

Help Me Understand Grief What Grief Is.

In the days after my wife died, people thought I was coping and “doing well”. They commended me that I seemed so “strong”. In fact I was not strong, I was numb. But a few weeks after the death, that numbness wore off and I began to experience an overwhelming sense of loss. It was probably the most difficult time of my life. There were days when I thought I was going crazy or losing my mind.

But, in fact, what I was experiencing was not unusual, abnormal or pathological. What I was experiencing was grief. Unfortunately, in our “death denying culture”, we are not taught what to expect in the days and months after a loss, and so grief inevitably catches us by surprise.

I have come to understand grief as “a natural human reaction to a significant loss, manifesting itself in a unique cluster of human emotions, intensified and complicated by the relationship lost.”

This definition allows us to understand the grief experience in several ways.

1. Grief is an Unwelcome Experience:

While loss is inevitable in this life, no-one *welcomes* the experience. You may be reading this at a very difficult time of your life. Perhaps someone you care about has died; possibly this experience is much more difficult, emotional or long lasting than you had ever anticipated. Many around you may be telling you to “get over it” or “pull yourself together”. I would simply like to acknowledge that if your experience is anything like mine, things must be difficult for you right now. This is probably the last thing in the world you would have wanted, and you would much rather things were very different for you. That is understandable. Grief is unwelcome.

2. Grief is a Natural Human Experience:

Our definition affirms my strong, unshakable conviction that grief is a normal, human response to any significant loss. It is not a sickness, disease or disorder. While there can be pathological or complicated elements to grief, the reaction to a significant loss is a natural response. After a death, some may encourage you to “be strong” or “not to cry”. But how sad it would be if someone we cared about died and we **didn't** cry, or if we carried on as if nothing had happened. Frankly,

I'd like to think that someone will miss me enough to shed a tear after I'm gone. Wouldn't you? The greatest gift you can receive in these days is the knowledge that what you are experiencing is not abnormal. When you lose someone special from your life you are going to grieve. Our grief is saying that we miss the person and that we're struggling to adjust to a life without that special relationship. Your grief is not a sign of weakness, it is a sign that you CARED!

Sometimes people ask me "*What is the worst kind of loss?*" Is it worse to lose a spouse or to lose a child? Others question if it is worse to lose someone after a long lingering illness, or if the individual dies suddenly and unexpectedly from a heart attack or an accident. There is no answer to such questions. Perhaps the best response is to affirm that "*The worst kind of loss is yours.*" Your loss probably seems like the worst possible thing that could have happened to you. When you lose a significant person from your life, whatever the relationship, it hurts and nothing takes away from your right to feel the loss and grief the absence of that person from your life.

3. Grief is a Uniquely Personal Experience:

Every individual is unique. We are all different, in looks, gender, age, family background, cultural diversity, as well as in human experiences. Just as every individual is unique, so every person's grief process is unique. While some people experience 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. That is why the word "cluster" seems so appropriate in the definition. One of my weaknesses in life is a love of chocolate, particularly nut clusters. After a lifetime of research, I have made an amazing discovery. There are no two nut clusters exactly the same. While each consists of the same basic ingredients, every single one is different. Some are round while others are a little "off shape", some containing a few extra nuts, others have a bigger blob of chocolate on top. Same ingredients, yet none identical. Grief is a *cluster* of emotions. We all have our own unique cluster, just because we are all different people. One person may experience many emotions of grief, but always to a lesser or greater degree than someone else.

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. Everyone is different, and so the way you respond to your unique loss, will not be the same as anyone else's. Every individual should be encouraged to express grief in a way that is appropriate for them, and that may be quite different from how others experience their grief. No two individuals experience grief in an identical way. Every grief is unique.

4. Grief is an Emotional Experience:

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” (tell it). Grief is one of these things. Whenever we lose someone (or something), or an attachment is broken, we can experience a painful reaction. If you hadn't loved that person or 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.

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 many more. What other emotions can YOU think of that can be connected to grief?

5. Grief is a Painful Experience:

Part of our culture's death denying posture is evidenced in how we tend to move away from pain. We try to distance ourselves from it, sometimes going to great lengths to shield ourselves from things that are unpleasant. Some of the clichés used after a death, “*try not to think about it*”; “*Let's not talk about it, because it will be too emotional*”; and others may also be an attempt to move away from the pain.

Yet, grief is painful. It hurts to lose anyone we care about. Loss is one of the most difficult human challenges, and there is no easy way around it. People may try to avoid the pain, and others may attempt to get the individual “over it” as quickly as possible. But most of the time it simply doesn't work that way. All that attitude

accomplishes is to isolate the grieving individual, leaving them feeling they can't share their true feelings with anyone, and crying alone at night, all the while feeling they are "not handling it".

The way out of grief is *through* it. As Helen Keller says, "*The only way to get to the other side is to go through the door.*" As we validate the grief experience, people come to realize that pain is a gift that warns us of danger. It can actually be a sign of healing, as we make the painful adjustments from life before the death to life after the death. It is this that enables us to reorganize, to learn, to grow. People need to find the courage to go through the painful experience of grief, and helpers need to find ways to enable them to move into and through the pain. This is one of the keys to recovery.

6. Grief is a Manageable Experience:

It is never too early to sow seeds of hope. You will make it through this process, even though it may be difficult to see that hope right this minute.

But think for a moment. You have learned that what you are going through, though painfully difficult, is not abnormal or unusual. You are not weak, or "not coping". You are someone who cared. And now that the person you cared about has died, you are struggling to come to terms with life as it now is. That is understandable. I regard grieving individuals as good people who have been temporarily overwhelmed by their situation and who with help and support will be able to make it through this difficult time.

Yet grief is difficult and it is always a struggle. It is never easy to lose someone or something you have relied on. This is possibly the most difficult experience of life. Some people, after a loss, see themselves as victims. They refuse to struggle to come to terms with the situation. But as we struggle, we discover that in every loss there is a gain. Expectant mother 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.