

# Healing with Haven

February 2008

## Shock, Numbness and Denial

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"There is no right response to death. You make it up as you go along." -Joan Connor

So far on the path to healing we've explored opening to the presence of your loss, dispelling the common misconceptions about grief, and embracing the uniqueness of your grief. Opening to the presence of your loss creates pain and feels hurtful. It may also make you feel numb, angry, fatigued and more. Dispelling the common misconceptions about grief may cause you to feel relief and/or confusion. And embracing the uniqueness of your grief may ultimately give you a profound sense of peace.

As strange as your emotions may seem, they are a true expression of where you are right now. Rather than deny or feel victimized by your feelings, I want to help you learn to recognize and learn from them. Naming the feelings and acknowledging them are the first steps to dealing with them. It's actually through this process of becoming friendly with your feelings that will help you heal.

My goal in this article is to help you see how normal your grief thoughts, feelings and behaviors are. I have worked with thousands of grieving people and they have taught me about many, many different thoughts and feelings after a death. Rest assured that whatever you are thinking and feeling, while in one sense is completely unique to you, is also usually a common human



response to loss. Moreover, keep in mind that although you may not have experienced some of these thoughts and feelings so far, you may do so in the future.

"It feels like a dream," people in early grief often say. "I feel like I might wake up and none of this will have happened." They also say, "I was there, but yet I really wasn't. I managed to do what needed to be done but I didn't feel a part of it."

Thank goodness for shock, numbness and disbelief! Other words that mourners use to describe their initial grief experience are "dazed" and "stunned." These feelings are nature's way of temporarily protecting you from the full reality of the death. They help insulate you psychologically until you are more able to tolerate what you don't want to believe. In essence, these feelings serve as a "temporary time-out" or a "psychological shock absorber."

Especially in the beginning of your grief journey, your emotions need time to catch up with what your mind has been told. On one level, you know the person is dead. But on other, deeper levels, you are not yet able or willing to truly believe it. This mixture of shock, numbness and disbelief acts as an anesthetic: The pain exists, but you may not experience it fully. Typically, a physiological component also accompanies feelings of shock. Your autonomic nervous system is affected and

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may cause heart palpitations, queasiness, stomach pain and dizziness.

You may find yourself hysterically crying, having angry outbursts, or even laughing or fainting. These are all normal and necessary responses that help you survive right now. Unfortunately, some people may try to squelch these behaviors, believing them to be hysterical or out-of-control. They may try to “quiet you” in an effort to feel more comfortable themselves. But this is an out-of-control, uncomfortable time for you. Trying to “control” yourself would mean suppressing your instinctive response to the loss. Don't do it. Remember-your needs are the priority right now, not theirs. Do what you need to do to survive.

During your time of shock, you may not remember specific words being spoken to you. Your mind is blocking; it hears but does not listen. Although you may not remember some ( or any ) of the words other people are telling you, you may well remember that you felt comforted. Their nonverbal presence is probably more important to you than any words they might say.

Even after you have moved beyond the shock, numbness and disbelief, don't be surprised if these feelings resurface. Birthdays, anniversaries, and other special occasions that may only be known to you often trigger your shock that this person you loved so very much is no longer there to share these days.

Denial is one of the most misunderstood aspects of the grief journey. Temporarily, denial, like shock and numbness, is a great gift. It helps you survive. However, your denial should soften over time as you mourn and as you acknowledge, slowly and in doses, that the person you loved is truly dead.

While denial is helpful-even necessary--early in your grief, ongoing denial clearly blocks

that path to healing. If you cannot accept the reality of the death, you can never mourn it.

Usually in grief, denial goes on at one level of awareness while acknowledgement of the reality of the death goes on at another level. Your mind may approach and retreat from the reality of the death over and over again as you try to embrace and integrate the meaning of the death into your life. This back-and-forth process is normal. I describe it as

“Evade ↔ Encounter.” The key is not to get stuck on evade.

A critical point to realize is that shock, denial, numbness

and disbelief are not feelings you should try to prevent yourself from experiencing. Instead, be thankful that this “shock absorber” is available at a time when you need it most. Be compassionate with yourself. Allow for this instinctive form of self-protection. This dimension of grief provides a much-needed, yet temporary, means of survival.

A primary self-care principle during this time is to reach out for support from caring friends, family and caregivers you trust. When you are in shock, your instinctive response is to have other people care for you. Let them. Let yourself be nurtured.

Accepting support does not mean being totally passive and doing nothing for you, though. Actually, having someone take over completely is usually not helpful. Given appropriate support and understanding, you will find value in doing for yourself. In other words, don't allow anyone to do for you what you want to do for yourself.

A few misguided people may try to “talk you out of” your denial. They will make comments like, “You just have to admit what has happened.” While your ultimate healing does require acknowledging the reality of the death, this period of shock and numbness is probably not the time to embrace the full



## Remember

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2. During your time of shock, you may not remember specific words being spoken to you.

3. Denial is one of the most misunderstood aspects of the grief journey.

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# On Crying- Part 1

by Russell Friedman & John W. James of The Grief Recovery Institute

Almost everyone has some questions and confusion about crying. How much crying is enough? If I start crying, will I be able to stop? Do I have to cry at all? I've cried and cried but I still don't feel better, is there something wrong with me? Are men and women different when it comes to crying? We will address these and other questions in this two part series on crying. We had intended this to be a single article, but as it unfolded we realized that it needed more than a little space to do it justice. Do not be alarmed if you recognize yourself in some of the scenarios highlighted here.

A common call to the Grief Recovery Institute starts like this: "My Mom died several months ago, and I'm very worried about my Dad." This statement is made by a young man or woman who is concerned about the well being of their father. In the ensuing conversation, we determine that although the caller believes that Dad is devastated by the death of his spouse, Dad has not cried "yet." We have put the word yet in quotes to illustrate the son or daughter's obvious belief that in order to grieve you must cry. [The fact is that the son or daughter has not seen him cry. That does not mean that Dad has not cried in private, and has not or will not talk about it]. The well-meaning offspring is concerned, because they believe that there is an absolute and direct correlation between grief and crying. When asked if they think that Dad's heart is broken, they always respond that they are sure that it is. We ask them, "where is it written that you must cry when you are sad?" We do not ask that question to be mean spirited, merely to illustrate that the caller may be laboring under a terrible mis-apprehension that tears must accompany sad feelings.

Let us pose a couple of other questions here, as we do in person or on the telephone. Have you ever known anyone who cries all the time, but never seems to change or grow? Have you ever known anyone who uses crying as a



manipulation to get something? There is a high probability that you will answer yes to both questions. Both of those questions are designed to explain the fact that crying, in and of itself, does not necessarily lead to completion of the pain caused by death, divorce, or any other losses. At best, crying acts as a short term energy relieving action, and relieves, temporarily, some of the emotional energy generated by the loss. We know of people who have been crying over the same loss, daily, for years and years. We know that the crying has not helped them complete what is emotionally incomplete in their relationship with their loved who died, or the person from whom they are divorced.

As our society has evolved, we have seen a quantum shift in the public display of emotion. In today's world, it is not at all unlikely to see a retiring professional athlete, often the paragon of "masculinity," weeping openly in a televised press conference. It is hard to imagine that same scenario occurring thirty or forty years ago. If your male parent is 60 years old or older, he is more likely to be affected by different beliefs about the open display of emotions than you are. Even your female parent is liable to be less willing to communicate sad, painful, or negative emotions than you. You must fight the trap of applying your emotional value system to others. It may seem odd, since your parents taught you, that you have different emotional views than they do.

In part 2, next month, we will address issues of gender and the underlying keys to recovery based on the uniqueness of each individual relationship.

**Question:** If I start crying will I be able to stop?

**Answer:** In our more than twenty years of helping grieving people, we have never seen anyone who has been unable to stop crying. 🧩



## *Grief & Loss Seminar Series*

The next seminar will be held on March 27th from 3pm-4:30pm @ 2895 Temple Ave, Signal Hill. Light refreshments will be served. For more information please contact Tina Stephenitch at 562-426-7500 ext 406.

## *Individual/Group Support*

As many of you may already know, Haven Hospice offers individual support and group support to all people in the community who are going through the difficult journey of bereavement. For more information on our groups or to make an appointment for individual support please contact Tina Stephenitch, Bereavement Coordinator at (562) 426-7500 ext 406

## *Make a Difference in Someone's life*

Do you have a few hours a week to listen, give support, or assist in the office? Haven Hospice is seeking people who would like to give some of their time visiting patients, helping in the office or doing community outreach. If you are interested in this rewarding opportunity, or know anyone who maybe interested in volunteering their time, please contact Tina Stephenitch, Volunteer Coordinator (562) 426-7500 ext 406 for more information.

## *Help us keep our mailing list current!*

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