



GRIEF, LOSS AND HEALING

by Kathy Burford

Grief is a normal and natural part of life. It is our reaction to loss and to having something unwanted happen. Mourning our loss is universal. We are all familiar with having to deal with a variety of losses during our lifetime. When we were young, a favourite pet may have died, or we lost friends as a result of a move or school change. As adults, we may have suffered the death of a parent or someone that we cared about. On the other hand, we may have experienced other types of loss such as a divorce, bankruptcy, job loss, or a serious debilitating injury or illness. Loss of trust or respect has more of a symbolic meaning, but can be difficult nonetheless.

The question that most of us face is, how do we recover from the heartbreak and pain of grief? While some losses are bigger than others, what we experience can range from mild anxiety to intense pain and heartbreak. Each loss, however, requires us to grieve the pain that accompanies it.

Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts to grieving. Eventually we need to recover by working through our grief, letting go, and moving on with the task of living our lives the best that we can. It is not only the passage of time that heals our wounds; it is what we do that matters the most and heals us the best. Alternatively, unresolved grief is the underlying problem in most people's lives.



Grief Reactions to Loss

The normal process of grief is highly personal and individualized which results in different reactions. Initially, when a loss occurs, most people experience numbness, shock, and disbelief over what has happened. Some people may find it hard to concentrate and carry on with normal everyday tasks. A great deal of thought tends to focus on the loss situation by constantly going over the events or constantly thinking about the person who has died. Once the shock wears off, the reality of the situation sinks in as does the conflicting feelings associated with the loss. For example, there may be relief that a family member no longer has to suffer the pain of their illness, but also an overwhelming sadness over the loss of the relationship. The work of grieving can be compounded when there is unfinished business in the relationship or situation. In the case of a job loss there may be some relief of leaving a job that was highly stressful but also the heartbreak of leaving behind relationships with students, parents, or colleagues. Also questioning what might have been if there had been a chance to remain in the position may be difficult to face.

Some of us vent anger towards others or at something we feel has created our pain and loss. We may feel that life is unfair and may doubt or lose our faith because life has dealt us a terrible blow. Some people feel guilty and blame themselves for something they may or may not have done which they believe could have prevented the loss. Emotions seem out of control and can include uncontrollable crying, fear, loneliness, hurt, sadness, helplessness, and hopelessness. It may be at this point when we take stock and see things more clearly and acknowledge what has been lost.

There are practical ways that people can begin to start the process of healing. The first begins with naming the losses. The difficult work of grieving does not start until we actually accept the loss and understand that our lives have changed and will probably never be the same again. After the death of my father, I can remember when the finality of his death finally dawned on me. It was at that time I truly accepted that he was gone permanently and realized what was left were pictures, stories, and memories of my relationship with him. It was during that time that many people who had known him shared stories I had never heard and it helped as a way to celebrate and honor his life.

There are ways of dealing with the loss that can be helpful in the healing process. The reality of loss can begin to be felt by attending the funeral, visiting the gravesite, or by building a memorial when someone you care about dies. If a marriage is over, it can help to remember the good memories as well as the bad. If you have lost a job, find someone who is a good listener with whom you can share your feelings. If your school is destined to close, it is important to have time to celebrate the good things that your school brought to the community, to the staff, and to the students who attended.

Eventually we have to start living again and adjust our lives without that which has been lost. If that is not accomplished we might find ourselves living with a whole host of grief substitutes. These could include addictions, emotional shutdown, fixed rage, depressive disorders, physical symptoms, and disease, to name a few. Instead, we have options that can help us heal. If you find you are stuck, you might consider grief counseling. You can also use the power of rituals such as lighting a candle, visiting the graveyard, writing to the person who died, or writing your thoughts and feelings in a journal. You can read books on grief and the journey of healing. You can use your pain to grow and, in turn, offer something back to yourself and to others in the future. Grief is often misunderstood, but in applying it to our losses we can use it constructively to start a new beginning and get on with the task of living in a meaningful way again.

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