

Explore Your Feelings of Loss

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“There is no right response to death. You make it up as you go along.” --Joan Connor

On your journey through the wilderness of your grief, a critical trail marker is Touchstone Four, which guides you in exploring your varied feelings of loss. This fourth touchstone colours all the others, because your emotions shape what each of the other touchstones feels like for you.

As strange as your emotions may seem, they are a true expression of where you are right now. Rather than deny your feelings, I want to help you learn to recognize and learn from them. Naming feelings and acknowledging them are the first steps to dealing with them. It’s actually this process of becoming friendly with your feelings that will help you heal.

I have worked with thousands of grieving people and they have taught me about many different thoughts and feelings after a death. Rest assured that your thoughts and feelings, while completely unique to you, are also usually a common human response to loss.

Shock, Numbness, Denial and Disbelief

“It feels like a dream,” people in early grief often say. Thank goodness for shock, numbness and disbelief! They are nature’s way of temporarily protecting you from the full reality of the death.

Especially in the beginning of your grief journey, your emotions need time to catch up with what your mind has been told. On one level, you know the person is dead. But on other, deeper levels, you are not yet able or willing to truly believe it. This mixture of shock, numbness and disbelief acts as an anesthetic. Typically, a physiological component also accompanies feelings of shock causing heart palpitations, queasiness, stomach pain and dizziness.

You may find yourself hysterically crying, having angry outbursts, or even laughing or fainting. These are all normal and necessary responses that help you survive right now. Unfortunately, some people may try to squelch these behaviours believing them to be hysterical or out-of-control. Trying to “control” yourself would mean suppressing your instinctive response. Remember—your needs are the priority right now, not theirs. Do what you need to do to survive.

During your time of shock, you may not remember specific things. Your mind is blocking; it hears but does not listen. Although you may not remember some, or any, of the words people are telling you, you may well remember that you felt comforted. Their non-verbal presence is probably more important to you than any words they might say.

Birthdays, anniversaries and other special occasions that may only be known to you often trigger your shock that this person you loved so very much is no longer there to share these days with.

Denial is one of the most misunderstood aspects of the grief journey. Temporarily, denial is a great gift. It helps you survive. However, your denial should soften over time as you mourn and as you acknowledge that the person you loved is truly dead.

Usually denial goes on at one level of awareness while acknowledgment of reality goes on at another level. Your mind may approach and retreat from the reality of the death over and over again as you try to integrate the meaning of the death into your life.

Disorganization, Confusion, Searching, and Yearning

Perhaps the most isolating and frightening part of your grief journey is the sense of disorganization, confusion, searching and yearning. These feelings arise when you confront the reality of the death.

This dimension of grief may give rise to the “going crazy syndrome.” Mourners often say, “I think I’m going crazy.” That’s because in grief, thoughts and behaviors are different from what you normally experience. If you feel disorganized and confused, know that you are not going crazy, you are grieving.

You may feel restlessness, agitation, impatience and ongoing confusion. Disconnected thoughts race through your mind, and strong emotions may be overwhelming. You may express disorganization and confusion in your inability to complete tasks. You may feel forgetful and ineffective, especially early in the morning and late at night. Everyday pleasures may not seem to matter anymore.

You also may experience a restless searching for the person who has died. Yearning and preoccupation with memories can leave you feeling drained. You might even experience a shift in perception; other people may begin to look like the person in your life who died. Sometimes you might think you hear the garage door open and the person entering the house as he or she had done so many times before. If these experiences are happening to you, remember—you’re not crazy!

Visual hallucinations occur so frequently that they can’t be considered abnormal. I personally prefer the term “memory picture.” As part of your searching and yearning you may not only experience a sense of the dead person’s presence, but you also may have fleeting glimpses of the person across the room.

You may also dream about the person who died. Dreams can be an unconscious means of searching for this person. Be careful not to over-interpret your dreams. Simply remain open to learning from them. If the dreams are pleasant, embrace them; if they are disturbing, find someone understanding to talk to. Other common experiences during this time include difficulties eating and sleeping.

Finally, keep in mind that disorganization always comes before any kind of reorganization. Feelings of disorganization, confusion, searching and yearning are actually stepping-stones on your path toward healing.

Anxiety, Panic and Fear

As your head and heart miss the person who was part of your life, panic may set in. Feelings of anxiety and fear often elicit thoughts about “going crazy.” If you begin to think you are “abnormal,” your level of fear may also increase.

You may be afraid of what the future holds or that other people will die soon. You may be more aware of your own mortality. You may feel vulnerable without the person who died. You may feel panicky about your inability to concentrate. Financial problems can compound feelings of anxiety.

While unpleasant, anxiety, panic and fear are often normal components of the grief experience. The good news is that expressing them can help make them feel more tolerable. And knowing that they are temporary may help you during this trying time.

Explosive Emotions

Anger, hate, blame, terror, resentment, rage and jealousy are explosive emotions that may be a volatile yet natural part of your grief journey. It helps to understand that all these feelings are a form of protest. Think of the toddler whose favorite toy is yanked out of his hands. His instinctive reaction may be to scream or cry or hit. When someone loved is taken, your reaction may be much the same.

Explosive emotions may surface at any time. You cry out in anguish. You may direct these emotions at the person who died, at friends and family members, at doctors, at people who haven't experienced loss, at God.

Unfortunately, our society doesn't understand how normal and necessary these feelings are. The implicit message is that you should try to "keep it together." Still, you must give yourself permission to feel whatever you feel and to express those feelings.

Some people may tell you that explosive emotions are not logical. "Anger won't bring him back," they might say. Watch out. You might find yourself buying into this rational thinking. Thinking is logical; feeling is not.

People often oversimplify explosive emotions by talking only about anger. You may experience a whole range of intense feelings such as those listed above. Underneath these emotions are usually feelings of pain, helplessness, fear and hurt.

If explosive emotions are part of your journey, be aware that you have two avenues for expression—outward or inward. The outward avenue leads to healing; the inward avenue does not. Keeping your explosive emotions inside leads to low self-esteem, depression, guilt, physical complaints and sometimes even persistent thoughts of suicide.

Explosive emotions should change in intensity and duration as you do the work of mourning. The key is finding someone who will help you understand what you are feeling and allow you to embrace your grief. You can't go around your grief, or over it, or under it—you must go through it. I hope you will be surrounded by people who understand, support and love you and will help you explore your explosive emotions without trying to stifle you.

Guilt and Regret

Guilt, regret and self-blame are common feelings after a death. You may have a case of the if-onlys: If only I had got him to the doctor sooner... If only I had been with her that night...

If you find yourself experiencing if-onlys, be compassionate with yourself. It's natural to think about actions you could have taken to prevent the death. But, you are not to blame. When you express your guilt and regret, some people may say, "Don't be silly. There was nothing you could have done." That is beside the point. The point is that you are feeling like you could have or should have and you need to express those feelings.

- **Survivor guilt**

Have you found yourself thinking, "How come she died and I survived?" This is a natural question.

- **Relief guilt**

You may naturally feel relief if someone you love dies after a long period of illness. But your feelings of relief can also make you feel guilty. Relief guilt also occurs when you recognize that you will not miss certain aspects of the relationship you had with the person who died. For example, you may not miss how the person never cleaned up after himself. To not miss some things about the person who died is fine. This doesn't mean you didn't love the person.

- **Joy guilt**

Joy guilt is about thinking that happy feelings are bad at a time of loss. One day you might find yourself smiling or laughing at something, only to chastise yourself for having felt happy for a minute. It's as if your loyalty to the person who died demands that you be sad all the time now that he or she is gone. That's not true, of course. As you do the work of mourning, you will start experiencing more joy and less pain.

- **Magical thinking and guilt**

Consciously or unconsciously wishing for the death of someone loved—and then having that “wish” come true—can make you feel guilty. We call this “magical thinking,” because, of course, your thoughts didn’t cause the death. Know that all relationships have periods in which negative thoughts prevail. But your mind doesn’t have the power to inflict death.

- **Long-standing personality factors**

Some people have felt guilty their entire lives because they learn early in life that they are responsible when something bad happens. When someone dies, it is just one more thing to feel guilty about.

Whatever your unique feelings of guilt and regret, don’t let them go unexpressed. They are a natural part of your journey, and like all dimensions of grief, they need to be explored. Find a compassionate partner who will walk with you and listen to you without judgment.

Some mourners are in fact partly or wholly responsible for the death of someone. If your accidental or intentional actions resulted in the death, please, seek help from an experienced, well-trained grief counselor.

Sadness and Depression

Sadness can be the most hurtful feeling on your journey through grief. We don’t want to be sad. Sadness saps pleasure from our lives. But sadness is a natural, authentic emotion after a death. Allowing yourself to feel your sadness is in large part what your journey toward healing is all about.

Weeks or months will pass before you are fully confronted by the depth of your sorrow. The slowly-growing nature of this awareness is good. You could not tolerate all of your sadness at once. Your body, mind and spirit need time working together to embrace the depth of your loss. Be patient with yourself. Surround yourself with loving people who will understand, not judge you.

You may find that certain times and circumstances make you sadder than others. Grieving people often tell me that weekends, holidays, family meals and anniversaries can be hard. So can bedtime, waking up in the morning, awakening in the middle of the night, and arriving home to an empty house. These difficult times usually have a special connection to the person who died.

Unfortunately, our culture has an unwritten rule that says while physical illness is usually beyond our control, emotional distress is our fault. Nothing could be further from the truth. Your sadness is a symptom of your wound. Just as physical wounds require attention, so do emotional wounds.

Paradoxically, the only way to lessen your pain is to move toward it, not away from it. Moving toward your sadness is not easy to do. Every time you admit to feeling sad, people around you may say things like, “Oh, don’t be sad” or “Get a hold of yourself.” Comments like these hinder your healing. If your heart and soul are prevented from feeling the sadness, odds are your body may be harmed in the process.

Occasionally, your feelings of sorrow can be overwhelming enough to be classified as “clinical depression.” After all, grief and mourning share many symptoms with depression, including sleep disturbances, appetite changes, decreased energy, withdrawal, guilt, dependency, lack of concentration and a sense of loss of control. You may be having a hard time functioning at home and at work, which may compound your feelings of isolation and helplessness. If you feel totally immobilized, please get help from understanding friends or a professional counselor. If you’re unsure if you’re experiencing normal grief or clinical depression, seek out help.

Thoughts of suicide also may occur during your grief journey. Hundreds of grieving people have shared with me thoughts like, “I wouldn’t mind if I didn’t wake up tomorrow.” It’s natural to experience these passive and passing suicidal thoughts; it is not natural to want to or make plans to take your own life when someone dies.

If you have been thinking of taking your own life, talk to a professional helper immediately. Suicidal thoughts are sometimes an expression of wanting to find relief from the pain of your grief. Yes, you have been injured and you hurt. But to help your injury heal, you must openly talk about what this death has meant for you.

Relief and Release

When you anticipate the death of someone who is terminally ill, you begin grieving long before the death itself. Your grief journey begins when the person you love enters the transition from living to dying. When you watch someone you love endure physical pain, you begin to understand that death can bring relief. And so when the death occurs, your feelings of relief may supersede all others for a time.

Another form of relief you may experience comes when you finally express your thoughts and feelings about the death – you may feel as if a great pressure has been lifted from your head, heart and soul.

Allowing yourself to acknowledge relief as a part of your grief experience can be a critical step in your journey through grief.

A Final Thought about the Feelings You May Experience

As you journey through the wilderness of your grief, you will come to experience what I like to describe as “reconciliation.” When you come out on the other side of the wilderness and you are able to fully enjoy life and living again, you have achieved reconciliation of your grief.

This article, an excerpt from Dr. Wolfelt’s book, Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart, is reprinted by author’s permission.

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