

Grief: It's Complicated

A few years ago, I remember telling my hairdresser that I was interested in grief counseling. "Really?" he shuddered. "That sounds so depressing. Ewww...Let's change the subject." As he moved the conversation to the latest new restaurant, I was struck by his overwhelming discomfort. As a culture, we can gossip about celebrities and even Michael Jackson's tragic death, but if we are confronted with loss on a personal level most of us would rather discuss the weather. In fact, according to John W. James, the co-author of *The Grief Recovery Handbook*, the single most off-limits topic of discussion in the English-speaking world is grief or people's reaction to loss. This is one reason why most of us learn to lie about how we are feeling. How many of us in response to the question, "How are you?" and answer "I'm fine" when we are heartbroken?

There is plenty of discussion in our society on how to acquire things. How to get an education. How to get a job. How to find a relationship. Yet at the same time most of us are ill-prepared to deal with some 42 potential loss experiences in a lifetime. The experience of loss is actually a part of life from the very beginning when we separate from our mothers to the very end, as Judith Viorst explains in her classic book, *Necessary Losses*. She makes a persuasive argument that loss and change go hand in hand with growth. Most people think of death and divorce as losses, but do we ever think of life events such as moving as a loss? A loss that goes unattended and unacknowledged can go underground, building layers of confusion and sadness around our hearts. Sometimes a current loss can trigger old unresolved losses from the past that we thought had been long forgotten.

It's actually the misinformation we hear from our environment that can make things so complicated and disrupt the grieving process. Here are some common clichés and myths about grief and loss:

- “Be strong” — This cliché tells us that by avoiding our feelings we can recover sooner or make it easier for others to be around us. Grieving is a feeling process, not a head process. The more we try to intellectualize a loss or postpone emotional pain the more we disrupt the process. If we were bleeding severely we would go to the emergency room right away, yet if we were bleeding emotionally many people believe that if we ignore the pain the wound will heal on its own without attention.
- “Time heals all wounds”— How many of can still feel the pain of a loss that occurred twenty years ago? If we simply do nothing but keep busy or wait for recovery without processing the loss we can still feel the heartbreak at the end of the day. Grief recovery work requires support and active reflection in order to process the loss.

- “You should be over it by now.” —While recovery time is completely individual, there is no absolute time frame. We can harm ourselves by trying to conform to other people’s time frames and compound the pain by keeping our feelings locked in time by putting limits on feelings that may arise unexpectedly.

The natural grieving process can become complicated for many reasons. When we are unaware that a legitimate loss has occurred, or it’s unresolved or ambiguous, we may be unaware of how our lives have been affected until much later. Losses are stressors and they can affect us individually in many different ways. Sometimes the loss takes place within the family or the community. The event could be planned where we have some control, or it could be completely unpredictable. Losses can occur in isolation for a short time period or we can experience chronic loss. Often a key to recovery is social support. If we approach grief according to cultural myths and messages we may never get the support we need to process our often conflicting feelings. Human beings heal best through supportive relationships. By allowing a griever the time and space to process all of their emotions the process moves through us naturally and possibly more quickly. The good news is that grieving is an ongoing universal life skill that can be learned. We all can find resiliency when we learn how to love and to let go and find a personal meaning in the experience.

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