

Living with Loss

"Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak knits up the o'er wrought heart and bids it break."

William Shakespeare

Sometimes You Have To Be Strong

Thom Dennis, D. Min, LCPC, CT

Breakdown

Think about the last time you felt overwhelmed by one of those waves of grief. How would you describe the experience? I'm no mind reader, but I'd venture to guess you'd probably say something like, "I broke down." At least that's what people tell me when they come for grief counseling.

While breakdown, might be the most commonly used term, I'd like to suggest that word really isn't my favorite way of describing what's going on because it suggests there has to be some previously undetected character flaw or internal weakness that resulted in a total system failure.

From my point of view, what you experienced wasn't a breakdown; rather, given the significance of the loss, those tears seem like a perfectly reasonable and appropriate reaction to me.

The words we choose are important because they are a window into our internal assumptions, the unconscious ways we understand and evaluate ourselves and our world. In this case, I think that phrase points toward an underlying cultural attitude that we must be strong. Americans value independence, self-reliance; a Teddy Roosevelt kind of rugged individualism that requires a person to pick yourself up from your bootstraps and keep going.

In this culture to be strong is often equated with a silent indifference to pain. However, please don't

mistake stoicism with strength. Maintaining a stiff upper lip, refusing to show one's emotions, or pushing through the pain of separation is not a sign of strength; it's merely a demonstration of a person's acting abilities.

Hopefully, nobody in your life is judging you so harshly as to accuse you of "wallowing in self-pity" because your spouse died a short time ago, or said to a six or sixty-year-old, "Oh, quit your whining you little crybaby! Grow up and stop feeling sorry for yourself.", because your parent just died. And yet, that is exactly the type of internal dialogue that goes on in the minds of many people who grieve.

Different types of courage

Last summer, I had a brief encounter with a border patrol officer. During the interview, he asked me what I do for a living. When I told him that I'm a hospice grief counselor, he said, "Man, I'd hate to have your job!" To which I replied, "It's a good thing that there are so many different types of people in the world because I can honestly say I wouldn't want your job either."

While I admire his courage, (and the courage of all first responders) I think his response suggested, like most Americans, he'd prefer to avoid dealing with the intense emotions and thoughts related to

death and bereavement. I've heard it said that there are three types of courage. It takes **physical** courage to run toward danger, it takes **moral** courage to speak out against injustice, and it takes **emotional** courage to stay with difficult emotions.

Grief requires emotional courage. It is an inner strength that is not dependent on your size, age, gender, income, organizational affiliation, or previous life experience.

Over the years, I have seen brokenness and despair, I have witnessed family conflicts and personal limitations, and I have observed people struggle with fear, uncertainty, and self-doubt. I know we all have our struggles, and yet I stand in amazement every time I see someone rise to the challenges of navigating the world without that special loved one by their side.

The gravity of grief

The word, grief, comes from the Latin word, *gravis*, meaning heavy, weighty, or burdensome.

Bereavement comes from the Old English word, *berēafian*, (bereft) meaning to rob, to deprive, or to take away. To have "lost" a loved one does not mean they were carelessly or absent-mindedly misplaced; these words combined suggest the oxygen depleting awareness that a beloved companion has been stolen from us, and the hope-crushing knowledge that there isn't enough ransom money in the entire world that can bring them back.

As William Shakespeare expressed so well, grief, like gravity, weighs heavily on us all. For some, it is a burden too heavy to bear by themselves, not because of some internal weakness, but because of a combination of things going on simultaneously, (personal health concerns, family dynamics, and other life stressors, to name a few). Grief on top of everything else becomes the proverbial "straw that breaks the camel's back." From where I sit, strong doesn't mean, unmovable, rigid, impenetrable, or can't be broken; the damage has already been done. Grief is nature's way of providing the broken hearted with emotional convalescence. You will rise

again, but first, your rended heart will need some time to mend.

A personal trainer

Think of a grief counselor as a sort of personal trainer. As your trainer, it is my job to help you regain your strength. Understand that grief impacts the whole person, body, mind, and spirit. That means for a while; you will have less emotional energy, less mental acuity, less tolerance with annoying people, more questions and doubts, more anxiety, and much, much more physical fatigue. What this all leads to is the awareness that in order to get stronger, you need to stop on occasion to recharge your batteries. You can recharge your physical batteries by getting lots of rest. Recharge by eating natural, healthy foods. I know it's comforting to go for the sugar and carbs, but you will feel better physically if you think of food as fuel for the grief journey.

Heavy Topics

A question you might want to consider is, "How can I recharge spiritually and emotionally?" Your personal trainer would caution against trying to lift too much, too soon. After all, building strength requires repetition, persistence, and patience. As a grief counselor, and on occasion spiritual advisor, I need to tell you that answers to those big questions about meaning, identity, and existence stirred up by loss, don't magically appear overnight. After the "brain fog" begins to lift and you have regained some physical strength, you will want to seek out wise counsel.

When you are ready, be intentional about searching for satisfying answers to the questions that trouble you. Admittedly, these are heavy topics that will require you to do some research. Read a book, consult with a priest, rabbi, or guru. You are not the first person to ask those questions; somebody somewhere must have a plausible response that will enlighten you. This kind of search requires perseverance, an internal strength that means doggedly pursuing meaningful answers to all those

big questions stirred up by loss. Unfortunately, I'm inclined to believe that most people either just keep busy or simply give up. Don't be like most people.

Work smarter, not harder

Nobody said you have to carry the heavy burden of grief all alone. A single twig is easily broken, while a handful of twigs, bound together, can bear a great weight. Remember that there is strength in numbers. In the absence of family, friends, or a community of like-minded people who understand, you can always join a grief support group. It will take time and no small degree of effort to build or rebuild your social support network.

Sometimes, you have to be strong

A while back a widow attending a support group shared that after her husband's long and costly illness, she was confronted with the reality that there wasn't enough money left for her to live on. At a time when most people are thinking about relaxing into retirement, she was going to have to start looking for a job. Resigned to her fate, she concluded, "Sometimes you have to be strong."

I cannot imagine how overwhelming facing that new reality must have been for her, but I also happen to know the rest of the story. Eventually, she managed to draw from some deep internal reserve (she didn't know she had) and rose to the challenge. She got a job, moved to more affordable housing, and accessed government assistance programs.

"Financially," she says, "I'm getting by." But more importantly, through it all, she discovered that she is stronger than she initially thought. Moving forward, she knows that no matter what happens, she'll be okay because she has gained confidence in herself and in her ability to cope with the uncertainties that lay ahead.

Resilience

These days, there is a word that is thrown around a lot. The word is, *resilience*. It suggests the ability to resist being broken by challenging environments and difficult situations. It also indicates the capacity to bounce back, to recover, get up after a traumatic experience. Understand that resilience is learned

not inherited. It points to the idea that it is possible to grow stronger through facing adversity. Admittedly, we will all make some mistakes. We might even "breakdown" on occasion; but, just because you have been knocked off your feet, doesn't mean you are destined to stay there.

What does it mean to be strong?

I believe we need to re-examine how we define the word strong, especially within the context of grief and loss.

To be strong means to never feel restrained or shamed by other people's expectation that "you should be over it by now." Give yourself permission to express your emotions no matter what other people think, do, or say.

To be strong means to advocate for yourself when you don't understand or need something, instead of suffering silently or give up.

Let's face it; sometimes people say stupid things. On occasions to be strong will mean biting your tongue, being the better person, or offering correction without losing your cool.

To be strong means having courage; maybe not the kind of courage it takes to run into a burning building, but the kind of courage it takes to get out of bed tomorrow morning, and the next day, and the next.

When you don't feel so strong

I began this article with a quote from Shakespeare that speaks to the heaviness of grief. I'd like to end with a quote that may help to lighten your load just a bit. It comes from a conversation between the Disney version of A. A. Milne's beloved characters, Christopher Robin and Winnie the Pooh. On those occasions when you are not feeling so strong, imagine your loved one offering these encouraging words:

"If ever there is a tomorrow when we're not together, there is something you must always remember. You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think. But the most important thing is, even if we're apart, I'll always be with you."