

# *Grief Recovery*

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## **How to Work With and Heal Grief**

There are times in life when we will all be called upon to experience the profound loss of a loved one. As painful and confusing as this process can be, it can also be a time of positive personal growth and transformation. For the latter to occur, it is important that we understand the fundamentals of the grief process.

Grief dwells in an inner reservoir. When you focus on one particular loss and reconnect with those feelings, you gain a clearer perspective on many other losses. The ones that you choose to reconnect with depend on your current needs and the issues at hand. Once we relax our resistance, there is always a sweetness and comfort in these reconnections and a part of you comes alive once again. It makes sense that grieving enlivens. If there was not significant and meaningful bonding in these relationships to begin with, we would not experience the loss as traumatic.

Furthermore, in the state of openness and vulnerability that is created through grieving, new learning and corrective experience come more easily. These can be times of significant change and transformation. Outer life experiences tend to be put in a perspective that reflects what is truly important in your life, and what is without significant meaning. When you re-enter and process our losses, you simultaneously begin to separate “the wheat from the chaff.” Robert Gass, who conducts workshops on loss and “opening the heart” suggests that: “One may always feel sadness...yet rather than being crippling, this sadness may one day become like a rich color in the palette of the soul.”

There is very good news in this merging with nature’s healing process. Grief is a “healing feeling.” If we allow ourselves, it will come naturally.

Healing grief is a very individual process. Often it really begins to affect us profoundly weeks or months after the loss. When it does, each of us must be reassured that the sun will shine again, for while we are in grief, often only clouds prevail. We must be comforted by an outside source, written or spoken or sung words that healing will organically occur. We need to be with our unpleasant feelings and even allow ourselves to get lost in them as need be. We must also rise above our grief as need be. We must pull ourselves out of it to periodically socialize, even if we don’t feel like it. We must dance with suffering, allowing it to lead sometimes in our private moments and in the nurturing presence of our family or community. However, it is also important to distinguish the grief healing that occurs in grieving unresolved losses from feelings connected with a current, significant loss. Though the healing principles are the same, a present loss, even one that is grieved in a healthy way will take longer to heal than unresolved losses from the past. This is because a current loss is anchored in present reality that must be lived day to day, while unresolved losses from the past are not anchored in a current reality that must be dealt with. You must only “make room” for the feelings to move through you and be respected. The revisited memories are ghosts from the past that bring us profound and important connections with lost parts of our selves. With this reclaiming of our soul, we develop an expanded sense of aliveness. This process continues to quicken as we become more grounded in its necessity and realize it as a pathway to our wholeness.

When we have lost someone very close, it is important that we stop idealizing them as soon as we are ready to do. We want to grieve their beauty as well as their more difficult aspects and their own life challenges. Indeed, if they were a parent or spouse, we may want to bring compassion to our lost ones and ourselves around what could look like shortcomings. None of us is always perfect, and a one dimensional view of grieving will not bring us the holistic relief and regeneration we desire and deserve.

Every one I have come to know also suffers from an unconscious, individualized “laundry list” of unresolved losses and traumas. These repressed hurts are easily explained, since most of us lacked a safe, emotionally articulate and supportive enough environment during childhood in which to express and explore such complex feelings.

Grief has its own unique characteristics and manifestations and is universal to the human experience. Ironically and magically, the healing process involved can be distinctively beneficial to all other healing as well as the grief which precipitated it.

Often, when we appropriately express our grief, our friends and family don’t know what to say to us. They are afraid of our feelings. They will try to change the subject or intellectualize the process. They think that keeping busy helps. Practically no one wants to talk about death or feelings of loss. We are encouraged to pull ourselves together and get on with our lives.

Because we tend to want the approval of others, we rise above our grief, abandoning our aliveness behind in the shadows. We attempt to suppress our feelings only to have them haunt us later. We engage in acting-out behavior to relieve the psychic pain, frustration, and pressure. For many of us who had found at least temporary psychic relief in addictions, we were struggling to find some peace from the constant undercurrent of our unattended losses.

Though most of us are completely unaware of our repressed, unresolved grief, it will resurface if we are willing. We must resolve our grief so that the re-enactments and compulsively driven lifestyles can be transformed. With validation and support, each person needs to experience the feelings that were not originally allowed. Especially if we have experienced a recent significant loss. We need to do this in safe community or family contexts. Often only those who *know* and have experienced grief are safe listeners to bear witness to your process. Some of the complex feelings involved in grief work are sadness, anger, remorse, hurt, depression and loneliness. The duration depends on the severity of the loss, and the degree to which it may trigger other unconscious losses.

In my own grief work, I was amazed at the intensity and depth surrounding these emotionally forgotten patches of my history. The first trauma surfaced when I was 32 years old and newly abstinent from drugs and alcohol. What erupted under me was the complex feelings of loss and grief surrounding the death of my teenage bride eleven years earlier.

We had married young, I was age eighteen. It was one of those wonderful and crazy teenage things, a time of great learning and great confusion. Sheila and I were aware of all of our immature traits, but our love and commitment were unquestionable. In the three years that we had together, Sheila suffered a leg amputation from a rare bone cancer, which later metastasized to her lung. She died after a year of tortuous physical, psychic and emotional pain.

She died without us ever having acknowledged that she had a terminal disease or discussing her impending death. Times were different then: we did not know how to negotiate such complexities. This emotional incompleteness caused me much pain. I had somehow shrouded the entire trauma.

In therapy, eleven years later, the entire experience unraveled. With deep feeling I rediscovered and shared many of the pains and confusions from the compounded traumas, as well as many of the sweet and tender moments that counterbalanced them. I remembered the day at the hospital when the doctor informed me that her leg would have to be amputated. It was the night of the East Coast electrical blackout. It took six hours to drive home with her mother, neither of us saying a word. The setting was strangely appropriate: My whole world was going dark but I didn't know how or where, to express my feelings. As I finally came out of my own "blackout" I recalled the struggles my wife endured when she was fitted for a prosthesis and had to learn to walk again, I remembered the coughing spells that signaled her pneumonia and the cancer in her lungs.

When all of this came back to me, my foremost emotion was shame. I was ashamed of my emotional incompleteness. I felt that I could have comforted us both more if only I had known how to communicate effectively. I felt I failed her. I was ashamed of the helplessness that I felt throughout the entire crisis. My complex thoughts and feelings of relief when she finally died compounded this shame.

In therapy, after experiencing my emotions, I was able to reconnect with the love and tenderness in our union. This came over me like a wave of peace. It felt as though the best and most loving parts of my deceased partner instantly surrounded and engulfed me. In the purity and amplification of these feelings, my soul was restored. I immediately felt more open and more alive. Love lived in my heart again. When I shared all of these feelings, I gained the ability to once again have a significant, loving relationship. I share this story as an example of unresolved grief. It's been a beautiful way to honor Sheila's memory. Because of this uncovering process, she still lives and so do important parts of my emotional self.

I have had many such discoveries in the gradual awakening of my emotionally incomplete losses. It seems that as time progresses, I connect with the oldest and deepest of them. I welcome this depth of character because I have slowly learned, and come to trust, that in these unresolved regions lie my true spirit, beauty, vulnerability and wisdom. I have come to have great reverence for the process of grief and loss.

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