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Along The Way

*Helping you understand your
journey through grief.*

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Dealing With Emotions

by Dr. Bill Webster

No sooner had Jane started to talk about the death of her mother she burst into uncontrollable sobs. She wept for a minute or so, then heaved a big sigh and looked up. "I am sorry," she exclaimed, wiping her eyes, "I didn't mean to get emotional."

Every time that sentiment is expressed, I wonder, "Where did people get the idea they should apologize for their tears?" Probably it came from those who blithely say, "Try not to be emotional; you mustn't cry; you have to pull yourself together and be strong."

Or the ultimate guilt trip, "Your loved one wouldn't want you to cry."

Really? Are you sure? I don't know about anyone else, but frankly I would like to think that after I am gone, someone would miss me enough to shed a tear. Wouldn't you? I think we have to remind ourselves that tears are not a sign of weakness, they are a sign we cared.

Yet, dealing with overwhelming emotions is one of the most challenging aspects of the grief process. Often we feel stunned by the emotional impact of the death, and swamped by an ava-

lanche of uncharacteristic reactions and behaviours that are difficult to understand.

It is important to acknowledge that the focus of grief is not on our ability to understand, but on our ability to feel. In other words, grief is not just a thing of the head, it is a thing of the heart. It is not enough to know about grief, it is something we have to go through by experience.

While each individual's emotional reaction will be unique and personal, there are a number of emotions that many can identify.

1. NUMBNESS

Often after a death, and the initial impact, people feel quite numb. Some might describe this as shock or denial, but it is actually our human defence mechanism which shuts down until we can marshal our resources to face the reality of what has occurred.

The problem is that many often confuse numbness with strength. How many times have we heard people commend the

grieving person for “doing so well” and for “how strong they are”? Then a few months later when that numbness wears off and the grieving person is overwhelmed by their emotions, the same folks can compound the confusion with their well-intentioned yet misguided statements of “What’s wrong with you? We thought you were doing so well,” implying that now the person isn’t doing so well.

2. CONFUSION

After a loss, we can actually feel like we are going crazy, or at the very least, like we are “losing it.”

Some of the reactions people can experience include shock, confusion, lack of concentration, forgetfulness, difficulty making decisions, fatigue, apathy, and there may be others. What are some of the emotions you have experienced?

It is important to acknowledge all these responses are a natural reaction and there is an explanation for them. But while we can normalize these experiences, we must not minimize their importance or indeed their complexity. The individual needs the confidence to know they will be able to survive (a word taken from two Latin words, literally meaning “to live beyond”).

People are sometimes tempted to believe they are losing their minds. But in fact this numbness is what protects us from the full impact of our loss until we are able to cope with it. You are not losing your mind; your mind is simply shutting out a harsh reality that may be too difficult to face right now.

Trust the process. Trust yourself.

3. DISORIENTATION

When the numbness wears off (and every individual’s time frame is different), many people experience what can be described as an explosion or avalanche of emotions. Everything seems to touch the person on the raw nerve. There can be many emotions associated with grief and no one has a comprehensive list.

Emotions can include oversensitivity; overreacting to everything and everyone; anxiety; fear; vulnerability; panic; impatience; restlessness; irritability; sadness; yearning and searching; and there may be others. What are some of the reactions you have experienced?

Sometimes we have to relearn that these emotions are not an enemy that has to be wrestled to the ground and brought into submission, but rather are a friend helping us express how we really feel about our loss.

Counsellors, support groups, friends and family all should work towards the goal of enabling people to work with their feelings. Feelings teach us about our reaction to life with the person who died, and our response to this new life without their presence.

Good grief encourages people to work through their feelings allowing them to express their emotions in appropriate ways. This is never easy, for the griever or the helper, yet it is the necessary process that will help them begin to reconcile what has happened.

But here is the dilemma. When numbness is replaced by this emotional avalanche, some of the people who thought you were strong (when you were really numb) may now wonder, “What’s wrong? You seemed to be doing so well.” They may imply that maybe there is even something pathological because you are so emotional. Others may regard showing feelings as a sign of not coping, and try to get you “not to think about it.”

But in fact, your emotions are not a sign of growing weakness; they are an indication of increasing strength. Your mind has decided you are a little more able to come to terms with this unbelievable thing that has occurred, and you are now feeling the pain of your grief.

The reason we need to understand grief is so that we can validate and legitimize the fact that what people are experiencing is a normal reaction. If you understand the “why” behind the emotion, it helps you understand that grief is after all a healing process.

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This Changes Everything

by Dr. Bill Webster

There is little doubt in the minds of people who have lost someone they care about that bereavement is one of the most difficult experiences of life. There are no words that can take away the pain we feel when someone dies. It is often difficult to understand what has happened, or even comprehend what we are going through. It can be a challenge to see any light in, far less at the end of, what feels like a very dark tunnel.

When someone dies, you feel like your whole world has been turned upside down. And in many ways, it has! We really cannot understand bereavement and every individual reaction to it unless we appreciate how each grieving person's world has been forever changed by the loss.

Some may say, "Life goes on," and in one way it does. But it is also fair to acknowledge the bereaved person's reaction may be to say, "This changes everything."

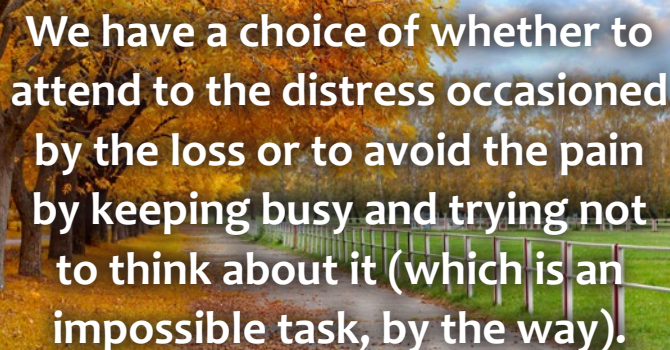
Often there can be a fundamental misunderstanding of grief and how it affects those touched by it. After a loss, some anticipate the person will go through an inevitable process, wait it out, "see it through," on the assumption that "time heals all wounds," and that eventually "in time," they will "get over it." This would seem to suggest that in the emotional aftermath of a loss, bereaved individuals simply must surrender themselves to suffering through a series of

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stages or structured grief system over which they have little or no control, and in which there is very little choice.

But in fact, what people actually experience after bereavement is not such a nice, neat, orderly or predictable scheme. Grief is not understood by some linear time frame ("It's been three months, you ought to be over it by now!") or by a set formula whereby the individual goes passively through certain emotions, phases or reactions in order to somehow eventually arrive at this destination we casually call acceptance.

To really understand the effects of grief, the main focus should not primarily be on a person's emotional reactions, behaviours or manifestations of grief and how to lessen them. Those who focus on these considerations are just trying to fix a situation that simply cannot be fixed; trying to get "back to normal" something that has changed forever.



We have a choice of whether to attend to the distress occasioned by the loss or to avoid the pain by keeping busy and trying not to think about it (which is an impossible task, by the way).

I believe we serve people better if we focus on the significance of the bereavement to this individual rather than on the substance of their specific reaction to the bereavement.

The meaning of a death or any loss is personal and unique to specific individuals, based on the relationship that has been lost as a result of the bereavement. We need to gain a better understanding of not only "what" people experience after a loss, but also "why" grief affects people so uniquely and individually.

We discover the meaning of this loss to the individual is being expressed through their specific emotions and uniquely individual behaviours. Put simply, instead of trying to get people back to normal by seeking to resolve and rectify their emotions and behaviours, we should rather regard these reactions as a symptom of the much deeper issue, namely the person's awareness that, "My world has changed ... and I don't like it."

In other words, when someone dies, rather than simply focusing on their emotions and behaviours and how we can alleviate these symptoms, we should understand the emotions and behaviours of grief as a normal human reaction in response to and in protest of the need to search for meaning in what has become an unwelcome world in which everything has changed.

Grief then is better understood as a protest against something they didn't want, don't like, but sadly can't change. And the challenge for the helper is in enabling them to come to terms with this new albeit unwelcome reality by beginning to form appropriate new patterns of action and emotion that better fit their new situation.

But, from another perspective, while the loss may be a reality we are powerless to avert, the experience of grieving itself involves hundreds of concrete choices that the bereaved person is invited to make, or indeed if they choose, to avoid. It is a call for us to accept the fact everything has changed, the only options being to go with it, or to resist the process.

We have a choice of whether to attend to the distress occasioned by the loss or to avoid the pain by keeping busy and trying not to think about it (which is an impossible task, by the way).

Alternatively, we have a choice as to whether to feel and explore the grief of our loved one's absence or to explore this brave new world that our loss has thrust us into. Loss may be inevitable, but what we do about it is optional. We may not have a choice in what has happened, but we do have a choice in what we do about it.

People should be encouraged to be active in facing life challenges rather than simply being passive reactors to them. "Who we are" must not simply be defined by our experiences, but rather by our reaction and responses to those experiences.

Any model of grief must integrate how a person's world is forever transformed by their loss, rather than suggesting a return to some pre-existing, established behavioural or emotional state following their "recovery" from the loss.

We must realize their life has changed. They are not getting back to normal; what was normal in the past has changed. Rather, they are redefining what is normal now – the new normal – and coming to terms with the fact that life can still be meaningful in the present.

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