

# Healing with Haven

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## The Many Faces of Grief

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Grief makes itself known in many aspects or spheres of our lives: through our feelings and thoughts, our physical bodies, our social relationships and our spiritual belief systems.

In our last column we discussed how grief makes itself known emotionally and mentally—our psychological lives. We said that there are normal and expected feelings that emerge sadness, anger, fear, guilt, and shame. Additionally, thinking can be affected by grieving—the inability to concentrate, memory lapses, and identify questions, (“Who am I now?”) are common in my experience as a grief therapist. Three other spheres of life that changes our grief are, our physical bodies, social interactions, and the spiritual component of our lives.

**Physical Bodies** Nerves, muscle, bones, hormones, viscera, senses, the immune system, the heart, and circulation — all of these parts of our physical being are affected by the distress of loss or the threat of loss. The typical physical complaints people who are grieving have are very reminiscent of those of a depressive reaction: aches and pains, nausea, headaches, dizziness, tightness in chest, trembling, gastrointestinal distress, emptiness inside, sleep and eating problems (too much or too little), alcohol and drug abuse, lack of energy, and debilitating fatigue. For many, a feeling of deep physical pain, not in one spot but everywhere at once. Not everyone experiences all of these and some grieving people have few or none of these physical symptoms of grieving. These physical reactions are common.

However, when any physical symptoms persist, a physician should be consulted.

**Social Interactions** Grief changes the individual’s face to the world. Social roles, family relationships, and self-picture are all modified by significant loss. Some individuals shrink from social contact while others overextend themselves socially. The death of a parent, a child, or a spouse may severely shift the course of life, and this is true to some extent of all loss in life. We are pushed, pulled, and buffeted. We seek and find places of satisfaction and even joy in the

post-loss world without the person who has been lost. We lose so much more than the body and being of the loved one. Children lose the sense of protection and security. Parents lose a part of themselves and all the future dreams they have had regarding their child. A spouse or a life partner will talk about all the things they used to do together and how difficult it is now to be alone, to be a single parent, or the sole breadwinner. Children will find that the death of a parent has altered their living circumstances with new locations, new people, and new life styles. Losing a close loved one can make you feel different from others in your social groups. Grieving people need contact with others, inclusion (if they choose it), someone to listen to their story of loss in the comfort of bereavement support groups where they do not feel so different from others.

The reactions of others: family, friends, neighbors, classmates, colleagues, or community acquaintances may be positive or may be negative. Many of my clients express great hurt at what others say or do (or fail to do) regarding their bereaved status. This can vary from sheer avoidance to overly intrusive comments and questions such as, “You know you have to move on!” “I know how you feel.” “You are so strong, such a survivor.” Grieving people must give themselves permission to avoid such persons or to tell them specifically how they can be helpful or at least what is not helpful.

**Spiritual Aspects of Grief** The human grief response is typically bound up with spiritual considerations. Many people suffering loss will turn to their belief system for help with death-related rituals, prayer support, comfort, and for advice on placing the loss within a greater spiritual context. Families and friends are usually drawn together to participate in funerals, burials, and memorials. Some of the research on the role of spiritual faith and reported healing shows that one’s faith can play an important role in making meaning out of a tragic loss.

The experience of loss is a time when many reach back to their faith traditions for connection with some sense of

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comfort and understanding. However, others may reject any notion of God or a Higher Power because they see their tragedy as incompatible with such a concept. Some of them will ultimately reconnect with their faith systems but some never do. There are also people who may have no particular faith system and seek comfort and answers in a non-theological or secular philosophy of life. Funeral directors can be of help with families who have no faith connection and desire some meaningful death associated rituals.

### **Why Some Bereaved Do Not Grieve**

We can predict that a large percentage of people who experience loss or the threat of loss will have many of the feelings and thoughts mentioned here, there is an important minority of persons who show little of the usual and expected behaviors and feelings of grief. Psychologists call them the resilient bereaved. Studies show that after a death, they do not appear very distressed and even over a year or more they still appear to be minimally upset and typically have been

able to continue life with little signs of distress. It was once generally thought that to show no signs of grief indicated a pathological condition but this is no longer an automatic diagnosis. Such people have the ability to reorganize and reclaim life with little or no significant distress. Researchers continue to seek an understanding of such resilience. There are, however other bereaved people with whom I have worked who also do not show the typical signs of grieving and whose absence of or delay in grief reactions can be explained.



These include but are not limited to: strong restrictions on expression of feelings learned in childhood, fear of loss of control, resistance to acknowledging the painful reality of loss, cultural influences on expression of feelings, and practical responsibilities to others, which place the person's grieving on "hold". For example, a man whose child was severely injured in a vehicle crash and whose wife was killed as well showed little of the emotional or mental disturbances that one would expect to see after such a tragedy. He literally put aside his child grieving until he could be sure his child was well

cared for and placed in the best school environment possible. It was many months before he could take that time to grieve.

### **Respecting the Grief of Others**

This points up again for us the caution to not lay an expectation on grieving people as to how they should grieve — cry more, cry less, stop talking about the deceased, talk more about the deceased, visit the grave more, stop going to the grave so much... Some tears are on the outside

and some tears are on the inside. Who can really be the judge of whether another's grieving is "good enough?" There is no one right way to grieve and we have the right not to grieve too.

Our next article will be devoted to how we can help the grieving people who are our family, neighbors, colleagues, and friends. The goal is to learn how to move towards the suffering when normal instincts are telling us to run the other way. 🏠

## *It's Also Okay Not to Grieve*

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*By Rob Anderson, Sugar Grove, Illinois.*

"Wow," you say, "I've never heard someone say that." All you've heard are things like, "Get it out," or "You've got to express yourself," or "Don't keep your pain inside." All of those are true, but I don't believe they're true all of the time. Yes, it's critical you share your suffering. Yes, it's critical to bleed out the poison of your loved one's death. Death is an absolute horror that we don't know how to handle, especially if we're newly bereaved. Grieving is hard work. It's exhausting, draining and essential work if you want to ever smile again—but you can't do it all the time.

Have you ever worked seven days a week for a month, or even longer? Not one day off. You get up, go to work, come

home, go to bed; get up, go to work, come home, go to bed....At some point you say, "Enough already, I need a break from my job." You may do that with a reward of a night out, a massage, a vacation or just a quiet evening with a good book. Whatever you do, it's a way to get away from the work of doing your job. You may love what you do, but at times you need some emotional distance from doing it. It's the same way with your job of grieving. Getting it out, letting go, crying, beating up a pillow, talking, and the myriad of ways to express yourself are healthy and constructive, but they can also be exhausting. The grieving/healing soul can only handle so much.

When death happened in your life, you may have felt like you had been tossed into a blender and switched on high.

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Around and around you spun, confusion reigned—and may still. You were doing grief work, but you probably didn't know it. What you knew for sure was that at the end of each day you were exhausted, not knowing if you could go on. When the blender slowed down a bit and you found your pain was still with you and you made the decision to feel better, your work began in earnest.

How you heal is up to you. Healing is a lifelong process, full of bumps in the road, falling down and getting back up. While it's hard work, it's do-able work and it can actually be rewarding when done with enthusiasm and optimism, both of which are in short supply if you're new to your journey. A "can do" attitude can take a while to find, but if you do your work, that attitude can enter your life and you can heal. Time, and what you do with it, and being good to yourself, will help you once again find your smile. This journey is survivable; joy can return, but you will need to invest yourself in the process for that to happen. But it's also important to back off, get some perspective and sometimes take a break from grieving.

The work of grieving and healing is done in many different ways. Sometimes you'll hear, "There are no wrong ways to grieve," and for the most part I believe that's true. But if you're abusing yourself or others, your grief is moving in a dangerous and unhealthy direction. There are no good ways to run from your pain. It can be difficult to express how you feel and you may try to bury your suffering in ways that are destructive and hurtful, but that behavior will not make your pain go away. It will still be there when you return.

If you find yourself walking down that path and feeling helpless and alone, search for help. You are never, ever alone in your journey. There are many ways to help yourself and many understanding and compassionate people to help you. You can get better, you can move in a positive direction, but you might need assistance in finding that path. Seeking help is a sign of your strength and desire to get better. You're saying, "I don't know what to do here, I need help." Reach out for help; it can only do good things for you. The work of grieving in negative ways can be a lot harder than working on your healing in positive ways.

As you do your grieving and healing work you'll find many ways to do that work. Grab as many of those ways as you can, throw them into the mix of your life, take what works and

throw away what doesn't. In other words, do what's best for you, not necessarily what others think you should do. Try not to be a "pleaser-griever." Actively participate in your healing and express it in positive ways.

There are books and magazines to read, people to talk to, conferences to attend and support groups to join. There are many ways to heal. But just as your grief can overwhelm you, so can the process of grieving. At some point you may say, "Enough already, I need a break!" That's fine.

Try not to feel bad about taking a break from your job of grieving. If you leave grieving behind for a while, you're not leaving your loved one behind. Try not to think of taking a break from your pain as the same thing as taking a break from the love you have for the person you miss most. You will always love them and you will never forget them whether you're expressing your pain or getting away from it for a while.

There's healing in routine and normalcy. Before your grief, you probably went to dinner, a show, a sporting event, bowling or dancing. Those activities filled your life with laughter and joy. They won't fill your life like they used to because your life is so different now, but if you let them, those fun activities can take you away from your pain for awhile.

Getting away from grieving can be healing. When you take a break from grieving, don't stay away too long, but stay away long enough to recharge your heart and your enthusiasm for your healing work. Escape to a world where death isn't on your mind all the time. Let yourself feel true and genuine laughter. You're not forgetting your loved one or disrespecting his or her memory. To the contrary, you're embracing your healing and memorializing that life in a positive way.

Life is very difficult after our loved ones die. It will never be the same, but it doesn't mean life has to be painful and filled with suffering. Healing work takes time and at times it can consume us. Smiles and joy are out there to be found. They're found in our healing and in the lives of those we love who are gone. When grieving becomes overwhelming, take a break; it's okay not to grieve. 🏠



## *Grief & Loss Seminar Series*

The next seminar will be held on October 25th 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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