

Silence is Not an Answer in the Time of Grief

What Do We Need During Grief?

How Do You Know You Are Feeling Better?

Question & Answer

SILENCE IS NOT AN ANSWER IN THE TIME OF GRIEF

by Elizabeth Cross McDonald

This summer I survived the two most devastating realities I have experienced since my father's death in 1980. The first was anguishing in its inevitability: my 31-year-old brother's death from the cancer that stalked him for seven years. The second was worsened by its utter uselessness and avoidability: the deliberate way virtually every friend and acquaintance, save my very closest, has avoided and ignored me during this time of grief.

I do not believe that those who knew about Al's death did not worry about me and my family. It is likely that many were concerned. But I know that most of my friends are young, and have not yet had a close family member die. Death is scary or unreal, and few can envision themselves in the position I have been in twice. In a word, they are ignorant about my feelings and how to react to them.

A few of the braver approached me with hearty, superficial greetings that suggested my absence, but not its cause: "Well hello, nice to see you back" or "So school's about to start, are you ready?" This was, for all its well meaning, very painful for me. I felt these people were using trivialities as a way of saying, "These things are more important than his death, and I'm more concerned about today's weather than how terrible you feel." With uneasy smiles on their faces, these people made me feel like a fool.

To a few, I said, "Perhaps you didn't know my brother died." The response was a muffled, "Oh, yes... I'm sorry." I stopped volunteering this information: it was awful to realize that these people, through all the banality, knew about Albert, and said nothing. Some people undoubtedly kept silent in the hopes that I would approach them to talk and they could then be duly supportive. This was a gross error of judgment. I needed to have friends voluntarily open their hearts in sympathy, as I was feeling vulnerable and afraid that those I turned to might turn me away.

To me, the silence said, "Leave me alone, I don't care." Still others made efforts to engage me in conversation, as long as I was able to be cheerful and not talk about Albert. To these people, my casual comment like, "Oh, I remember when Albert and I visited that person" was nervously ignored and met by an embarrassed silence. I needed to be able to remember my brother reflectively, without self-consciousness or shame. And even close friends could not understand that waves of grief, anger and depression affected me in ways I myself could not understand. How I needed their patience and support, their faith that I was angry at death, and not at them.

My grief is now settling into the long depression that is a necessary step to healing. But every week, people on campus – maybe your friend or roommate – also face the unthinkable tragedy in a place where youth can lead

Continued on next page...

Transitions

...continued from page 2.

helps you get through the time in the immediate future. Living one day at a time is the rule of thumb. At first, don't be surprised if your enjoyment of these things is not the same. This is normal. As time passes you may need to work on some longer range goals to give some structure and direction to your life. You may need guidance or counseling to help with this.

Small Pleasures

Do not underestimate the healing effects of small pleasures when you are ready. Sunsets, a walk in the woods, a favorite food – all are small steps towards regaining your pleasure in life itself.

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Transitions

I feel numb. Is this normal?

Sometimes, when we are faced with overwhelming physical and emotional demands, we do go "numb." And sometimes, going numb is a healthy defensive mechanism that will allow us to go on. Vigilance, honesty and clarity are called for, however, in the face of numbing. We don't want to fall into the seduction of "not feeling." Healing is always a delicate interplay of forces much like the homeostasis within the body's chemistry: a little bit of bacteria is a good thing; too much causes infection. The answer: pay attention to your own inner voice and listen to the feedback of trusted friends.

Q & A by Deborah Morris Coryell, author of "Good Grief: Healing Through the Shadow of Loss," www.goodgrief.org.

...continued from front page.

people to feel immortal. These people need your support, and it's not hard to give it to them. If someone you know, whether closely or just vaguely, is bereaved, please don't be shy or afraid. Take the initiative, walk up, look into his or her eyes and say, "I am so sorry to hear about the death." (Only one person did this to me. Though I was not particularly close to him, his generosity moved me to tears.)

You need not give your philosophy on tragedy in life or your favorite remedy for depression. The bereaved person does not expect or want this. And if you consider yourself to be a close friend of the bereaved person, now is your chance to prove it. Listening – not avoiding the bereaved's sadness or being afraid to have the friend cry to you – is essential. If your friend does cry, consider yourself lucky that he or she is comfortable enough to share these deep emotions with you.

And don't try to stop the tears – they are also a step to healing and must flow freely. If you feel anger or hostility directed at you, take comfort that anger and grief are interconnected. The friend is not angry at you, it is simply his desperate attempt to justify or focus the waves of anger and desolation that surge uncontrollably through him. If the bereaved are surrounded by people who care, the grieving process is made less bitter and devastating. Yet caring and concern for your friend is meaningless unless you directly tell her that you do care.

I understand that Dad and Albert had no intention of abandoning me, that they left me through no power of their own. The intentions of my silent friends are much less clear. Remember this: Just say, "I heard, and I'm sorry."

~ Chicago, 1987

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What Do We Need During Grief?

Time

Time alone, and time with others whom you trust and who will listen when you need to talk. Months and years of time to feel and understand the feelings that go along with loss.

Rest, Relaxation, Exercise, Nourishment, Diversion

You may need extra amounts of things you needed before. Hot baths, afternoon naps, a trip, a "cause" to work for to help others – any of these may give you a lift. Grief is an exhausting process emotionally. You need to replenish yourself. Follow what feels healing to you and what connects you to the people and things you love.

Security

Try to reduce stress or find help for financial and other stresses in your life. Allow yourself to be close to those you trust. Getting back into a routine helps. You may need to replenish yourself to do things at your own pace.

Hope

You may find hope and comfort from those who have experienced a similar loss. Knowing some things that helped them, and realizing that they have recovered and time does help, may give you hope in the future.

Caring

Try to allow yourself to accept the expressions of caring from others. They may give you hope that sometime in the future your grief will be less raw and painful.

Goals

For a while, it will seem that much of life is without meaning. At times like these, small goals are helpful. Something to look forward to, like playing tennis with a friend next week, a movie tomorrow night, or a trip next month

Continued on last page...

HOW DO YOU KNOW YOU ARE FEELING BETTER?



You can measure the progress you have made in adjusting to your loss by identifying certain feelings and behaviors, which have appeared, as you feel better. Complete the following statements to discover those areas in which you have progressed.

I'll always remember the happy/funny time: _____

I have made the following decisions during the past month: _____

I have discovered the following capabilities in myself that I never knew I had: _____

This has been a tragic experience, but I have changed and grown because of it. I have learned: _____

I have become: _____

I now feel like I have regained some control in these areas of my life: _____

I feel hopeful about: _____

I am making these plans for my future: _____

My loved one has died. Although I believe that relationships never die and that my love for the person I lost will go on forever, I can now release him/her and can say good-bye.

Supports in my life: _____

Take time to think about those people, groups, and activities in your life which are important to you and help to give meaning to your life.

PEOPLE WHO ARE CLOSE TO ME

· Family Members: _____

· Relatives: _____

· Friends: _____

· Neighbors: _____

· Teachers/Counselors: _____

· Clergy: _____

· Colleagues: _____

· Pets: _____

· Others: _____

CLUBS OR GROUPS

· Educational Activities: _____

· Church Groups: _____

· Job/Work: _____

· Athletic Activities: _____

· Arts and Crafts or Music: _____

· Groups: _____

· Others: _____

My Favorite Belongings (a special picture, ring or other memento): _____

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