NorthShore University HealthSystem

Home and Hospice Services

Bereavement Services

Transitions

A Newsletter for friends and family who grieve

Living with Loss

By Thom Dennis, D. Min., LCPC, CT
Bereavement Services Coordinator
NorthShore University HealthSystem Hospice Services

Grief in Uncertain Times

These are uncertain times. As I sit down to write, I'm mindful that news of the COVID-19 outbreak is changing daily, and so has the local, national, and global response. Whatever I venture to write today may be seriously outdated by the time this newsletter reaches your home. However, there are a few points about grief in uncertain times that I think remain relevant, especially as the challenge before us unfolds.

Over the years, I've noticed that times of crisis or political change seem to magnify grief. The image I have in my mind is of a Chinese acrobat juggling ceramic plates. When one area of our life begins to spin out of control, it is especially challenging to keep everything balanced. When more than one area of life begins to wobble, it can feel like the whole thing is going to come crashing down. **It may be helpful to stop for a moment, take a deep breath**, and consider what remains. In the midst of shattered lives ask these questions, What are the parts that remain whole? What are the pieces you can hold-on-to? What pieces can be repaired?

Concurrent stressors, your personal list of all the other difficulties you are dealing with simultaneously, (personal health concerns, financial and job insecurity, relational conflicts, environmental concerns, etc.) will add to your grief like compounding interest. Think about things you can do, however small, to reduce some of the other areas of stress in your life. This strategy should help to make life a little bit more manageable.

At challenging times like these, clients often share that they miss and yearn for their departed loved ones all the more. Either because having them physically near offered a sense of security and reassurance or because they often knew just the right words to say that provided hope and encouragement. **It may be helpful to stop for a moment** and consider what they would say about situations like the one in which we find ourselves no . Would they use humor; would they try to cheer you up? Or would you have to be the one to help them put the issue in proper perspective? More than one bereaved family member has commented that their loved one was a "worrier," and they are glad that the person who died does not have to deal with the current global health crisis. Although

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they are no longer physically present, we can still make a reasonable guess at how they would respond to new situations and draw strength from that knowledge.

When meeting a client for the first time, one question I always ask is, "Are you currently retired or not working outside the home?" I ask that question because social isolation is one of the significant challenges for people who grieve. For many of us, our initial tendency is to withdraw from society for a while to tend to our wounds. We don't have the energy to engage with the world, we don't feel motivated to do much of anything, and we certainly don't feel like celebrating. I support this instinct. Historical and cross-cultural mourning customs bear this out. We need time to grieve. We need time to absorb the impact of the loss and to regain the strength required to face the world without that special someone by our side. However, we must also balance this survivor's instinct with the consolation that comes from being with people who love and support us.

Additionally, meaningful work (paid or volunteer) provides us not only with a much-needed distraction from being deluged by grief 24/7, work also gives us a sense of efficac , direction, and purpose. Even taking the dog for a walk provides us with the chance, if only momentarily, to get out of the house and get some fresh air. With restaurants, bars, and other public venues closed, social gatherings to celebrate joyful milestones like birthdays and anniversaries are also limited. Quarantine, self-imposed or ordered by medical or civil decree, adds a whole other layer to the burden of bereavement. **It may be helpful to stop for a moment** and consider ways to connect with others that do not require physical contact. For your mental and emotional wellbeing, you need to make a concerted effort to reach out to others, write long letters, reconnect with old friends you haven't seen in a long time, check-in with sick or elderly relatives and neighbors daily. Surprisingly, even researching your family's genealogy online can also help you feel more connected.

Faith communities around the country and the globe have been canceling all public worship services until further notice. That also includes funerals. If your loved one has died recently (one of the 7,000 Americans who die each day from causes other than the Novel Coronavirus,) you may not have been able to hold a proper funeral, Shiva, Celebration of Life, or other type of public memorial service. I am confident that phone calls, obituaries, old-fashioned written announcements, and other forms of electronic media can help to communicate your sad news, as well as provide connection with the community around you to offer you some form of condolence.

Funeral homes are beginning to offer live-streaming services, and small, private, family gatherings are still able to occur. However, I can only imagine how this adds to your sense of loss. The current situation also calls to my mind something I read a while back in a book by Ronald Grimes, Ph.D. He suggests, *"Our definitions of death rituals must be large enough to include not only ritualized preparations for death and rites performed near the time of death but also ritual activities that follow long after the occasion of a person's death."*[1] His point reminds me how our dominant culture, which emphasizes the need to recover quickly and return to functioning at pre-loss levels, in other words to "let go and move on," has mostly abandoned mourning rituals that extend beyond the first few days or weeks following the death of a loved one. However, it seems essential for me to point out that the restrictions imposed on existing rituals do not prevent us from getting creative and using our imposed isolation time to design personally meaningful rituals of remembrance that can be enacted at some later date. **It may also be helpful to stop for a moment** and consider things you can do right now, at home to 1. honor the memory of the person who died, and 2. provide solace to yourself and others impacted by their life and death. Rituals do not require the use of incense and engaging the services of people wearing robes. They can

be as simple as lighting a candle and as elaborate as writing and staging a memorial opera. Feel free to give me a call, and we can discuss ways to create personal rituals that are meaningful to you and yours.

Sharing in the Suffering of Others

As I suggested earlier, an initial response to loss is often to withdraw. Another seemingly primal reflex is to lash-out like a wounded animal. We are less patient with strangers, more irritable with loved ones, and frustrated at everything. Consequently, we shake our fists at the sky. This may be the reaction that is often referred to as the *anger stage* in Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' 5 staged framework for understanding death and grief. While outdated, her model persists in the minds of many because when death occurs, we feel threatened physically and existentially; robbed of the friendship and affection of someone whom we love, we get *angry*! We demand someone be held accountable and answer for the crime.

While both are legitimate and situationally appropriate reactions, I am also sure that we cannot remain wrapped in these emotions indefinitel . If we stayed in that dark cave of isolation and anger for too long, it would be the death of us. However, if we honor our emotions, that means to give ourselves permission to feel whatever we feel and find healthy ways to exp ess them, then these emotions will naturally mellow in a fermentation process that also involves two other ingredients, thoughtful reflection and time.

Having sat in my office and listened to grief-wounded clients for the past fifteen years, I've slowly come to believe that our individual losses cause lacerations to the heart that will never fully heal. A favorite quote by the poet T. J. Melvin illustrates this point; *"It is a misconception to suggest that time will heal the wounds of grief. I imagine a small cleft in the heart will always remain un-mended so that compassion for others can take wing, and love will return to roost."* That cleft in the heart gives vent to the grief we will inevitably feel periodically for years to come, on holidays and birthdays, at weddings, graduations, and other family celebrations, as well as the challenging times, like this global pandemic in which we currently find ourselves. As Shakespeare suggested in Macbeth, we must *"Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak knits up the o-er wrought heart and bids it break."*

That cleft, our personal pain made visible to others, can also suddenly lead to an epiphany; "Oh, I see you more clearly now. You, too, have been wounded by loss. You, too, have felt the pain of separation."

And instantaneously, a connection is made, a bond forged in empathy by shared suffering becomes a bridge capable of spanning the fog-fille gorge left by loss. If grief teaches us anything, and I'm certain grief teaches us many things, but if grief teaches us anything it is that the only balm for our wounded hearts is compassion; compassion for ourselves and others. Compassion compels us to rise from the ash heap of our own devastation, to do the simple and the extraordinary. It will be made manifest in the notes of encouragement you email to a lonely frightened neighbor, in the rolls of hoarded toilet paper you leave at the homeless shelter, in the positive thoughts, good intentions, and prayers you send out into the universe. It is made visible in only taking what you need from the store, turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, and reminding yourself to be kind – you just don't know what burdens that other person is shouldering. The sheltering in place that JB Pritzker and other governors have called for will flatten th epidemic curve, but it is compassion that will keep our humanity and our sanity intact. And the most amazing and miraculous things about this experience is that when we extend compassion to others, our hearts are also soothed. It seems ironic, but this virus that requires social isolation is also capable of showing us our shared humanity.

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University HealthSystem

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4901 Searle Parkway, Suite 160
Skokie, Illinois 60076-8006

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In uncertain times, **it seems essential to stop for a moment** and consider those things that remain of which we ***are*** certain. Like, we will find a way to get th ough this. As a species, as a nation, as families, as individuals, we have dealt with difficult times in the past. In life we have very little power over what happens to us, but how we respond to what happens remains squarely within our control. The following are a few general suggestions that are within your control, and I believe will help manage the stress of grief in uncertain times.

- **Establish a routine and stick to it.** Dedicate blocks of time to specific activities each da . Include a variety of kinds of activities to keep life interesting.
- **Limit your exposure to traumatic news.** I recommend switching to animal videos and visiting ***www.sunnyskyz.com*** to read positive and inspirational news.
- **Eat better, sleep more.** We all know what we should do; the challenge is doing it. Eat something green every day (No, mint chocolate chip ice cream doesn't count.)
- **Connect with nature.** Research verifies the healin power of nature to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression. Go outside for at least 15 minutes every day, or minimally, sit by an open window, listen for sounds of Spring, and breathe.
- **Access philosophy, spirituality, and religion.** Be intentional and explore how different traditions respond to the big questions stirred up by grief, loss, and pandemic; find consolation i connecting (if only virtually) with like-minded people. Read a good book.
- **Make plans for the future.** Plan a trip, research where you can (eventually) take a class that interests you, or tackle a household project; demonstrate your commitment to carry-on.
- **Work on memory projects.** Create a scrapbook, sew old t-shirts into a quilt, or record relatives sharing family stories.
- **Take it one day at a time.**

[1] *Deeply into the Bone: Re-Inventing the Rites of Passages* Grimes, R, (2000) University of California Press, Berkeley, California, p. 254.