

Understanding Grief

By Dr. Bill Webster

“Your wife is dead”

The words of the doctor seemed to have such a hollow ring to them as they impacted my numb and disbelieving brain. I felt as if an invisible hand was pushing me off my chair. I struggled to grasp what I was being told. The whole situation had an air of unreality about it. It was like a bad dream. I expected to wake up at any second and realize to my relief that this wasn't really happening. But it was happening. My wife, a young woman in her thirties, had died of a heart attack. The days that followed would be full of new challenges, not least of which was being a single parent to my two sons, then 6 and 7 years of age. But the biggest challenge of all was not as immediately apparent.

I was beginning a grief process. I didn't even know there was such a thing as a grief process, far less how to deal with it. There is not much understanding of grief in our society. We have not learned what IS normal after a significant loss...what we should expect, what emotions we will experience, how long the process continues. Many people, albeit with good intentions, try to rationalize the situation, with phrases like “it's a blessing in disguise”, or “maybe it's for the best”. These statements may or may not be true. But for us, it doesn't feel like a blessing. To us, it's NOT for the best...in fact, we may feel it is the worst thing that could have happened.

Perhaps you have experienced a significant loss recently. I wish I could sit down and listen to you tell me about the special relationship you had with the person, whatever that relationship happened to be. Whether you have experienced the loss of a spouse, a parent, a child, or the loss of a relative, friend or colleague, whenever we experience a loss, we experience grief.

This article is designed to help us understand grief and to validate the many emotions we may experience after a loss. Grief is normal, yet saying it is normal does not minimize its difficulty. Grief is one of life's most challenging experiences, and I hope reading this will help you cope with it.

1. *Grief involves Suffering*

Grief is an emotional response to a significant loss. Because it is an

emotion, it is difficult to describe. The Scots have a saying that some things are better “felt than tell’t”. Grief is one of these things. Whenever we lose someone (or something), or an attachment is broken, we can experience a painful reaction. To experience grief is to acknowledge that you have loved someone, and now that person has gone. If you hadn’t needed that relationship, or risked the emotional attachment, you wouldn’t be feeling the loss. But you did, and, oh yes, it was worth the risk. It is a high compliment to any relationship that we miss it enough to shed a tear and feel emotional. How awful if we didn’t! Tears are not a sign of weakness, but an indication of how special the relationship was. And, now that it is gone, we miss it. To experience grief is to acknowledge that you are human.

1. *Grief involves Surprises*

Because we have not understood grief, its intensity often comes as a surprise. We can find ourselves bewildered by the avalanche of emotions that can impact us. Among these emotions are numbness, shock, confusion, disbelief, anxiety, absent-mindedness, restlessness, crying, fatigue, appetite disorders, sleep disruptions, physical symptoms, anger, guilt, depression, and the list goes on.

What is most surprising is that every person’s grief process is unique. Some people experiences certain emotions, other people experience others. Everyone is different, and so the way you respond to your unique loss, will not be the same as anyone else’s. That’s why I NEVER say, “I know how you feel”. I don’t! How can I? All I know is how I felt when grief touched my life. Just because one person experiences something one way does not mean another person is abnormal because their experience is different. Yet it is amazing how many people do not give others the freedom to grieve in a way that is right for them. You are unique. Your situation, and the relationship you have lost is unique. So do not be surprised if your response to your loss is unique.

2. *Grief involves Surrender*

The days after the loss of my wife were confusing. I felt numb. People may have thought I was doing well, and even commended me for how strong I was. But I wasn’t strong. I was numb. Even when that numbness began to wear off, I had difficulty accepting that Carolyn was really gone. I found myself searching for her: hoping to see her in the shopping mall; going to the cemetery and talking with her. I kept hoping somehow she was going to return. Of course, I didn’t TELL anyone this, because they might have thought I was going crazy.

In fact, such feelings are not crazy. They are an important part of coming to

terms with reality. But inevitably we have to surrender to the reality that we have had a loss. That may seem like the most obvious statement, yet it is exceedingly difficult to accept, and for a considerable time we fight against the idea. Sooner or later, however, we have to realize that our loved one has really gone, and will not return. Often, it is some months after the death that this painful realization occurs. The people who thought we were strong may not understand what is happening. Often, it is when people think we should be getting ourselves together, we feel we are falling apart. People who do not understand the grieving process may not know that it is normal to fall apart even months after the funeral, or to find Christmas, birthdays, anniversaries, or just “a year ago today” days difficult. Grief is normal. YOU are normal. Surrender to the process that follows every significant loss.

3. *Grief involves Survival*

After a loss, we may wonder how we are going to manage to go on without our loved one. It is not easy to lose whomever or whatever we have counted on for support, encouragement and indeed the confidence to face the world. When this does happen, we struggle to cope with many unexpected and surprising emotions. Basically these emotions help us face the question, How will I manage in the light of my loss? Will I be able to go on without the person?

Often in the early days after a loss, it is simply a matter of survival. That word actually derives from two Latin words... “vivo” - live, and “sur” - beyond. To survive means to find the resources to “live beyond” the experience of loss. The adjustments one must make are many. These can be practical, emotional, physical, social and spiritual. Each adjustment can be a painful process. Sometimes mere survival is a major success.

4. *Grief involves Support*

While many friends are supportive around the time of the death, grieving people often discover that support fades shortly after the funeral. When someone is going through a bad time, we tend to leave them alone, often because their situation makes US feel uncomfortable. We aren't quite sure what to say or do, and many end up saying and doing nothing. I know many grieving people who feel quite abandoned after their loss, even though this is not the intention of their friends.

After a loss, people need to talk. To be more accurate, they need to talk and talk. Part of the resolution of grief is found in reviewing the events of the person's life and death, and reliving our memories. Many people find grief support groups

helpful. The opportunity to share with others of similar experience can help bring resolution. Yet, it is not easy. Often, we delay getting back into the swing of things because that would be to admit that life is going on without our loved one, and we may not be ready for that yet. If you have a friend with whom you can share, you are very fortunate. Possibly you could talk to your minister, or to a grief counselor, and your local funeral home can direct you to professional resources.

5. *Grief involves Struggle*

Grief is difficult. It is never easy to lose someone you have relied on. This is possibly the most difficult experience of your life. There's an ancient Warrior Song, that says, "Life has meaning only in the struggle, Triumph or defeat is in the hands of God. So let us celebrate the struggle". One of the things I believe about God is that He gives us choices. In some things, we have no choice. We had no choice in the death of our loved one, and much as we might like, that situation cannot be changed. But we do have a choice around what we do about it. We can choose to be bitter or better. We can choose to be victims or victors. Some people, after a loss, see themselves as victims. They refuse to struggle to come to terms with the situation. But it is as we struggle that we discover that in every loss there is a gain. You didn't think you could make it, but suddenly you're discovering strength and resources you didn't know you had. Expectant mothers have labor pains, teenagers have growing pains, but out of that pain comes growth and life. That doesn't make the pain any easier, but it does help put it in a meaningful context.

Life is full of problems. Each one has the potential to be a stepping stone or a stumbling block. Will the problem trip you up and be a barrier to your progress? Or will you allow it to become a stepping stone to growth and renewed life. Stepping stone or stumbling block. Both are made of the same material. What we do with them makes all the difference.

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Benjamin Franklin may have said that the two certain things in life are death and taxes. But possibly Mr. Franklin would not mind us adding one more. CHANGE. Things change, people change, circumstances and situations change. Coping with some of the changes can be one of the most challenging experiences of life. There are many changes in life, some physical and others symbolic, yet all leave the human mind and spirit struggling to cope with the inevitable outcome of change: a

sense of loss and an emotional reaction we can identify as grief.

We live in a culture that does not deal well with loss. Whether it is a loss by our favorite sports team; a material loss due to robbery or fire; a relational loss through death, divorce or people moving away; a role loss such as unemployment, or a functional loss such as the loss of health or strength; change and the resultant feelings of loss are often an unwelcome element in our lives.

Let's consider our culture's attitude towards death, for example. We live in a society in which death is not part of the business of living. While death is one of the certain things in life, we have somehow decided not to acknowledge it or talk about it in the normal course of events. As Margaret Mead succinctly puts it:

*"When someone is born, we rejoice.
When someone is married, we celebrate
But when someone dies, we pretend that nothing has happened."*

If we live in a culture that denies or avoids the reality of death, or any significant loss, it is hardly surprising that we would also deny the significance of grief. The same factors that affect our attitude towards death, influence, and even aggravate, societies attitude towards grief. Grief, which is the normal reaction to any significant loss is often minimized and unmentioned. People seem reluctant to recognize the painful process of grief. The messages they give the grieving person are conflicting. Things like "you must be strong; pull yourself together; you mustn't cry; life must go on". We haven't learned what IS normal and what we can expect after a significant loss. We have often failed to validate the long term process of grief, or legitimize the experience.

When people find themselves unavoidable confronted with loss and struggling with grief, it can be one of the most difficult experiences of life. Yet the attitudes that make the subject of death and loss difficult for us, also create a **conspiracy of silence** when it comes to grief.

It is my conviction that a holistic approach to life involves taking a balanced view, and acceptance and an integration of the positive and the negative, the good and the bad. This article is designed to help us understand grief and to validate the many emotions we may experience after a loss. Grief is normal; yet saying it is normal does not minimize its difficulty. Grief is one of life's most challenging experiences, and often we need help to come to terms with it.

1. *Grief involves Suffering*

Grief is the cost of caring. It is an emotional response to any significant loss. Because it is an emotion, it is difficult to describe. Whenever we lose someone (or something), or an attachment is broken, we can experience a painful reaction. To experience grief is to acknowledge that you have loved someone, and now that person has gone. If you hadn't needed that relationship, or risked the emotional attachment, you wouldn't be feeling the loss. But you did, and, oh yes, it was worth the risk. It is a high compliment to any relationship that we miss it enough to shed a tear and feel emotional. How awful if we didn't! Tears are not a sign of weakness, but an indication of how special the relationship was. And, now that it is gone, we miss it. To experience grief is to acknowledge that you are human.

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7. *Grief involves Surrender*

My wife died suddenly and unexpectedly in 1983. The days following that loss were confusing. I felt numb. People may have thought I was doing well, and even commended me for how strong I was. But I wasn't strong. I was numb. Even when that numbness began to wear off, I had difficulty accepting that Carolyn was really gone. I found myself searching for her: hoping to see her in the shopping mall; going to the cemetery and talking with her. I kept hoping somehow she was going to return. Of course, I didn't TELL anyone this, because they might have thought I was going crazy.

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terms with reality. But inevitably we have to surrender to the reality that we have had a loss. That may seem like the most obvious statement, yet it is exceedingly difficult to accept, and for a considerable time we fight against the idea. Sooner or later, however, we have to realize that our loved one has really gone, and will not return. Often, it is some months after the death that this painful realization occurs. The people who thought we were strong may not understand what is happening. Often, it is when people think we should be getting ourselves together, we feel we are falling apart. People who do not understand the grieving process may not know that it is normal to fall apart even months after the funeral, or to find Christmas, birthdays, anniversaries, or just “a year ago today” days difficult. Grief is normal. YOU are normal. Surrender to the process that follows every significant loss.

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After a loss, we may wonder how we are going to manage to go on without our loved one, or without that which we have lost. It is not easy to lose whomever or whatever we have counted on for support, encouragement and indeed the confidence to face the world. When this does happen, we struggle to cope with many unexpected and surprising emotions. Basically these emotions help us face the question, How will I manage in the light of my loss? Will I be able to go on without the person?

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talk. Part of the resolution of grief is found in reviewing the events of the person's life and death, and reliving our memories. Many people find grief support groups helpful. The opportunity to share with others of similar experience can help bring resolution. Yet, it is not easy. Often, we delay getting back into the swing of things because that would be to admit that life is going on without our loved one, and we may not be ready for that yet. If you have a friend with whom you can share, you are very fortunate. Possibly you could talk to your minister, mentor or to a grief counselor or therapist.

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Grief is difficult. It is never easy to lose someone or something you have relied on. This is possibly the most difficult experience of your life. There's an ancient Warrior Song, that says, "Life has meaning only in the struggle, Triumph or defeat is in the hands of God. So let us celebrate the struggle". One of the things I believe about God is that He gives us choices. In some things, we have no choice. We had no choice in the death of our loved one, and much as we might like, that situation cannot be changed. But we do have a choice around what we do about it. We can choose to be bitter or better. We can choose to be victims or victors. Some people, after a loss, see themselves as victims. They refuse to struggle to come to terms with the situation. But it is as we struggle that we discover that in every loss there is a gain. You didn't think you could make it, but suddenly you're discovering strength and resources you didn't know you had. Expectant mothers have labor pains, teenagers have growing pains, but out of that pain comes growth and life. That doesn't make the pain any easier, but it does help put it in a meaningful context.

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Dr Bill Webster: Biography

Dr. Bill Webster is Executive Director of the Centre for the Grief Journey in Toronto, Canada. He brings a unique blend of personal experience, academic education and many years of practical application to his work. Widowed in 1983, he struggled to come to terms with his loss, as well as coping with bringing up his two young sons.

After working through his own grief process, Bill began to assist others in a similar situation and pioneered several community grief support programs. Already a university graduate with degrees in psychology and theology, he completed his doctorate at the University of Toronto in 1990.

Dr. Webster is the author of several books for grieving people, including “When Someone You Care About Dies”, “Now What?” , “Grief Journey”, and “A Not So Jolly Christmas”. He recently completed a series of 5 one hour videos entitled “From Mourning to Dawn” which provides a foundation for support programs in many communities. The Centre for the Grief Journey has it’s own site on the world wide web at griefftalk.com, with information about the Centre and several useful articles on grief and loss.

Acknowledged as a dynamic, personable and practical speaker, Dr. Bill Webster combines his own story with his knowledge and sense of humour to effectively communicate his message.

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