

# Living with Loss

## HARD TIMES

Thom Dennis, D. Min., LCPC, CT

At a party, my friend John pulled me aside to ask a question; "Why do some people seem to have a harder time than others with grief?" I asked him to tell me a little bit more about what was prompting the question. He told me a mutual friend of ours, Sally, whose father recently died, seems to be coping quite well with the death of her father. In comparison, when his own father died three years earlier he felt as if his world had been turned upside down. From his perspective, she's coping much better than he did, and he wonders why. I got the sense that John was thinking less of himself because Sally appears to be handling her grief so well.

I paused for a moment to consider his question and the personality of both of my friends. Then I said, "Well you know, while you both experienced the death of your fathers, the two of you have very different personalities so, naturally, you're going to handle things in very different ways." He saw my point. Sally is an accountant and she thinks like one. More importantly, she's very outgoing, constantly networking, and always concerned about her personal appearance. If Sally were upset about something she probably wouldn't show it. On the other hand, John is much more of an open book. He's a teddy bear, demonstrative, caring, and always promoting some social cause. Sally teases him about one day having a heart tattooed on his sleeve.

Our personal style, the way we solve problems and the way we choose to appear to others, is going to have a lot to do with how we cope with any significant life stressor. Just imagine if either of them was a "worrier," anxious about everything and generally pessimistic about future outcomes. A worrier might experience the death of a person they depend upon as a threat to their safety and survival. In this case,

he or she is going to need extra support as they struggle to adjust to a world without their loved one.



There are many other reasons why some people will (seemingly) have a harder time than others with loss; the first of which is the nature of the relationship. As you might imagine, close relationships will be mourned with equal intensity to the love that bound them together in the first place. Conflicted and broken relationships are often equally distressing because when that person dies, there seems to be nowhere to go with all of the unresolved relational issues.

I cannot tell you how many times I have heard someone say about a sibling, "I don't get why he/she is having such a hard time with this. After all, he was my dad too!" It is true that in many families one sibling might feel closer to mom and another to dad. While the stress of being a caregiver, the dying process, funeral planning and the settling of the estate will often stir up old childhood rivalries, there is another reason why conflict can erupt between family members. People have to understand that death happens in the midst of life. If someone's life is already stressful, they are going to have less emotional

resources to deal with the current crisis.

*Concurrent stressors* is the term we use to describe all the other concerns you have to deal with at the same time you are trying to manage your grief. Imagine that your daughter is going through a divorce or your grandson is addicted to drugs. Imagine that when your loved one died you also lost your only source of income. Imagine you are worried about someone else who was recently diagnosed with cancer or that you are struggling with your own personal health concerns. Real or imagined, big or small, any one of these other life stressors just might be the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back.

Some people will struggle more because of a lack of social or emotional support. Strangers are seldom interested in your problems, co-workers are impatient, bosses lack empathy, and neighbors forget that even though they have gone back to their regular routine, your grief will continue to confound you for an unspecified length of time. Spouses and children don't "get it" and will often want life to return to "normal" as quickly as possible. For those who have few family members or have outlived most of their friends, the challenge of finding someone to talk or cry with, or simply someone who is willing to fill a passing hour can be monumental. However, some people linger longer than they have to in a sort of self-imposed isolation because they do not reach out for help. Statements like, "Everybody has their own problems, I don't want to bother them with mine," will not serve you very well. You need to make your needs known. Think of it this way: if you are the type of person who doesn't ask for help, you can give your family and friends the opportunity to feel good about themselves by allowing them to do something kind for you once in a while.

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By Thom Dennis, LCPC, CT

When death comes suddenly or with little warning, it can be hard to accept the reality of the loss. On the other hand, the long-term stress of watching a loved one suffer can also take its toll on a grieving heart. People who have experienced multiple losses say it feels like being kicked when you are already down. Deaths by violence or trauma have their own challenges too. While people in our culture tend to avoid the whole topic of death, dying, and bereavement, the family and friends of those who die in tragic circumstances can feel particularly disenfranchised, isolated and alone.



I have been a grief counselor now for almost a decade, and as I reflect on John's question, another reason why grief is harder for some people than others comes to mind. First we have to deal with the overwhelming feelings and thoughts associated with the loss, and then learn to adjust to a life without the deceased. Depending on how well a person negotiates their way through the issues I have just mentioned, they will eventually adjust. But there is a second level to grief that often presents a greater challenge: The experience of loss confounds us with some of life's biggest questions. Those who have not really had the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of life and death often find themselves struggling to make sense of it all. The death of a child, or perceived preventable deaths, will challenge fundamental assumptions we have about the world, our sense of justice, or the concepts of fairness and safety. "How can a merciful God allow children to suffer?" "It makes me so angry when I see older couples together and

we only had each other for a few years!" "They told us it was a routine procedure and everything was going to be fine." For some, the reason why the death of a loved one is so destabilizing is because it calls into question our foundational beliefs. Again, it is possible to find the answers we are looking for, it's just that it requires a lot of soul searching. Some are able to live with the ambiguity better than others while they search for new answers.

**While not an exhaustive list, these are many of the reasons why some people have a harder time with grief than others.**

If John and I ever have the chance to follow up on his thought-provoking question, I would want to propose one of my own: "So what can we do about it?" As helpful as it is to understand some of the factors that will complicate our grief, it still doesn't really give us any concrete sense of what is going to help.



First, it is important to remember that every person's grief is unique. Remember, what worked for John probably isn't going to work for Sally. My suggestion is to survey as many people as you can for ideas and direction, but then determine what works best for you.

Second, recognize that we are all doing the best we can to manage what the hand of fate has dealt us. The best place to begin is by considering what has helped you cope with difficult situations in the past. It is probably true that these existing coping skills may not be enough to manage the current life crisis, but they can help as you struggle to acquire new coping tools. Contrary to popular belief, time alone does not heal. You have to take an active role in finding ways to deal with the loss.

Third, have some compassion for yourself and others. Grief is hard work. Nobody benefits from that critical inner voice that expects you to function at pre-loss levels. Nobody will resolve their grief any faster at the crack of a whip. And none of us can do this all on our own.

Finally, trust in your higher power, trust that there are other people and resources that can help, and trust in yourself. In the end, it doesn't really matter who is having a harder time than whom. What matters is that each of us finds what we need to cope with the loss and to know that no matter how overwhelming it may seem, we are never powerless in the face of loss.

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