

Dispel the Misconceptions about Grief

As you journey through the wilderness of your grief, if you mourn openly and authentically, you will come to find a path that feels right for you. That is your path to healing. But beware—others may try to pull you off this path. They may try to make you believe that the path you have chosen is wrong. The reason that people try to pull you from the path of healing is that they have internalized some common misconceptions about grief and mourning.

As you read, you may discover that you yourself have believed in some of the misconceptions and that some may be embraced by people around you. Don't condemn yourself or others for believing in them. Simply make use of any new insights you might gain to help you open your heart to your work of mourning in ways that restore your soul.

Misconception 1: Grief and mourning are the same thing.

Perhaps you have noticed that people tend to use the words "grieving" and "mourning" interchangeably. There is an important distinction, however. We as humans move toward integrating loss into our lives not just by grieving, but by mourning.

Grief is the constellation of internal thoughts and feelings we have when someone we love dies. Think of grief as the container. It holds all your thoughts, feelings, and images of your experience when you are bereaved.

Mourning is when you take the grief you have on the inside and express it outside of yourself. Another way of defining mourning is "grief gone public" or "the outward expression of grief." Talking about the person who died, crying, expressing your thoughts and feelings through art or music, and celebrating special anniversary dates that held meaning for the person who died are just a few examples of mourning.

When you don't honor a death loss by acknowledging it, first to yourself and then to those around you, the grief will accumulate. Then the denied losses come flowing out in all sorts of potential ways (e.g., deep depression, physical complaints, difficulty in relationships, addictive behaviors), compounding the pain of your loss.

Misconception 2: Grief and mourning progress in predictable, orderly stages.

Probably you have already heard about the stages of grief. This type of thinking about dying, grief, and mourning is appealing but inaccurate. The notion of stages helps people make sense of death, an experience that is usually not orderly or predictable. If we believe that everyone grieves by going through the same stages, then death and grief become much less mysterious and fearsome. If only it were so simple!



The concept of "stage" was popularized in 1969 with the publication of Elisabeth Kübler - Ross's landmark text *On Death and Dying*. In this important book, Dr. Kübler-Ross lists the five stages of grief that she saw terminally ill patients experience in the face of their own impending deaths: denial; anger; bargaining; depression; and acceptance. However, Dr. Kübler-Ross never intended for her stages to be interpreted as a rigid, linear sequence to be followed by all mourners. Readers, however, have done just that, and the consequences have often been disastrous.

As a grieving person, you will probably encounter others who have adopted a rigid system of beliefs about what you should experience in your grief journey. And if you have internalized this misconception, you may also find yourself trying to prescribe your grief experience as well. Instead of allowing yourself to be where you are, you may try to force yourself to be in another "stage."

Everyone mourns in different ways. Personal experience is your best teacher about where you are in your grief journey. Don't think your goal is to move through prescribed stages of grief.

Misconception 3: You should move away from grief, not toward it.

Our society often encourages prematurely moving away from grief instead of toward it. The result is that too many mourners either grieve in isolation or attempt to run away from their grief through various means.

During ancient times, stoic philosophers encouraged their followers not to mourn, believing that self-control was the appropriate response to sorrow. Today, well-intentioned but uninformed relatives and friends still carry this long-held tradition. While the outward expression of grief is a requirement for healing, overcoming society's powerful message to repress can be difficult.

As a counselor, I am often asked, "How long should grief last?" This question directly relates to our culture's impatience with grief and the desire to move people away from the experience of mourning. Shortly after the death, for example, mourners are expected to be "back to normal."

Mourners who continue to express grief outwardly are often viewed as "weak," "crazy," or "self-pitying." The subtle message is, "Shape up and get on with your life." The reality is disturbing: Far too many people view grief as something to be overcome rather than experienced.

After the death of someone loved, you also may respond to the question, "How are you?" with the benign response, "I'm fine." When you respond in this way, in essence you are saying to the world, "I'm not mourning." Friends, family, and coworkers may encourage



this stance. Why? Because they don't want to talk about death. So if you demonstrate an absence of mourning behavior, it tends to be more socially acceptable.

This collaborative pretense about mourning, however, does not meet your needs in grief. When your grief is ignored or minimized, you will feel further isolated in your journey. Ultimately, you will experience the onset of the "going crazy" syndrome. Masking or moving away from your grief creates anxiety, confusion, and depression.

Misconception 4: Tears of grief are only a sign of weakness.

Just yesterday morning I read a lovely, personalized obituary in my local newspaper. The obituary described a man who had done many things in his life, had made many friends, and had touched the lives of countless people. He died in his 60s of cancer. At the end of the obituary, readers were invited to attend his funeral service and were instructed to bring memories and stories but NO TEARS. I nearly choked on my Cheerios.

Tears of grief are often associated with personal inadequacy and weakness. The worst thing you can do, however, is to allow this judgment to prevent you from crying. While your tears may result in feelings of helplessness for your friends, family, and caregivers, you must not let others stifle your need to mourn openly.

Sometimes, the people who care about you may, directly or indirectly, try to prevent your tears out of a desire to protect you (and them) from pain. You may hear comments like, "Tears won't bring him back" or "He wouldn't want you to cry." Yet crying is nature's way of releasing internal tension in your body, and it allows you to communicate a need to be comforted.

While data is still limited, research suggests that suppressing tears may actually increase your susceptibility to stress-related disorders. It makes sense. Crying is one of the excretory processes. Perhaps like sweating and exhaling, crying helps remove waste products from the body.

You must be vigilant about guarding yourself against this misconception. Tears are not a sign of weakness.

Misconception 5: Being upset and openly mourning means you are being weak in your faith.

Watch out for those who think that having faith and openly mourning are mutually exclusive. Sometimes people fail to remember those important words of wisdom: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

Above all, mourning is a spiritual journey of the heart and soul. If faith or spirituality is a part of your life, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you. If you are mad at God, be mad at God. Actually, being angry at God speaks of having a relationship with God in the first



place. I've always said to myself and others, "God has been doing very well for some time now, so I think God can handle my anger." Grief expressed is often grief diminished.

Similarly, if you need a time-out from regular worship, don't shame yourself. Going into exile for a period of time often assists in your healing. If people try to drag you to a place of worship, dig your heels in and tell them you may go, but only when and if you are ready.

When and if you are ready, attending a church, synagogue, or other place of worship, reading scripture, and praying are only a few ways you might want to express your faith. Or, you may be open to less conventional ways, such as meditating or spending time alone in nature.

Don't let people take our grief away from you in the name of faith.

Misconception 6: When someone you love dies, you only grieve and mourn for the physical loss of the person.

When someone you love dies, you don't just lose the presence of that person.; as a result, you may lose many other connections to yourself and the world around you. Sometimes I outline these potential losses, or what we call "secondary losses," as follows:

Loss of self

- self ("I feel like part of me died when he died.")
- identity (You may have to rethink your role as husband or wife, mother or father, son or daughter, best friend, etc.)
- self-confidence (Some grievors experience lowered self-esteem. Naturally, you may have lost one of the people in your life who gave you confidence.)
- health (Physical symptoms of mourning)
- personality ("I just don't feel like myself...")

Loss of security

- emotional security (Emotional source of support is now gone, causing emotional upheaval.)
- physical security (You may not feel as safe living in your home as you did before.)
- fiscal security (You may have financial concerns or have to learn to manage finances in ways you didn't before.)
- lifestyle (Your lifestyle doesn't feel the same as it did before.)

Loss of meaning

- goals and dreams (Hopes and dreams for the future can be shattered.)



- faith (You may question your faith.)
- will/desire to live (You may have questions related to future meaning in your life. You may ask, “Why go on...?”)
- joy (Life’s most precious emotion, happiness, is naturally compromised by the death of someone we love.)

Allowing yourself to acknowledge the many levels of loss the death has brought to your life will help you continue to “stay open” to your unique grief journey.

Misconception 7: You should try not to think about the person who died on holidays, anniversaries and birthdays.

As with all things in grief, trying not to think about something that your heart and soul are nudging you to think about is a bad idea. On special occasions such as holidays, anniversaries such as wedding dates and the day the person died, and your birthday or the birthday of the person who died, it’s natural for your grief to well up inside you and spill over—even long after the death itself.

It may seem logical that if you can only avoid thinking about the person who died on these special days—maybe you can cram your day so tight that you don’t have a second to spare, then you can avoid some heartache. What I would ask you is this: Where does that heartache go if you don’t let it out when it naturally arises? It doesn’t disappear. It simply bides its time, patiently at first then urgently, like a caged animal pacing behind the bars. Do not doubt you have some family and friends who may attempt to perpetuate this misconception; they are really trying to protect themselves in the name of protecting you.

While you may feel particularly sad and vulnerable during these times, remember—these feelings are honest expressions of the real you. Whatever you do, don’t overextend yourself during these times. Don’t feel you have to shop, bake, entertain, send cards, etc. if you’re not feeling up to it.

Instead of avoiding these days, you may want to commemorate the life of the person who died by doing something he or she would have appreciated. On his birthday, what could you do to honor his special passions? On the anniversary of her death, what could you do to remember her life? You might want to spend these times in the company of people who help you feel safe and cared for.

Misconception 8: After someone you love dies, the goal should be to “get over” your grief as soon as possible.

You may already have heard the question, “Are you over it yet?” Or, even worse, “Well, you should be over it by now!” To think that as a human being you “get over” your grief is



ludicrous! You don't get over it, you learn to live with it. You learn to integrate into your life and into the fabric of your being.

We will talk more about this important distinction in Touchstone Nine. For now, suffice it to say that you never “get over” your grief. As you become willing to do the work of your mourning, however, you can and will become reconciled to it. Unfortunately, when the people around you think you have to “get over” your grief, they set you up to fail.

Misconception 9: Nobody can help you with your grief.

We have all heard people say, “Nobody can help you but yourself.” Or you may have been told since childhood, “If you want something done right, do it yourself.” Yet, in reality, perhaps the most compassionate thing you can do for yourself at this difficult time is to reach out for help from others.

Think of it this way: Grieving and mourning may be the hardest work you have ever done. And hard work is less burdensome when others lend a hand. Life's greatest challenges—getting through school, raising children, pursuing a career—are in many ways team efforts; so it should be with mourning.

Sharing your pain with others won't make it disappear, but it will, over time, make it more bearable. By definition, mourning (i.e., the outward expression of grief) requires that you get support from sources outside of yourself. Reaching out for help also connects you to other people and strengthens the bonds of love that make life seem worth living again.

Misconception 10: When grief and mourning are finally reconciled, they never come up again.

Oh, if only this were so. As your experience has probably already taught you, grief comes in and out like waves from the ocean. Sometimes when you least expect it, a huge wave comes along and pulls your feet right out from under you.

Sometimes heightened periods of sadness overwhelm us when we're in grief—even years after the death. These times can seem to come out of nowhere and can be frightening and painful. Something as simple as a sound, a smell or phrase can bring on what I call “griefbursts.” My dad loved Frank Sinatra's music. I have griefbursts almost every time I hear Frank's voice.

Allow yourself to experience griefbursts without shame or self-judgment, no matter where or when they occur. Sooner or later, one will probably happen when you're surrounded by other people, maybe even strangers. If you would feel more comfortable, retreat to somewhere more private, or go see someone you know will understand, when these strong feelings surface.



You will always, for the rest of your life, feel some grief over this death. It will no longer dominate your life, but it will always be there, in the background, reminding you of the love you had for the person who died.

If the people who are closest to you are unable to emotionally and spiritually support you without judging you, seek out others who can. Usually, the ability to be supportive without judging is most developed in people who have been on a grief journey themselves and are willing to be with you during this difficult time. When you are surrounded by people who can distinguish the misconceptions of grief from the realities, you can and will experience the healing you deserve.

Sidenote:

Realistic Expectations for Grief and Mourning

- You will naturally grieve, but you will probably have to make a conscious effort to mourn.
- Your grief and mourning will involve a wide variety of different thoughts and feelings.
- Your grief and mourning will impact you in all four realms of experience: physically; emotionally; socially; and spiritually.
- You need to feel it to heal it.
- Your grief will probably hurt more before it hurts less.
- Your grief will be unpredictable and will not likely progress in an orderly fashion.
- You don't "get over" grief; you learn to live with it.
- You need other people to help you through your grief.
- You will not always feel this bad.

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