



Loss & Grieving

*(References: grief-recovery.com; *Grief Counselling & Grief Therapy*: J.W. Worden)*

Each of us processes grief in our own individual way. Take the time that you need; talk to the people you want to talk to; express your feelings in your own way. No-one can tell you how to manage the pain of your loss.

Clichés such as “You should be over it by now”, “Time heals” or “You have to be strong for others” are just that: clichés. Time doesn’t heal things by itself – if you lock up your feelings, time will just pass without recovery or change; expressing your feelings is a measure of trust in yourself and others, not a sign of weakness.

Grief itself is neither an illness nor an indulgence: it is a normal response to loss. Even with the departure of a less-than-loving relationship, you may be taken by surprise at the depth of your feelings. With the loss of someone you have come to rely on in your life, whether the loss is by death or separation, the deep anguish you feel might make you scared that you will not recover. These reactions are normal, natural, expected – even if they shake your world for a while. Attend to the hurt, much as you would a physical wound, and you will heal. If you had received a major cut to a limb, you would want to ensure that the wound was clean, that it was being held together in a way that would help it heal healthily and speedily, but you would also protect it from further harm and look after it. You wouldn’t expect it to get back to normal immediately. In fact, you might expect that a scar would always be there.

The following are some of the helpful things people do to attend to their grief:

- Tell the story to someone who will listen. Go over the details, but also remember the relationship in its entirety. What is it that has been lost with the departure of this person? Has anything been gained that will stay with you forever? What has been left incomplete by this person departing now?
- Explore and express the emotions you feel. It can help to do this with another person, as well as on your own. Normal responses to loss include shock, sadness, yearning, anger, guilt, anxiety, loneliness, despair, helplessness as well as relief, liberation, excitement, humour, satisfaction. Feelings change and fluctuate in intensity, sometimes hitting out of the blue, sometimes needing to be drawn out by a careful listener.
- Discover what it is that has been left incomplete. Are there important things that will never be done, or important things that have been left unsaid? Or is it just the sense of a process that has been interrupted? It is often the sense of incompleteness which makes recovery from grief difficult. When you identify what’s been left over, find ways to address this.



- Ritual and symbolism: it can be useful to encapsulate the grief, the loss or the sense of what's incomplete in a way which you can act out – saying out loud to someone what you would have liked to have said, taking a journey to a special place, writing a letter, giving something symbolic away... you will know yourself what would have meaning for you. This may take a religious or spiritual form. Anniversaries are often times when doing or saying something meaningful has a particular impact. Paradoxically, it is connecting with the pain in these profound ways which decreases the magnitude of the feelings and enables you to begin to recover.

Familiarity with pain can leave you ill-equipped to recover. Survival habits from a very early age can create ever-increasing cycles of pain, so that each new loss is simply added to the pile. These early survival habits were probably all you knew to do back then, but they are not necessarily helpful now. Common habits to cope with loss include: never getting too close to others, being angry instead of sad, transforming your emotional pain into physical symptoms, over-working and over-busyness to distract yourself, clinging on to people inappropriately, rejecting others before they reject you. You can probably think of more, but the result is that you accumulate pain rather than work through it, and then expect that you will not really recover from any loss.

You might ask yourself: If someone had seen me as a young child trying to cope with loss, what would they have noticed about me? What was the first significant loss I can recall? What would I have learnt from others at that time about how to express my grief? If I had had someone helping me back then, listening to me, what would I like to have been able to say to them? We don't notice the way that sadness, anxiety and anger can build up until we find ourselves being stressed all the time, not knowing why we are over-reacting to things and not being able to express our emotions without hurting others or ourselves. "What you practice is what you get good at", so your defensive responses to loss go on getting more and more entrenched, and more and more familiar, so in the end you think that the way you do things is normal – when often it's just what is most familiar to you.

Don't be afraid to cry, but also don't think that you have to cry just because others think you should. (Everyone gets nervous when they see someone else in pain, and the urge to tell the grieving person what to do can be overwhelming.) Releasing the pain through tears is good, but it is even more useful if you can talk when you are crying so that you connect with the complexity of the painful thoughts inside.

Above all, stay with the truth of how you feel and try to express it. You may or may not be able to re-find the person you have lost, but in the end you will re-find yourself.