort, then perhaps you can experience the sympathy that underlies their misspoken comments.

#### **7. Friends and family will disappoint you**

If you have friends and family who love and support you, consider yourself blessed. There are lots of folks who don’t have a built-in support network and when their loved one dies they have to start from scratch. One of the most common laments I hear in support groups is the failure of family and friends to offer the kind of support that you need. I encourage people to consider the temperament of each of the

people in your circle of support. Are they generally a good listener? If not, is it fair to expect them change now? Remember that each family member had a different relationship with the deceased. Consequently, their grief will look different than yours. If your spouse hasn't lost a parent, they may not "get it" when your parent dies. Best friends may not know how to react so they might pull away. You may feel like a third wheel at social gatherings. You may need to be more direct when it comes to expressing your needs. It may also take some time, but you will gravitate toward people who have experienced a similar type of loss. I'm going to predict that you will find additional sources of support. You will hear from old friends or an acquaintance may step forward to fill the void.

#### **8. You have to be assertive**

It's not easy to ask for help. However, that is exactly what you are going to have to do if you want your needs to be met. Whether it's legal, financial or cooking, you are going to have to ask for advice. Whether it's respect, intimacy needs or driving directions, you are going to have to be more assertive. What is the alternative? Also, you will have to mention your loved one's name at the family or holiday gathering because most people will be afraid to say it out of fear that it might upset you. Little do they know that your departed loved one's name is sweeter to you than your own.

#### **9. Decisions still have to be made**

Immediately following a death in the family, certain decisions have to be made.

Hopefully there are people around to share the burden but more often than not, the sole responsibility falls on your shoulders. As time passes the business of life requires other decisions be made. Your loved one may have been your most trusted advisor or decision making partner; and yet you still have to make important decisions. You will make some mistakes, but you will learn from them. If you choose to accept the challenge, you are going to grow from this experience and become a stronger, wiser person.

#### **10. There is no time frame and no road map for grief**

If grief were on a time clock, you could punch in and punch out at your own convenience. That way you could schedule your tears to fit neatly into the daily life. If someone offered a roadmap for grief, you could take a short cut or bypass the tricky spots. Everyone grieves in their own way and at their own pace. So don't let other people project their discomfort with grief onto you. Stop and take a break when you need it. This is not a race. Linger along the back roads of memory, it is there that treasures will be found.

#### **11. Your personal hard truths**

This list of the ten hard truths of grief is certainly not exhaustive. There must be other truths that you have learned on your own grief journey. I invite you to add to my list or create your own list of hard truths. What are the truths that have helped you cope with loss, make decisions and enter into this new phase of your life?

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For more information about how to bring the *Grief River*® model to your group or community, contact: thomdennis@hotmail.com (773) 454-9176 P.O. Box 409427 Chicago, Illinois 60640.