

Grief: Part of the Natural Order



The day a tsunami swept away hundreds of thousands of South Asian lives instantaneously, the devastation was so shockingly merciless and all-encompassing, people put aside all differences to help. In Sri Lanka, for example, guerrilla fighters banded together with the government troops they had been battling mere hours earlier to help the innocent struggle to survive. People the world over were shaken by nature's pitiless power.

But then – as it always does – time has passed. By now, the water has receded, only to be replaced by waves of grief. The only thing as wide-ranging as the waves' destruction is the breadth of bereavement across cultural, ethnic and religious divides. For some, the grief will last years after the physical wounds have healed. Others – even those directly affected – may very soon start to move forward with their lives as if nothing happened.

How people grieve depends on many things, including their intimacy with and connection to whom or what was lost. Also, the type of loss suffered, the circumstances surrounding the loss and the society in which a person lives all impact how they grieve. For example, an Indonesian father who lost his wife and children in the tsunami will likely grieve in a much different way than an American who lost a wife to Alzheimer's.

However, many factors do unite groups of people in the ways they grieve, both publicly and in private. Some of these include, but are not limited to:

- Spirituality
- Socioeconomic status
- Community
- Culture

Your Grief is Your Own

But despite the cultural and religious similarities you may have in common with those who surround you, your grief is as unique as your fingerprints. The bereavement you experience will be different from that of your co-workers, friends, your spouse, and even from your own previous and future losses.

Everyone is born, ages and dies – it's the natural order of things. Left in the wake of that cycle is the grief people experience when that natural order is manifested in the death of someone we care about. Most experts agree that bereavement is a fact of life, as certain as eating, breathing, and, according to an old joke – paying taxes.

Ways to Cope

The National Mental Health Association (NMHA) offers many ways of coping. The most important concept is to give yourself as much time as you need. According to the NMHA, if you're going through grief, it helps to:

- 1.** Surround yourself with caring supportive people. Grieving takes enormous amounts of emotional energy and you don't have any extra to waste negatively.
- 2.** Find safe ways and places to express your feelings without hurting yourself or others. Pounding pillows with your fists or the pavement with your feet lets you vent your anger without erupting on someone else.
- 3.** Eat nourishing, healthful, comfort foods; wrap yourself in warm blankets or flannel pajamas; drink plenty of water, fruit juice and milk while avoiding alcohol and caffeine; and get plenty of rest – take naps as needed.
- 4.** Maintain as much of your usual routines and schedules as possible. Making too many changes such as a new house, new job or new relationship can leave you overwhelmed and vulnerable to intense emotions once all the activity stops. Big decisions made under the influence of strong emotions often are regretted later.
- 5.** Have patience with yourself and other grieving family and friends. Healing from a major wound – physical or psychological – takes time. You've experienced a life-changing event that may take months or years to accept and adjust to.

Being a Friend

If you're a friend who wants to help, the NMHA suggests you:

- 1.** Be a supportive, caring listener. Encourage your friend to talk and remember.
- 2.** Be a safe friend by accepting all of your friend's feelings.

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Share your memories of their loved one. Remember birthdays and anniversaries with a card, a note, a phone call or a visit.

3. Bring nourishing comfort foods a month after the funeral. For many, the second month is very difficult as all the family and friends have returned to their homes and work, the thank-you notes are written and estates are settled or in process.
4. Help slow down decision making. Encourage taking their time and keeping schedules and routines as regular as possible. Let them know it's OK to return to work as the structure and routines can be comforting and it's something your friend knows how to do.
5. Be patient, practical and compassionate. While there is no time limit on how long a person grieves, there is usually a gradual return to participation in everyday activities and routines. If this is not happening after a few months, you may want to encourage your friend to see a physician or grief counselor. Offer to go with them to a grief support group.

Can You “Deal With” Grief?

People, especially Americans, grieve and mourn while they maintain a veneer of normalcy by going to work or taking care of children. Sometimes, when observing a person who recently experienced a loss, it's obvious he or she is suffering. Fortunately, most of us have friends, family and co-workers we can rely on for support. Just having someone to talk to can greatly alleviate the pain of grief and speed up the recovery process.

However, there are people who try to avoid their feelings. They may think, for a variety of reasons, that experiencing

these emotions is something they simply don't have to do. There are many people who believe they can deal with grief, and simply move on.

But can you “deal with” grief?

It's hard to control emotions. Have you ever heard of someone who wanted to get a “handle” on their joy? Probably not. So then why do some people try to “deal with” their grief? Like happiness, grief is a natural emotion and is something that simply happens to most of us. Your feelings may be many or few – some even have no feeling at all, they go numb – but it's difficult to “deal with” these emotions. Simply put, there's no way around it – you have to have them.

You do have a choice. You can experience your grief naturally, and let the feelings come to you as they must. Or, you can put them off. What you can't do is put them off forever – at some point these emotions will surface and demand to be “dealt with.” By then, likely they will have gained strength.

So, it's pretty much out of your control whether you “deal with” grief, but what you do manage is the when and the how you grieve. Letting it happen is natural. Putting it off or dealing with it in unhealthy ways can be destructive. ▲

RESOURCES

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry: Children and Grief

<http://www.mutualofomaha.com/eap/resources.html#grief>

American Hospice: Helping your bereaved friend

<http://www.americanhospice.org/griefzone/articles/helpingafriend.htm>

American Hospice: The bereaved employee: Returning to work

<http://www.americanhospice.org/griefzone/articles/returningtowork.htm>



KID'S CORNER

Learning Through Loss

You know that sinking feeling you get when you experience a disappointment? As adults, we understand that this is the feeling of loss, and it can result from a number of situations, including death, divorce, a move, or even something as simple as a change in routine.

Of course, your reaction depends on the magnitude of the situation, but rational adults know that loss, both great and small, is an essential part of life.

For kids it's a different story. If you're a parent, you have likely witnessed the earth-shattering temper tantrum that can occur as a result of simply telling a child that they can't have a happy meal. So, what happens when the loss is real? How do you help your child through the pain?

Communication is Key

The first step is to do everything possible to prepare your child for the event, when you can. Gradual transition can ease the stress caused by a change and help avoid more intense repercussions. Know that your child will sense the strain of a life-changing event, even if they are very young, and that avoiding the subject altogether is more detrimental than talking openly about it. Discuss grandma's failing health, or the upcoming move to another city. Make yourself available for questions, and be prepared to discuss the logistics over and over again. Your child is grappling to get a handle on the situation, and it is your job to be there.

Be aware that you may witness some regression in your child. Bed-wetting, thumb-sucking or even an overall clinginess where there was none before can be expected. Change evokes uncertainty for kids, and that can be scary. Gently provide your support, and do not punish for these behaviors. It might help to acknowledge your child's action and help tie this to the loss or change.

Make sure to look for the positive side of the situation. Try to reinforce that a new school provides opportunities to meet new people and to try different activities. For death, recall fond memories of the loved one and rely on your belief system to help assuage your child's fears.

Finally, remember to always be honest with your responses, as you are teaching your little ones how to handle experiences. Use this opportunity to reiterate that while you can't prevent future losses from happening, your love and support always can be counted on. ▲