

While grief is fresh, every attempt to divert it only irritates. You must wait till grief be digested, and then amusement will dissipate the remains of it.

Samuel Johnson

~~ Looking at Grief ~~

By Bob Nelson

Grief, in brief, is about the loss of someone or something. It can be sudden or unexpected. When it comes to healing from grief everybody is different. Some methods are healthy and some are not healthy and actually hinder the grieving process. Grief doesn't have to wait for loss, the anticipation of loss will start the process.

Dying seems less sad than having lived too little.

Gloria Steinem

Many books have been written about death, dying and grieving. All are similar, but all arrive at their final destination of resolution by a different path.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross: "On Death and Dying"

- ✚ Denial - this isn't *happening* to me
- ✚ Anger – why is this happening to *me*?
- ✚ Bargaining – I promise to be a better person *if...*
- ✚ Depression – I don't *care* anymore
- ✚ Acceptance – *I'm ready* for whatever comes

These five things were identified by Dr. Kubler-Ross as her "stages" of grief. I prefer to think of them as "emotional behaviors."

The real problem with the list is that some people take her words literally. Know that there is no script for grieving. Everybody is an individual and therefore handles their emotions differently.

What we commonly call death does not destroy the body, it only causes a separation of spirit and body.

Brigham Young

Dr. Roberta Temes: “Living with An Empty Chair”

- ✚ Numbness – mechanical functioning and social isolation
- ✚ Disorganization – intensely painful feelings of loss
- ✚ Reorganizaton – re-entry into a more “normal” social life

The problems with the above list are that people don’t fall into neat list categories. If the process was this predictable the list could be posted on the wall and we could chart our progress as we journey through grief. Grief, especially our personal grief, is as individual as those who feel and live it.

It has been said that America does not have a culture of grieving... that it instead has a grieving culture of anger – about death, about being cheated, about having to feel miserable with a vague hope that “someday we will feel better.”

If you think you are confused about grieving, think of the people that surround and support us. They have questions such as: How should we treat those that are grieving, what do we say to them, when will they get over it, I’d like to help – but what can I do? As a result it is not uncommon for people to just avoid people who are grieving.

Although death is the only certainty in life, in America death or the grieving process is rarely discussed. As a culture we are uncomfortable with the topic.

There are many sides to grief: physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological reactions to loss. It is not limited to feelings about death – grief can be the response to loss of home or country; separation from family, loved ones and friends; and having to adjust to new life stages.

Death is psychologically as important as birth... shrinking away from it is something unhealthy and abnormal which robs the second half of life of its purpose.

Carl Gustav Jung

*I never knew
it could hurt so much.*

*I never knew
so many strong feelings
would churn inside me.*

*I'm overwhelmed.
I'm confused.
I'm angry.
I'm lonely.
I'm hurting.*

*Part of my heart
has been ripped away.*

*How will I survive this?
How long with it hurt, God?
How long will it hurt?*

Unknown

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Dr. Kenneth C. Haugk in his book – “A Time To Grieve” answered a question for me that dates back to my repeated trips working in New York City following 9-11. While doing brief grief therapy and other models, I learned to dislike the word “normal” when it came to describing how the families and friends of the families were feeling. After a few sessions they would be upset with the word and tell me that their feelings are not “normal.” They were hurt, upset, crushed, demoralized, lost... it was a long list, but a list that they did not want to be “normal.”

Dr. Haugk talks about “the three Ns of grief.”

- Grief is *normal* because it is how people respond to a significant personal loss. It’s normal to expect people who have lost someone they love to be deeply affected by their loss.
- Grief is *natural* in that it’s a completely human thing to do. We cannot avoid grief – it’s built into us. We are created to grieve, just as we’re created to love. We love, and when we lose someone we love, we grieve.
- Grief is *necessary*. Grief provides a healthy way to cope with the loss and everything it means to us. Trying to ignore or avoid grief does not work. It will only make the grief last longer and possibly cause even more pain.

My new word from Dr. Haugk is “natural.” It is a process and it is “natural.” As in any process there is a beginning (the event), a middle (grieving), and closure (emotionally and mentally being in a different place).

Our society likes things to happen “right now.” As said, there is no schedule or completion date for grieving. It takes as long as it takes and then some.

*Like love, grief fades in and out.*

*Mason Cooley*

As with emotions and processes, there are a number of theories on how to properly grieve. One list, no author given, gave five steps:

- ✓ *Acknowledge* the symptoms: anxiety, depression, not wanting to face people, not wanting to leave the house, sleeping all the time, not being able to sleep, stomach pain, etc.
- ✓ *Accept* these symptoms: Grief work must be done before you can let go and go on with your life. If you don’t do the grief work and own and feel the pain, your body may express it through other ways: headaches, ulcers, colitis, asthma, depression, etc. Unresolved feelings put your body through a great deal of stress.

- ✓ **Allow** yourself to feel the pain without denial, recriminations, judgments.
- ✓ **Express** how you feel in an appropriate manner: cry, shout, work out parts of the body where the symptoms seem to be concentrated.
- ✓ **Choose** to manage your grief by deciding the best way, time, place for you to do your work. You determine when, where and how to grieve rather than letting the grieving process take control. Choices make us strong, as we start being able to make choices for ourselves, rather than letting circumstances and people dictate us, we regain our inner power and our self-esteem.

There are different types of grieving: grieving due to death, grieving due to divorce, grieving due to loss of control, grieving due to loss of power, etc. In general grieving follows the same basic pattern. But, in each of the types of grieving the “how to” is different based on the situation, the person, and their base of support.

Another aspect of grieving is called “*secondary loss.*” Those losses can be on the outside: financial, bills, loss of income, loss of love, loss of companionship, loss of security, etc.

They can be spiritual; death may challenge the way you see or think of God.

Loss can change your activities: forms of entertainment, movies, sports events, concerts, eating out, social clubs, taking trips, shopping, etc.

Loss can result in loss of identity: husband, father, wife, mother, son, daughter, friend.

*Each substance of grief hath twenty shadows...*

*William Shakespeare, Richard II*

*Grieve as you need to grieve. You are you, your loss is different from anyone else's loss, and you will grieve the way you need to grieve.*

*Dr. Kenneth Haugk*

A key thought about grieving is acknowledging that you need to grieve. Family providers, strong people, busy people – their life is to care for others and take care of themselves last. Know that you can't care for someone else unless you care for yourself first – both physically and emotionally. Wise words are spoken to each of us when we fly. The flight attendant tells us that in the event of cabin depressurization a mask will fall from the overhead compartment. The instructions are to put our mask on first and then help another person. Self care starts with self care – first.

Grief causes a fog to roll into our lives. The fog of grief can affect our ability to think or concentrate. This fog often sets in right after the loss. But even after the initial shock wears off, the fog can linger or come and go for a long, long time.

This fog can look different. To some it will be denial – denial of the loss, denial of the impact of the loss, and denial of the affective experience (expectations and attitudes) of the loss. For others it may feel as being lost: I don't know what to do, where to go, with whom should I talk?

Bottom line – we're going through the motions of living while all of our systems are on overload. Another way of saying this is that we are "just going through the motions." However, grief will not be denied. Ignoring it will not make it go away, your reality will not change... you cannot NOT grieve.

*Tears are sometimes an inappropriate response to death. When a life has been lived completely honestly, completely successfully, or just completely, the correct response to death's perfect punctuation mark is a smile.*

*Jimmy Buffett*

In our impatient world Americans want things to start and to end very quickly. That may work for some things, but not for grief. Not only can it be a wild ride sprinkled with many highs and lows, but it will last as long as it needs to last. In her book Elizabeth Kubler-Ross talks of the grief process taking up to two years. Others have no definite time limits.

*Grief is a choppy “two steps forward, one step backward” experience.*

*Therese Rando*

Dr. Haugk has a rule that I embrace: **share, don't compare**. His point is that it can be very beneficial to share your thoughts and experiences with grief. His message is that other people have walked the same road and have survived and we can support and comfort each other through these very difficult times.

In treating war trauma one of the first things I learned was to not compare wounds. Your trauma, your grief is just as real as the next persons. Grief and trauma are not a contest that “my experiences were worse than yours”. Comparing grief and trauma is another trauma just waiting to happen.

*After desolation, grief brings back our humanity.*

*Mason Cooley*

In Book Three of his book “Finding Hope and Healing,” Dr. Haugk shares three basic thoughts of comparing.

- **Comparing grief can cause heartache:** You're already feeling terrible because of your loss. Thinking you should grieve a specific way or for a certain amount of time to match another person's grief will only make you feel worse. Losses are never comparable. Spare yourself the added pain.
- **Comparing grief can cause tension:** Even members of the same family grieving for the same loss won't all grieve the same way. Dr. Haugk tells of one man who told him that his mother was very angry at the man because she felt he wasn't grieving enough after his brother died. The man said, “I wasn't showing the same emotions at the same intensity for as

long as she was, so she felt that meant I didn't love my brother enough. I loved him dearly. My grief was just different from hers." Trying to compare grief just creates more tension.

- **Comparing grief can cause unrealistic expectations:** Although you know (mostly) what's going on inside of you, you can never really know exactly what's going on inside another person. Looking in from the outside, you draw certain conclusions about the way another person is grieving. You may think you know what the person is feeling. But you don't, not really. What the other person reports is happening and what you believe is happening are often very different from that person's reality. You may be setting expectations for yourself that may have no basis in reality.

*In a culture with no single ritual for response to loss, many people use avoidance to cope. However, coping by avoidance is associated with poor adjustment to loss.*

*Dr. Edward J. Callahan, Ph.D.*

*All things grow with time, except grief.*

*Yiddish Proverb*

Walking the grief road can be very lonely. Just as we can't know what is going on inside of another person, they can't know what is going on inside of you.

Loneliness is a state during which a person experiences powerful feelings of incredible emptiness and isolation. That loneliness is not just about being and feeling alone, it is also about feeling cut off, disconnected, and alienated from other people and support.

When asked to describe "loneliness", terms such as "I feel hollow" or "I feel empty, I don't know what to feel."

There are three basic types of loneliness:

- **Situational** – a change in circumstances: someone is terminally ill; you've just moved and haven't made friends, divorce, death.

- **Developmental** – starting at birth life is about separating. We may just need to be or feel alone to develop higher feelings and emotions.
- **Internal** - these feelings are usually unrelated to external situations such as age, social standing, developmental stage. The feelings are primarily those of low self-esteem and vulnerability. Some of these feelings can be carry over's from our earlier separation stages.

*Grief can take care of itself, but to get the full value of a joy you must have somebody to divide it with.*

*Mark Twain*

Some things you can do to help yourself “get over it” are:

1. Surround yourself with “known” things and friends.
2. Know that this is a process hence there is a beginning, the middle and an end.
3. Be real with yourself. Grieving is both hard and time consuming and it doesn't happen in a vacuum.
4. Face the event or crisis actively so as to realize the full reality of what happened.
5. Avoid medications if possible. A changed belief in the psychological community is that people affected by trauma do better with medication followed by therapy. Working with military members returning from war in the Middle East has shown that talk (group or individual) therapy should be first. If the symptoms persist or get worse medication may then be prescribed.
6. Do not make any hasty decisions. An unofficial rule of thumb is following a major trauma or death; postpone making any life changing decisions by up to a year. The first step is to cope with the loss knowing that running away will not help.
7. Remember the memories and thoughts – running away physically or mentally only lengthens the grief process.

8. Need help – recognize that need and seek the services of a good friend, pastor, counselor, family member.
9. Beware of well-meaning friends. Our western civilization can be of great help when a tragedy or trauma initially happens, but that help can turn to misguided advice such as get over it, it's time to get on with life, everybody dies – you need to live, etc.
10. When possible talk to yourself – out loud. There's magic in hearing yourself saying certain words and giving yourself permission to think and feel again.
11. Journaling is a great exercise. Like #10 it's the writing down of the words and dealing with your thoughts that provides a catharsis.
12. Don't wander – establish growth goals for yourself. Recognize those around you, reach out to others, volunteer, try something you've always wanted to do but never gave yourself permission to try.
13. Keep hope alive. This too will pass, but only after you've done the grief work necessary for your survival and growth.
14. Give yourself permission to feel better and to laugh. It is hard to laugh when you feel so bad, but there are good memories and laughter in your past life and you are allowed to reach out and touch them.

Grieving is not an exact science. All of the above are strictly “guides” to help you through the process. Do what works for you. Eliminate or throw out what doesn't.

*May you live out your life  
Without hate, without grief  
And your hair ever blaze,  
In the sun, in the sun,  
When I am undone,  
When I am no one.*

*Theodore Roethke*

*All those who try to go it sole alone,  
Too proud to be beholden for relief,  
Are absolutely sure to come to grief.*

*Robert Frost*