

SPIRITUALITY & WELLNESS

A Newsletter Exploring Spirituality and Mental Health

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Welcome to
SPIRITUALITY
&
WELLNESS

Each issue integrates themes from psychology and religion. The goal is to explore psychological experience, and to mobilize spirituality as a resource for mental well-being.

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GRIEF: ON THE EDGE OF DESPAIR

By Janet R. Merkel and K. E. Bailey, III

Nobody Likes to Lose

Loss is all around us. The losing starts the moment we're born and doesn't stop until we die. First, we give up the safety and warmth of our mother, then a childhood pet, a job, grandparents, sometimes a spouse, and finally our own health. At every point along the way, letting go is never far from the center of our lives.

Somehow, most of us find a way to get through losses. We grieve them one by one.

Loss hurts. A major loss can leave us teetering on the thin edge of despair and fearing that we will fall in. Struggling for balance, we hold back feelings and think that we should just get over it. But, intuitively we know that the only way out of the pain of loss is by taking hold of our grief.

When nothing gets in our way, we instinctively feel loss. Grief is natural. Even so, many cultures undervalue and even discourage the natural response to loss, by confusing it with depression or self pity, for example. The resulting epidemic of unacknowledged loss causes much destructive behavior. Grief avoided always leaves part of us stuck in past hurts and drags us down.

What is Grief?

Grief feels awful. Some people avoid grief like the plague, like it is a disease and something to get over. But, grief is not a disease to be cured or a disability to be overcome. Neither is it a single or primary emotion, like sadness or anger. Grief is all kinds of feelings at different times, sometimes intense and sometimes

seemingly absent.

Grieving a person lost in death, bereavement, is just one of many kinds of grief.

Grief isn't simple. It is a complicated reaction of the whole person to losing something important.

Grieving persons turn

inward and may pay little attention to the world around them. Vivid memories of what has been lost come again and again. We get too little or too much sleep and have waves of sadness, regret, and weeping. With so much emotion tied up in grieving, there can be little energy left for making new connections.

Grief is completely normal because connection and separation are at the core of our lives. A family heirloom disappears, a good friend moves cross country, children grow up and leave home, a once valued principle loses

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meaning for us, our faith matures and we leave behind some long-held beliefs – the list is endless. Especially when we lose someone we care about, we feel that the sacredness of our lives has been violated. In one way or another, we are constantly grieving the losses that never stop happening to us.

With loss, it is never a question of *if*, only *when*. Some of us more than others are haunted by the awareness that anything we have can be taken away. Especially when losses are too big and come too early, the whole of life takes on the specter of what we have had to give up. For all of us, losses are permanently etched into our hearts.

The Valley of Grief

The process of grief follows a predictable pattern, as illustrated below. Grieving begins with an actual or anticipated loss. It feels like a pit has opened up in front of us filled with things we would rather avoid.

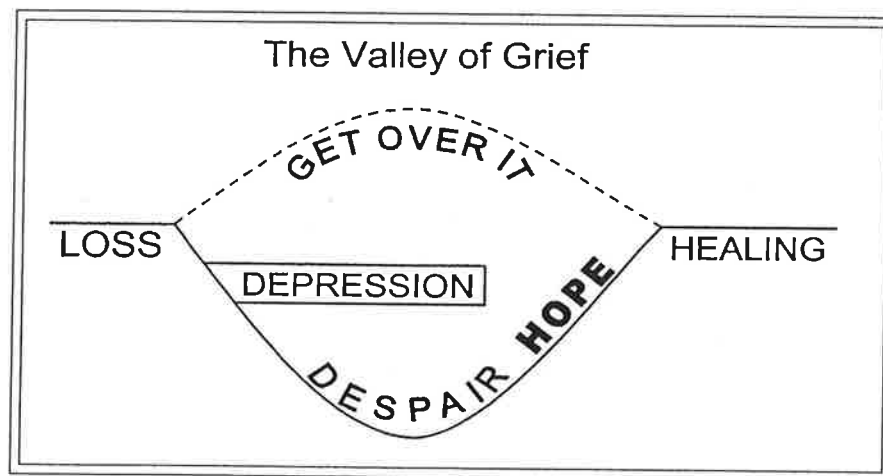
Just Get Over It

Standing on the edge and looking down into grief, we all have the instinct to “just get over it,” and we do – at least temporarily. We do what

we put grief on hold. But, it is a mistake to think that keeping ourselves together in a crisis means that the loss is healed.

After the crisis is over, it can still be tempting to avoid dealing with grief. In the illustration, this is shown by a dotted line. Sometimes people look for signs that they can leap ahead to the rest of life and leave their loss behind. Maybe a doctor prescribes pills and we think that's going to be enough. Or, we think that knowing about a loss is the same as grieving it. Not constantly brooding, no longer crying unpredictably, not staying home from work – all of these can be misinterpreted as signals that we are over it. The logic goes that if we can act okay then we are okay. Therapists call this kind of avoidance “flight into health.”

There are always signs when we are trying to leap over grief. We end up talking to everyone we meet about what has happened. We stay stuck in old habits as a way of hanging on to what we've lost. We jump into a new relationship to fill the emptiness inside. Other people are surprised that we are doing so well so soon. New, even small, losses affect us in an exaggerated way. These are not good signs, and we know it.



it takes to say goodbye to a friend who moves away, to find a place to live after a natural disaster, to get through a funeral. For the moment,

Down into Depression

Depression is an inevitable response to loss; the bigger the loss, the more depressed we may need to be. Depres-

People sometimes fear that they will get trapped in despair. ... What they should really fear is getting stuck in depression.



sion numbs us against feelings that hurt too much to take in all at once. It is a good thing that depression is available to protect us from being overwhelmed when we aren't ready yet to bear the full weight of loss. This kind of healthy depression is normal, indispensable, and eases us down into despair.

The damaging kind of depression blocks us from ever getting to despair. Depression hurts us if we get stuck in the numbness and can't move deeper into grief. People sometimes fear that they will get trapped in despair, but this almost never happens. What they should really fear is getting stuck in depression.

Undealt with losses always hang on and always hold us back from living well. After a child dies, parents keep the child's room exactly as it was. Once jilted, a man becomes anxious and moody when marriage comes up again. Hurt in an important relationship, people decide to keep their distance. Getting stuck like this in depression is a feature of pathological mourning.

Depression prevents us from suddenly plunging into the anger, hurt, regret, sadness, and loneliness at the bottom of grief. It takes courage to push past depression into despair and to let ourselves know how bad we really feel.

Despair: The Bottom of Grief

In despair, we start to recover feelings one by one. Anger is one of the first to return. Anger is the feeling that tells us what has happened isn't fair and we deserve better. While stuck in depression, anger stays bottled up,

turned against us, keeping us helpless and hopeless. Breaking through into despair mobilizes anger and moves us from being a victim to doing something about our loss.

Anger is an action feeling and likes to get things done. Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) is a perfect example. MADD began when a thirteen-year-old girl was killed by a drunk driver. Rather than stay depressed, the girl's mother pushed through depression, found her outrage, and sparked an international movement against drunk driving. When despair stirs up anger, things happen.

Despair stirs up other feelings that can also make us powerful. Ignoring loneliness leads to isolation. But, sitting with loneliness creates a longing for connection. Denying hurt opens us to more injury. But, taking hurt seriously demands that we find ways to protect ourselves.

Avoiding sadness keeps us wearing a mask. But, getting real about sadness makes us honest in relationships.

There are so many feelings that grief can seem like a bottomless pit. So, where is our hope?

Hope: The Fruit of Despair

The search for hope is not for the fainthearted. It takes courage to go down into grief, to push through depression, and to sit with despair. Only from the bottom can we see the way out. Pushing despair aside never works. Experiencing despair is itself the hope-seeking process. Hope is the fruit of despair.

Despair burns away illusions and gets us to be real. We all have the

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☞ to go down into grief

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illusion that we are whole, but we are broken. We want to believe that we are enough unto ourselves, but we need others. Despair loosens our grip on the impossible. Only then can we take hold of what is real. This mindfulness, being fully present in the now, is always the starting point for hope.

Despair opens us up to the hope that saves us. We can see public evidence of this in crusades to stop drunk driving, to recover lost children, and to fight against AIDS. Privately, hope can take the form of getting sober, confronting childhood trauma, ending abusive relationships, or seeking treatment for mental anguish.

Hope saves us by connecting us to others. We reach out to a spouse or partner, parents, other family and friends, our pastor. We get support. Some of us turn to our faith and look to God.

When despair is deep and hope hard to find, people need extra help. Therapists are not afraid to journey through the valley of grief. They can help us tune in to pain, face despair, and find hope. Therapists understand that grief is the best medicine for loss.

Loss takes us all to the edge. We would like to just leap over and move on, but this never works. Fortunately, each of us was born with the ability to heal ourselves by grieving. When faced with loss, it is life-saving that we can hold it together when we have to, push through depression, and sit with our feelings at the bottom of grief. There, on the edge of despair, hope finds us. What a blessing.

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