

Bereavement and Grief

Grief is a very personal and complex emotion in response to a loss that is absolute, unalterable, irreversible, and forever. It is not only essential, but also, quite literally, *vital* (“life giving”) to the process of healing that people who have been bereaved are allowed to work through, and to express, their grief.

Unfortunately in our society we are not comfortable with people being “out of control”. In their own homes, or even in ours, they ought to be able to express their feelings to sympathetic friends. We are similarly uncomfortable with people crying in public – especially men. There is a pressure to suppress the emotion of grief, even a reward system for doing so: “Wasn’t it wonderful how strong he/she was?” “You must be strong for the children” - implying that expressing emotion is a sign of weakness, which it isn’t.

Secondly, and this is very important, grief will be worked out somewhere, sometime, somehow, and discouraging or repressing it when it needs to be expressed is like plugging a boiling kettle - when the pressure finally releases itself, as it undoubtedly will, who knows the damage that can result. People need to know that it is OK to cry, they also need to know it’s OK to be angry - even with God (he is big enough to take it and most surely understands). An enlightened hospital will have a room where family members can go to be on their own and where, if necessary, they can express their grief without disturbing other patients.

In her book *The Bereaved Parent*¹, Harriet Sarnoff Schiff says:

Immediately following our son’s death, I recall a strange feeling of acquiescence. If someone told me to sit, I sat. If I was told to eat, I ate. Normally a strong-minded person, my behaviour was certainly not atypical. I appreciated, in fact, being told what to do. It was too much to wish to think for myself. I was afraid the numbness would leave and make way for grieving.

In the days that follow a death, and in the time immediately following the funeral, typically there will be a constant stream of visitors and friends offering help, cooking meals, and so on. But then it’s as if someone dammed the stream and, as everyone gets on with their own lives, from there being almost too many people around, suddenly there may now be almost no one. These can be lonely days when reality finally begins to sink in and it is precisely now that the bereaved needs visitors and support the most – not to shield them from what has happened, but to accompany them as they begin the process of recovery.

¹ This is a wonderful book (first published in 1977 and still in print) but may not be suitable for someone to read until they feel able to deal with the emotional issues it raises.

It can be very difficult for visitors, not knowing what to say, being sensitive to the feelings of the bereaved, trying to avoid any mention of death or of the person who has died. We can't suddenly pretend that the person never existed and, certainly in the emotional sense, to the bereaved they don't cease to exist just because they are no longer physically around. Often they need and want to talk about them, but visitors are carefully trying to avoid doing so because, perhaps, they don't realise and are not picking up on the clues. The best approach in such a situation is to carefully test the waters, to listen for what the person's needs might be, listen to what they are saying, simply listen if they need to do the talking. And if they don't want to talk, then sit quietly with them, simply supporting them by being there.

It's very important for a person who is grieving to be able to talk to a trusted friend as and when they need to, someone who will understand and be sympathetic to what they are going through. They need to know that the extreme emotions they are experiencing, possibly even imagining they sometimes see the person who died, are quite normal - they are not losing their minds.

Sarnoff Schiff again:

Worst of all, far worse than lying awake all night, were the mornings. There seemed to be daily a brief period shortly after I opened my eyes when I had forgotten. But then, like a tidal wave, remembrance would come and engulf me and make me feel as if I were drowning.

How long will the grief last? There's no answer to that. It will come and go – birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas and other holidays, will be particularly difficult times – much will depend on *grief work* (how much and how appropriately someone is dealing with their grief). The bereaved may feel that they will never get over how they feel just at the moment, but they will no matter how badly they feel. It's the old (and not to sound trite) saying that time is a great healer. It will take time, but they will begin to feel better. It's certainly not fair for others to say, "It's been [such-and-such a length of time], you should be getting over it by now." The loss of a spouse, for example, may be an experience from which someone may never fully recover – and understandably so when you are talking about someone's life-partner. The main concern for family and friends should perhaps be whether there is general positive progress in the direction of healing, coping, and normal functioning. And "general positive progress" is a good phrase because the experience of grief will come and go in waves, some days and weeks will be good and then the person may find themselves plunged back into their grief again – a little like the unpredictable ups and downs of snakes & ladders. It should be fairly obvious if grief is becoming pathological and when it might therefore be

necessary to think in terms of the need for professional help. (It's also worth bearing in mind the risk of physical ailments developing as a result of the emotional upset and stress of bereavement.)

The methods people use (Sarnoff Schiff says) in coping with grief are as highly personal as the people themselves. It is important to take some positive steps [but] do it slowly, trying to be gentle with yourself. It is important that no one neglect taking that first small step – and it should be a small one. Begin with essential everyday tasks. Begin to avail yourself of life's small niceties.

Surviving all the grief you felt seemed impossible. Those days and nights of crying, exhaustion, and pain were almost beyond endurance. You were certain, at times, you would never get past that time in your life. But you did.

Depending on the situation, guilt may be another emotion that has to be dealt with. “Could I have done something?” “Could I have done more?” “Why am I alive and they are not?” Suddenly having time to yourself again after caring full-time for the person who has died can also bring on feelings of guilt. Seek the guidance and advice of a trusted friend to help provide a little perspective on things.

There are also the needs of the “forgotten grievers” to consider – those not as immediately involved as, for example, a spouse or a parent, a son or a daughter, might be. This might typically include siblings and grandparents. The focus of everyone's concern and support is understandably on the person closest to the one who has died, and others who may feel the loss almost as acutely can be inadvertently excluded from that effort. As a result they have to handle their grief largely on their own and possibly without others realizing their needs.

In this regard it is perhaps worth mentioning specifically the problems that can arise in family relationships, and especially marriages, when individuals either don't share equally, or as deeply, in a situation of bereavement, or that they work through their resulting grief at a different rate or in a different way. (I know this from my own experience as a Jesuit novice in America working with families from all over the States attending a bone-marrow treatment hospital in Seattle. In many cases mothers would be there with their children all day, every day, for weeks on end, whereas fathers often had to stay at home, hundreds of miles distant, to earn money to pay the family's expenses, and to care for brothers and sisters, and could only afford to travel to Seattle occasionally or at the very end if the treatment didn't work. Sadly many of those marriages later failed as a result not only of the extreme circumstances surrounding the family's

loss, but also the very different experience and degree of involvement of the parents.) This may be another area where close friends can watch and help.

Again from *The Bereaved Parent*:

The atmosphere around us was one of comfort for me and “certain things must be faced” for my husband. Along with all the affairs of dying, he was also required, after a while, to earn a living. Instead of coming out of his state of grief, he sank deeper and deeper into sorrow. He walked around wondering when it would be his turn to grieve. Finally he reached a point where we both knew he needed counselling.

As I hope you would expect me to say as a priest, the role of personal faith cannot be underestimated in the way someone faces and deals with bereavement and the process of grieving and healing. If we look, for example, at St Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians (4 v 13-18), he points to the difference between the situation of the pagans who had no faith and for whom, therefore, death was the end of everything and theirs was a deep and dark grief, and that of the Christians for whom, while they rightly grieved over the loss of loved ones, there was the hope of life after death through the fruits of Our Lord’s death and resurrection – the very basis of our faith.

It is difficult to understand how someone can deal with some of things that life brings our way without the firm foundation of faith and prayer to work from. The experience of death and of being bereaved is never going to be an easy one to deal with. What we have to bear in mind as far as we are able is that suffering and death are not God’s will. As I said earlier, it’s OK to be angry with God – as we may well be until we regain some perspective on what has happened. He understands how we feel and, far from being the cause of our sufferings, he is there to support us and help us survive them – as we surely will. How much worse would our experience be if that were not the case?

Other scripture passages (among many) that might be of help in this particular area are:

Psalm 12(13) (*How long, O Lord, will you forget me...*)

Wisdom 3 v 1-9

Revelation 22 v 4-5

& John 11 v 25-26

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