

Healthy Thoughts: Grief and Its Stages

Provided by ERH Parish Health Ministry

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Do not fear, for I am with you; Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, Surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.” (Isiah 41:10)

Loving another person is the most wonderful emotion we ever experience. Unfortunately, at some point, or sometimes many different points, each one of us must grieve the loss of someone we love. Throughout every country and every culture, grief is a universal and unavoidable experience. Whether one lives in a mansion or in a clay hut, whether they have ten children or have none, they will inevitably experience grief.

According to those who study grief, grieving is the most difficult task a person will ever undertake. Because of the universal and pervasive nature of grief, it seems there would be great effort put into not only understanding it, but into supporting those going through it. Regrettably, our culture now values and promotes independence and expedience, and fails to recognize that grief work is nearly impossible to do either quickly or by one’s self. Unlike so many of the systems and formulas we use to fix or explain our way through things, grief work is neither linear nor predictable.

Sister Mauryeen O’Brien, an author of several books about grieving, says we have no choice about grief (either ours or others’), and asserts that grief cannot be *fixed*. She describes grief as a type of emotional surgery – an open wound that, despite time and effort, will inevitably leave a scar. O’Brien points out that we acknowledge certain specific things are essential for healing after open heart surgery, yet we often fail to recognize and respect the things necessary for healing from the loss of a loved one.

Many grief experts, including O’Brien, believe those journeying through grief must take on the four tasks of grief. They are described as:

1) *Accepting the reality of the loss* – There is commonly a sense that the deceased’s death did not really occur. It is important for the griever to accept that a physical reunion is never again possible. The best way to support someone in this stage is to have the person talk about the person they lost, and encourage them to tell stories of the person they loved.

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Grief and Its Stages, continued...

2) *Processing the pain of the grief* – Though no two people grieve alike, all griever undoubtedly experience a great deal of *feelings* around the death of their loved one. The feelings of shock, guilt, helplessness, jealousy, and sadness can overwhelm many people, but the feelings must be acknowledged, and more importantly, must be felt. Following the death of the loved one, the griever may try to push their feelings away, over-scheduling themselves in an attempt to distract them from the pain. In order to get the pain out of the griever’s system, it is essential to feel the pain and every feeling causing that pain. Some people benefit from exploring and processing the pain of their grief with professional counseling or in a support group.

3) *Adjusting to the world without the deceased* – With the death of the loved one, a true loss and ending has occurred. Before new beginnings can occur, the griever must go through transitions. In order to adjust to their new reality, the griever must determine what roles in their life must change, and which old dreams can remain and which must be given up.

4) *Finding an enduring connection with the deceased* – As the griever begins to essentially create a new life for his/herself, it’s important to also continue to collect the stories of the past with their loved one. In addition to continuing to talk about them, it’s also often helpful to journal about their loved one. Writing about and discussing the deceased allows the griever to really put all the memories out there, then put them all securely back into their heart.

Whether we are the one journeying through the grief or the one journeying alongside someone else, understanding and respecting the grief process and all its stages is a fundamental step in finding ways to heal the pain.

Source: “The Journey through Grief” webcast, Sister Mauryeen O’Brien, May 2013



Episcopal Retirement Homes (ERH) is a not-for-profit organization committed to enriching the lives of older adults in a person-centered innovated, spiritually based way. ERH serves seniors in southern and central Ohio through residential communities, affordable housing and in-home services. For more information, please call (800) 835-5768 or visit www.EpiscopalRetirement.com

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