

Dispel the Misconceptions about Grief: Part One

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As you journey through the wilderness of your suicide grief, if you mourn openly and authentically, you will come to find a path that feels right for you. That is your path to healing. But beware—others may try to pull you off this path. They may try to make you believe that the path you have chosen is wrong.

The reason that people try to pull you from the path of healing is that they have internalized some common misconceptions about grief and mourning.

As you read about this important touchstone, you may discover that you yourself have believed in some of the misconceptions and that some may be embraced by people around you. Don't condemn yourself or others for believing in them. Simply make use of any new insights you might gain to help you open your heart to your work of mourning in ways that restore your soul.

Misconception 1: Grief and mourning are the same thing.

Perhaps you have noticed that people tend to use the words "grieving" and "mourning" interchangeably. There is an important distinction, however. We as humans move toward integrating loss into our lives not just by grieving, but by mourning.

Grief is the constellation of internal thoughts and feelings we have when someone we love dies. Think of grief as the container. It holds all of your thoughts, feelings, and images of your experience when you are bereaved.

Mourning is when you take the grief you have on the inside and express it outside of yourself. Another way of defining mourning is "grief gone public" or "the outward expression of grief." Talking about the person who died, crying, expressing your thoughts and feelings through art or music, and celebrating special anniversary dates that held meaning for the person who died are just a few examples of mourning.

WARNING: After someone you love has completed suicide, your friends may encourage you to keep your grief to yourself. If you were to take this message to heart, the disastrous result would be that all of your thoughts and feelings would stay neatly bottled up inside you. A catalyst for healing, however, can only be created when you develop the courage to mourn publicly, in the presence of understanding, compassionate people who will not judge you. At times, of course, you will grieve alone, but expressing your grief outside of yourself is necessary if you are to slowly and gently move forward in your grief journey.

When you don't honor a death loss by acknowledging it, first to yourself and then to those around you, the grief will accumulate. Then the denied losses come flowing out in all sorts of potential ways (e.g., deep depression, physical complaints, difficulty in relationships, addictive behaviors), compounding the pain of your loss.

Misconception 2: Grief and mourning progress in predictable, orderly stages.

Probably you have already heard about the stages of grief. This type of thinking about dying, grief, and mourning is appealing but inaccurate. The notion of stages helps people make sense of death, an experience that is usually not orderly or predictable. If we believe that everyone grieves by going through the same stages, then death and grief become much less mysterious and fearsome. If only it were so simple!

The concept of "stage" was popularized in 1969 with the publication of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's landmark text *On Death and Dying*. In this important book, Dr. Kübler-Ross lists the five stages of grief that she saw terminally ill patients experience in the face of their own impending deaths: denial; anger; bargaining; depression; and acceptance. However, Dr. Kübler-Ross never intended for her stages to be interpreted as a rigid, linear sequence to be followed by all mourners. Readers, however, have done just that, and the consequences have often been disastrous.

As a grieving person, you will probably encounter others who have adopted a rigid system of beliefs about what you should experience in your grief journey. And if you have internalized this misconception, you may also find yourself trying to prescribe your grief experience as well. Instead of allowing yourself to be where you are, you may try to force yourself to be in another "stage."

Everyone mourns in different ways. Personal experience is your best teacher about where you are in your grief journey. Don't think your goal is to move through prescribed stages of grief.

Misconception 3: You should move away from grief, not toward it.

Our society often encourages prematurely moving away from grief instead of toward it. The result is that too many mourners either grieve in isolation or attempt to run away from their grief through various means.

During ancient times, stoic philosophers encouraged their followers not to mourn, believing that self-control was the appropriate response to sorrow. Today, well-intentioned but uninformed relatives and friends still carry this long-held tradition. While the outward expression of grief is a requirement for healing, overcoming society's powerful message to repress can be difficult.

As a counselor, I am often asked, "How long should grief last?" This question directly relates to our culture's impatience with grief and the desire to move people away from the experience of mourning. Shortly after the death, for example, mourners are expected to be "back to normal."

Mourners who continue to express grief outwardly are often viewed as "weak," "crazy," or "self-pitying." The subtle message is, "Shape up and get on with your life." The reality is disturbing: Far too many people view grief as something to be overcome rather than experienced.

After the death of someone loved, you also may respond to the question, "How are you?" with the benign response, "I'm fine." When you respond in this way, in essence you are saying to the world, "I'm not mourning." Friends, family, and coworkers may encourage this stance. Why? Because they don't want to talk about death. So if you demonstrate an absence of mourning behavior, it tends to be more socially acceptable.

This collaborative pretense about mourning, however, does not meet your needs in grief. When your grief is ignored or minimized, you will feel further isolated in your journey. Ultimately, you will experience the onset of the "going crazy" syndrome. Masking or moving away from your grief creates anxiety, confusion, and depression.

Misconception 4: Tears of grief are only a sign of weakness.

Just yesterday morning I read a lovely, personalized obituary in my local newspaper. The obituary described a man who had done many things in his life, had made many friends, and had touched the lives of countless people. He died in his 60s of cancer. At the end of the obituary, readers were invited to attend his funeral service and were instructed to bring memories and stories but NO TEARS. I nearly choked on my Cheerios.

Tears of grief are often associated with personal inadequacy and weakness. The worst thing you can do, however, is to allow this judgment to prevent you from crying. While your tears may result in feelings of helplessness for your friends, family, and caregivers, you must not let others stifle your need to mourn openly.

Sometimes, the people who care about you may, directly or indirectly, try to prevent your tears out of a desire to protect you (and them) from pain. You may hear comments like, "Tears won't bring him back" or "He wouldn't want you to cry." Yet crying is nature's way of releasing internal tension in your body, and it allows you to communicate a need to be comforted.

While data is still limited, research suggests that suppressing tears may actually increase your susceptibility to stress-related disorders. It makes sense. Crying is one of the excretory processes. Perhaps like sweating and exhaling, crying helps remove waste products from the body.

You must be vigilant about guarding yourself against this misconception. Tears are not a sign of weakness.

Misconception 5: Being upset and openly mourning means you are being weak in your faith.

Watch out for those who think that having faith and openly mourning are mutually exclusive. Sometimes people fail to remember those important words of wisdom: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

Above all, mourning is a spiritual journey of the heart and soul. If faith or spirituality is a part of your life, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you. If you are mad at God, be mad at God. Actually, being angry at God speaks

of having a relationship with God in the first place. I've always said to myself and others, "God has been doing very well for some time now, so I think God can handle my anger." Grief expressed is often grief diminished.

Similarly, if you need a time-out from regular worship, don't shame yourself. Going to exile for a period of time often assists in your healing. If people try to drag you to a place of worship, dig your heels in and tell them you may go, but only when and if you are ready.

When and if you are ready, attending a church, synagogue, or other place of worship, reading scripture, and praying are only a few ways you might want to express your faith. Or, you may be open to less conventional ways, such as meditating or spending time alone in nature.

Don't let people take our grief away from you in the name of faith.