

Healing with Haven

September 2008

Five Common Myths About Grief

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Our society continues to perpetuate a number of myths about grief and mourning. These myths may seem harmless, but I have found that they can quickly become hurdles to healing. This article describes five of the most common myths about grief. I hope that this information will help you overcome these myths and better understand how to help yourself or others heal.

Myth #1: Grief and mourning are the same experience.

Most people tend to use the words grief and mourning interchangeably. However, there is an important distinction between them. We have learned that people move toward healing not by just grieving, but through mourning. Simply stated, grief describes the internal thoughts and feelings we experience when someone we love dies. Mourning, on the other hand, is taking the internal experience of grief and expressing it outside ourselves.

In reality, many people in our culture grieve, but they do not mourn. Instead of being encouraged to express their grief outwardly, they are often greeted with messages such as “carry on,” “keep your chin up,” and “keep busy.” So, they end up grieving within themselves in isolation, instead of mourning outside of themselves in the presence of loving companions.

Myth #2: There is a predictable and orderly progression to the experience of grief.

Stage-like thinking about both dying and grief has been an appealing idea to many people. Somehow the “stages of grief” have helped people make sense out of an experience that isn’t orderly and predictable as we would like it to be. If only it were so simple!

The concept of “stages” was popularized in 1969 with the publication of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’ landmark text *On Death and Dying*. Dr. Kubler-Ross never intended for people to

interpret her five “stages of dying” literally. However, many people have done just that, not only with process of dying, but with the processes of bereavement, grief and mourning as well.

One such consequence is when the people who are around the grieving person believe that he or she should be in “stage 2: or “stage 4” by now.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Each person’s grief is uniquely his or her own. It is neither predictable nor orderly. Nor can its different dimensions be so easily categorized. We only get ourselves in trouble when we try to prescribe what the grief and mourning experiences of others should be, or when we try to fit our own grief into neat little boxes.



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Myth #3: It is best to move away from grief and mourning instead of toward it.

Many grievors do not give themselves permission or receive permission from others to mourn. We live in a society that often encourages people to prematurely move away from their grief instead of toward it. Many people view grief as something to be overcome rather than experienced. The result is that many of us either grieve in isolation or attempt to run away from our grief.

People who continue to express their grief outwardly “to mourn” are often viewed as “weak,” “crazy” or “self-pitying.” The common message is “shape up and get on with your life.” Refusing to allow tears, suffering in silence and “being strong” are thought to be admirable behaviors. Many people in grief have internalized society’s message that mourning should be done quietly, quickly and efficiently.

Such messages encourage the repression of the griever’s thoughts and feelings. The problem is that attempting to mask or move away from grief results in internal anxiety and confusion. With little, if any, social recognition of the normal pain or grief, people begin to think their thoughts and feelings are abnormal. “I think I’m going crazy,” they often tell me.

They are not crazy, just grieving. And in order to heal, they must move toward their grief through continued mourning, not away from it through repression and denial.

Myth #4: Tears expressing grief are only a sign of weakness.

Unfortunately, many people associate tears of grief with personal inadequacy and weakness. Crying on the part of the mourner often generates feelings of helplessness in friends, family and caregivers. Out of a wish to protect mourners from pain, friends and family may try to stop the tears. Comments such as, “Tears won’t bring him back” and, “He

wouldn’t want you to cry” discourage the expression of tears.

Yet crying is nature’s way of releasing internal tension in the body and allows the mourner to communicate a need to be comforted. Crying makes people feel better, emotionally and physically. Tears are not a sign of weakness. In fact, crying is an indication of the griever’s willingness to do the “work of mourning.”

Myth #5: The goal is to “get over” your grief.

We have all heard people ask, “Are you over it yet?” To think that we as human beings “get over” grief is ridiculous! We never “get over” our grief but instead become reconciled to it.

We do not resolve or recover from our grief. These terms suggest a total return to “normalcy” and yet in my personal, as well as professional, experience we are all forever changed by the experience of grief. For the mourner to assume that life will be exactly as it was prior to the death is unrealistic and potentially damaging. Those people who think the goal is to “resolve” grief become destructive to the healing process.

Mourners do, however, learn to reconcile their grief. We learn to integrate the new reality of moving forward in life without the physical presence of the person who has died. With reconciliation a renewed sense of energy and confidence, an ability to fully acknowledge the reality

of the death, and capacity to become re-involved with the activities of living. We also come to acknowledge that pain and grief are difficult, yet necessary, parts of life and living.

As the experience of reconciliation unfolds, we recognize that life will be different without the presence of the person who died. At first we realize this with our heads, and later we come to realize it with our hearts. We also realize that reconciliation is a process, not an event. The sense of loss does not completely disappear yet it softens, and the intense pangs of grief become less frequent. Hope for a continued life emerges as we are able to make commitments to the future, realizing that the person who died will never be forgotten, yet knowing that one’s own life can and will move forward. 🏠



The Missing Pieces of Life

By Rabbi Earl A. Grollman, DHL, DD, Belmont, Massachusetts

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I would like to recount one of my favorite stories, written by Shel Silverstein, entitled, The Missing Piece.

Try to visualize this: Once upon a time, there was a circle that was missing a piece of itself. The incomplete circle was very unhappy. So, it went all over the world looking for its missing piece... but in vain. It couldn't find it. Some parts were too big and some were too small. Some were too square and some were too pointy. None of them fit. Then, suddenly one day it found a piece that seemed to fit perfectly. The circle was complete again. And now, because it was an unbroken circle, it could roll much faster. And it did. It rolled so rapidly, it rolled past the lakes and through forests. It traveled so fast that the landscape became a blur as did the birds and the flowers. It couldn't even talk to the insects. Suddenly, the complete circle realized that it was moving too fast, propelling itself fanatically without seeing and living life. It couldn't do any of the things it had been doing. It stopped. It put down its missing piece. It began limping slowly away—beautifully, slowly away.

It's a fable, short and simple with many insights. It's saying that a little bit of incompleteness opens people up—as it did to the circle in the story—to feeling more, seeing more, experiencing more. In a paradoxical way, those who seemingly have everything may never have some of the most poignant experiences in life. Those who have everything will never know what it feels like to yearn, to hope. They will never understand the songs and poetry that are born out of longing, out of grieving, out of incompleteness. No one can ever make them happy by giving them something they would enjoy. By definition, they already have it. In a strange way, the “rich” person who had everything, who is missing absolutely nothing, is a “very poor” person indeed.

Sometimes we are more complete when we are incomplete. That's the strange truth of the story. We may be made more complete by the things we don't have. Not because we do not mourn for the loved one who died, because when just one person is missing the world seems so empty—a piece of us is missing. We realize that no matter how crowded our lives, there will always be empty places. Each of us in truth is incomplete in one way or another, some by death, some by divorce, others by disappointment. Maybe there was a job we wanted and didn't get, or perhaps there was a child who didn't turn out as we hoped they would, or certain people we trusted failed us. Every one of us is missing something from our lives. Like the circle in the story, because we are broken, we are compelled to see everything in our lives a

bit differently. We then come to see the world as it really is. The world isn't a birthday party. It's a very mixed up, unpredictable place. Hours of sunshine alternate with hours of darkness. We learn gratitude precisely because we can't have everything. We learn to roll through life more slowly with our missing pieces.

Having a missing part opens our lives to see life differently.

When my daughter Sharon and I wrote the book, *Caring for Your Aged Parents*, we interviewed literally scores of the elderly. We would see people of the same age and in similar health. The difference between them was attitude, the way they handled the missing pieces in their lives.

For some, the challenge was to attempt to fill in the incomplete part—to read another book, to see another sunset, to live to see a grandchild married. Since the circle was never completed, there was always anticipation. They

were searching for the missing elements. For others, there was no missing part. They had no patience to read, to watch television or even walk outside the bedroom door. In life, there was death. To find the missing piece is destruction. When life is complete, life is finished.

Perhaps you saw the movie or play or read the book, *The Lion King*. Recall that Simba, the baby lion, tries to carry on the father's hopes and dreams.



Isn't that our goal? Even though our beloveds are no longer with us, we attempt to take their ideals and spirits into our own minds and hearts. We yearn to find something outside of ourselves, like the stars (or whatever symbols) as did Simba, of the special gifts they bequeathed to us. We are to continue to fill in the missing pieces in the circle of life.

One of my favorite quotations is by the Christian martyr and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who died in 1945 in a concentration camp: “Nothing can fill the gap when we are away from those we love, and it would be wrong to try and find anything. We must simply hold out and win through. That sounds very hard at first, but at the same time it is great consolation, since leaving the gap unfilled preserves the bonds between us. It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; God does not fill it, but keeps it empty so that our communion with another may be kept alive, even at the cost of pain.”

Or as the great Rabbi Tarfon said in the first century: “You are not required to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to abstain from it.”

In other words, no one can ever complete the circle; our responsibility is to enlarge it filling in some of the missing pieces. 🧩

Grief & Loss Seminar Series

A new grief support group has begun and meets the 2nd and 4th Fridays of the month from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Alpert Jewish Community Center in Long Beach (3801 E. Willow St, Long Beach, Ca). This group will be a safe and supportive place for bereaved persons to share their experiences and feelings related to loss, and will also provide educational information on the grief process. For more information please contact Tina Stephenitch at 562-426-7500 ext 406. Pre-registration is required.

Individual/Group Support

The Bereavement Department of Haven Hospice offers individual support. For more information or to make an appointment for an individual meeting please contact our Bereavement Coordinator, Tina Stephenitch at (562) 426-7500 ext 406.

Volunteers

Are you ready to become a Haven Hospice Volunteer? If you are interested in this rewarding opportunity, or you know anyone who is looking to volunteer his or her time, please contact Tina Stephenitch, Volunteer Coordinator (562) 426-7500 406.

Help us keep our mailing list current!

If you no longer wish to receive our monthly newsletter or if the address that appears is not current, please email Tina Stephenitch at tstephen@havenhealth.org or call the office at (562) 426-7500 ext 406. Thank you for your assistance.



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