

Grieving in Your Own Way

By Kass Dotterweich

My father's death in 1995 was my first experience of deep grief. Other relatives and friends had died, of course, and I had experienced various kinds of grief other than death. But Dad's death left a vacuum unlike anything I had known.

As I talked about my sadness and grief with others, I received plenty of warmhearted and well-

CareNotesSM

*Take One—and take heart.
Give One—and give hope.*

intended guidance, often of a contradictory nature. For example, one person said, "Now be sure to get plenty of rest," while another said, "You're going to want to stay busy"; one person said, "Relocate to be closer to your mother," and another said, "Don't make any major decisions right now."

After months of listening to these kind directives, I realized that I was not following any of them; rather, I was grieving in my own way. My quiet, contemplative temperament was drawing me toward nature, to take long walks along wooded pathways; my love of books was drawing me toward reading; my passion for writing was driving me to record family history and personal emotions. In my own way, I was moving toward a peacefulness with regard to the vacuum that my father's death had left. I missed him deeply—I always will—but because I was grieving in my own way, the physical absence of my father was losing its power to make the void a dark, forbidding, and painful place.

Working your way through

To be alive is to experience loss: the death of a loved one, the loss of a valued friendship, deterioration of our bodies, a decline in our sense of financial security, a realization that the God of our prayer is not, in fact, the God of our lived experience.

As a result of these losses, we grieve. Sometimes, our grief is acute; in our waking moments we are distracted with the pain, and in our sleep we are haunted with a sense of darkness. At

other times, our grief is subtle; we're not even aware that we are grieving, and thus go about doing what we need to do to take care of ourselves. "I didn't realize how much my son's starting kindergarten was a time of grieving for me," recalls Elsie. "Then, at Thanksgiving, when I went to get our holiday tablecloth, I noted that I had done some thorough closet-cleaning during the fall—and I realized right then that I had thrown myself into some major housecleaning as a way of working through a sense of loss in Nathan's 'going off to school.'"

The mental wellness field offers an abundance of good advice for those who grieve. This material is especially valuable because it usually gives careful consideration to a person's age and the kind of loss being grieved. Despite its value, however, such advice will prove of little merit if we do not keep in mind that, ultimately, we must grieve in our own way.

■ **Grieve according to your personality.** I tend to be an introvert; you may be more of an extrovert. I tend to enjoy cold, dark, rainy days; you may dread the gloom. I tend to tire quickly when in a crowd; you may draw energy from being around people. These are personality differences. They are the way we are in life, and they bear heavily on the way we grieve. Take a careful inventory of what kind of person you are, and tailor

You know you are grieving in your own way when you:

- Feel a greater measure of peace with each passing day;*
- Find yourself smiling at simple delights;*
- Begin to take a renewed interest in your favorite pastimes;*
- Realize your relationship with God has become more intimate;*
- Cease to ask "Why me?";*
- Want to reach out to others who grieve.*

Your grief accordingly. The advice of family, friends, and experts will be valuable only if you apply it according to your personality. Choose things that fit your nature and that capitalize on your strengths and minimize your weaknesses.

"Grief can't be shared. Everyone carries it alone, his own burden, his own way."

—Anne Morrow Lindbergh

■ **Recall how you've grieved in the past.** Think of a time when you grieved a subtle loss, and let that suggest how you might grieve an acute loss. For example, I always grieve when my children leave after being with me over the holidays. As I hug and kiss the last one goodbye, I close the door, turn to face the empty, quiet house, and say to myself, *Now what?* Invariably, I head for the gifts the children gave me. I finger each one, recall the joy in opening it, and imagine what I will do with it or where I'll put it. *In those subtle moments of loss, I remember the past and look ahead at the same time.*

That very same pattern helped me grieve my father's death. I recorded all I could remember about special moments with him, and I pondered how precious that written memoir would be to my children and grandchildren some day in the future, when I'm no longer around to share my memories and tell my stories.

■ **Ritualize.** Rituals are those symbolic gestures we perform to help us make real that which is too much for us to comprehend. Rituals express life's mystery and meaning, and can take many shapes. They can be extravagant or simple; they can involve others or just ourselves; they can include tangible objects or mere images in our minds. As you grieve, turn to those rituals that have meaning for you.

Rich recalls how lighting a small candle each morning helped him grieve the loss of his job. "I just lit a candle each morning before I opened the Want Ads, and that seemed to help me face the fact that I had lost something important to me—and that there was, for sure, light at the end of the tunnel."

■ **Grieve with an image.** Think about people you admire and who have faced serious grief, and hold their image as you grieve in your own way. "When my son was killed by a drunken driver in an automobile accident," shares Renee, "I thought of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Her son, too, died unjustly. I thought of how she must have sobbed deeply and raged with anger, and although I still hurt

those symbolic gestures

Therapist William Rabor, who has directed grief support groups for over ten years, says, "For many years I have counseled people through various kinds of grief and loss—and invariably I find that people grieve in their own way. I offer directives, support, and guidance, and they use the basics of what I offer in ways that work for them. Often, however, people grieve in ways that are not genuinely healing or healthy.

Because times of loss make us especially vulnerable, we have a tendency to let our weaknesses influence what we do for ourselves. We are at risk of allowing habits that are not good for us under 'normal' circumstances influence what we do for ourselves when we're hurting and grieving. So I always offer this counsel: Do not confuse comfort with escape. We know what we do that isn't healthy. If we are to grieve in healing ways, we will not turn to unhealthy behaviors. What may appear to be comfort is actually escape and will leave us grieving longer, deeper, as we become less and less healthy."

awfully, I felt like I was really with someone who knew what I was going through." The heroic spirit of others—people you may know personally or only know of—can be intimate companions as you grieve your own personal loss in your own way.

A friend recalls how a gentle rain fell during his mother's funeral. A relative turned to him and said, "We Irish believe a little rain at the funeral is a good thing; it's the tears of heaven. And you'll know your mother's at peace when you see your next rainbow." Nine months later, on the morning of Mother's Day, he saw a rainbow. And every rainbow since has brought a smile to his face and comfort to his heart.

Search your own memory for an image or object that was special to your loved one, or that helps you bring your loved one to mind—a favorite flower, a memorable song, an oft-quoted poem, a special recipe. Find a way to hold onto that special "icon," and let it bring you comfort and joy.

■ **Grieve according to your own personal expectations.** Nowhere will you find a universal list of "griefs," for that which saddens one person may be of little consequence to another. When my sister's cat died, for example, her sobbing moved me deeply, but I would not experience the death of one of my cats to that same degree. Yet, when the cat was dying, we both knew what to expect; my

sister knew she would "fall apart," and I knew I would hold her hand while she cried.

What do you expect of yourself? After all, no one knows that better than you. The fact that your employer gives you three "bereavement days" at the death of a close family member, for example, does not mean that you are finished grieving when you return to work. Grieve what you need to grieve, in your own way, in your own time.

Take heart

Grief, like any emotion, is your own—no one else's. No one can determine for you *what* you will grieve or *how* you will grieve. You can turn to others for support and practical advice, of course, and this, in fact, is wise. Family and friends can offer comfort, and experts can guide you with healthy counsel.

No one is an island, as we learned from poet John Donne. But you would do yourself a grave disservice if you were to heed the directives of others without checking in with the foremost expert on your grief—you. ■

Kass Dotterweich is an editor and author living in St. Louis, Missouri. She is a frequent CareNote contributor and the author of Grieving as a Woman: Moving Through Life's Many Losses (Abbey Press, 1998).

Sources of additional help

Books: *The Courage to Grieve: Creative Living, Recovery, & Growth Through Grief* by Judy Tarelbaum, New York, HarperTrade Books, 1984. *How We Grieve: Rethinking the World* by Thomas A. Attig, New York, Oxford University Press, 1996.

Website: www.willowgreen.com



HOW GRIEF AFFECTS YOU – FEAR & ANXIETY

“Realizing you cannot undo what has happened can cause you to feelings of loss and control over your life and world. Issues intensify these feelings.” (p. 26)

Concerns about going it alone.

Panic about being able to deal with the separation pain.

Fear about what the absence of your spouse means in your life.

Upset over the recognition that you are markedly different than before.

Worry about how the rest of your family is coping.

Fright arising from the sense of vulnerability caused by the loss.

Terror at the thought of losing others who are close to you.

Distress associated with memories of earlier losses.

Heightened emotional arousal that “turns up” your feelings of tensions and uneasiness.

RANDO STATES THAT SUCH FEARS AND CONCERNS ARE NORMAL. EXPERIENCING THESE CONCERNS MAKE A PERSON FEEL LIKE THEY ARE GOING CRAZY WHEN IN FACT THEY ARE NOT. THESE ARE APPROPRIATE SYMPTOMS FELT IN LOSS.

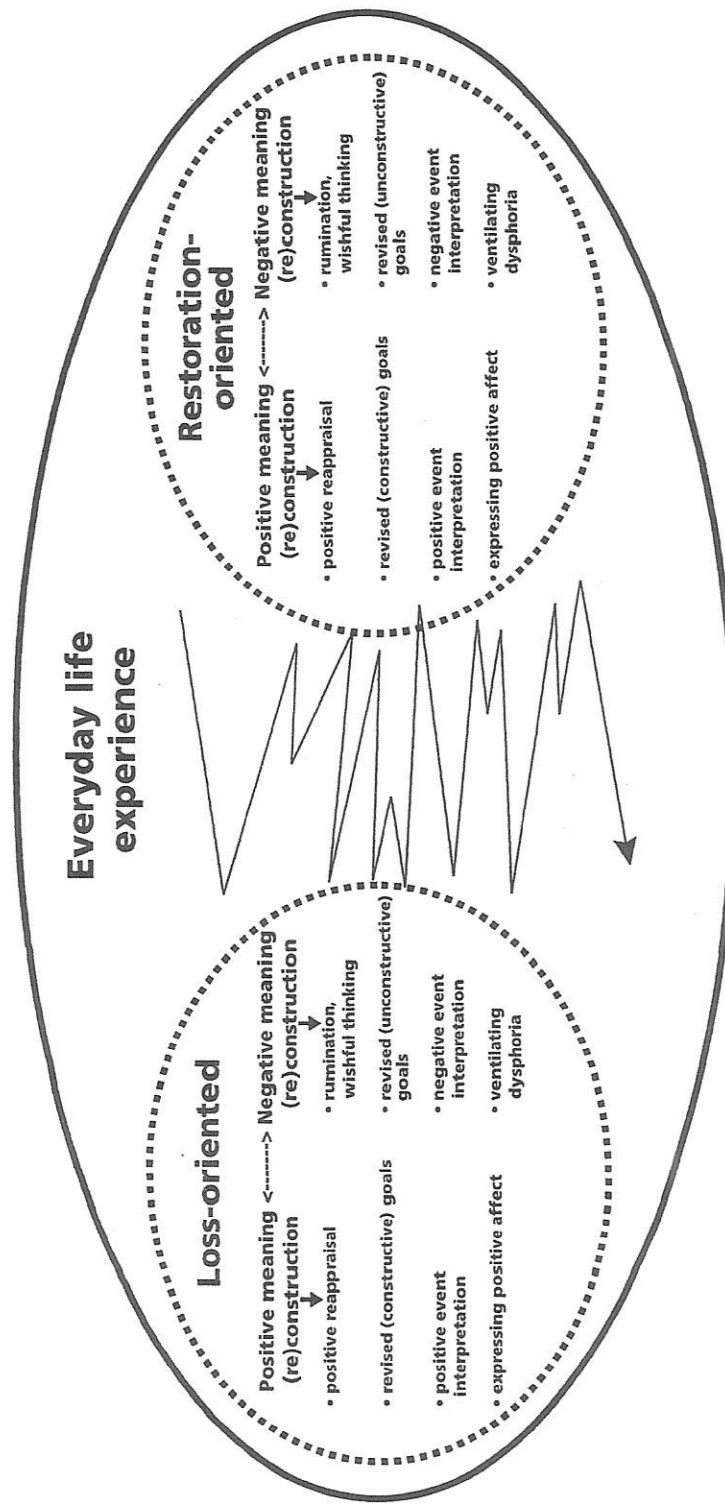


Figure 17-2. A Dual Process Model of Coping With Loss: Pathways. Copyright Stroebe and Schut, 2001.

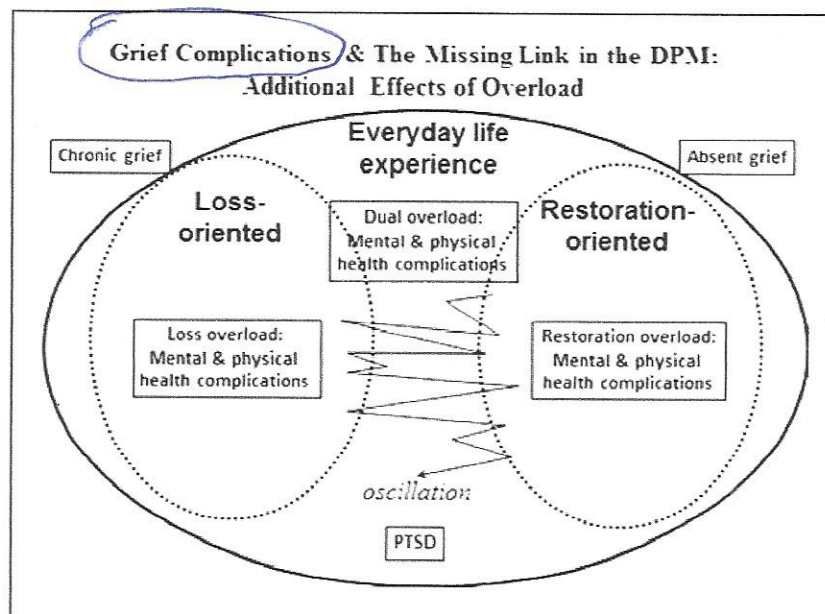


Figure 4. Grief complications and the missing link in the DPM: Additional effects of overload.

bereavement overload & dual process
Approach to grief

Coping with Loss and Helping Others Cope with Grief and Loss

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1. More important than anything is to **listen, listen, and listen!** **Be there in body and in spirit.** You do not have to have all the answers, either!
2. Be an **active listener**- really attend to what the other person needs and wants to share. Make it clear by your facial expression, tone or voice, and body language that you care and that you are indeed listening. Ask “how are you?” “Is there anything I can do?”- Several requests may be necessary for those who think they can “go it on their own.”
3. **Try to remember how you felt when you lost someone special** – your emotions, behaviors, thoughts. What do someone say or do that made you feel more comfortable? Less alone? More accepting of your loss and the changes in your life that your loss brought about? This will make it easier to relate to them, even if their loss is different than yours. **Remember, everyone grieves in his or her own unique way.**
4. **Make a mental note of how healthy people appear to be** – do they appear to be taking care of themselves? Have their self-care behaviors changed since their loss?
5. **Do not offer advice unless it is asked for**, and even if it is, be very cautious in giving advice. What worked for you may not work for someone else.
6. **Be accepting and uncritical** of what people are saying or doing, unless it is clear that they are acting in a way that is harmful to them or to others. If so, try to find a professional helper to intervene. Go with them to the appointment if necessary.
7. **Take the opportunity to go out of your way to support them** - call or drop by. Most persons report that feeling lonely, feeling different from others, and being judged by them are the major difficulties as grieving people that they face.
8. **Try to strike a balance** between asking them what they need and what you can do, and their need for help and support from you. Try not to be a pest, but do not say “call me when you need me.” Make it clear that you are always available, but on their terms, not yours.
9. **Normalize their feelings.** This assures them that what they are feeling and thinking about are probably not as weird, unusual, or bad as they think. Talk about what interests them, be it cooking or baseball. Have a meal together. Ask them what they would enjoy doing and offer to do that together.
10. **Stress that the process of coping with a loss is difficult, and that it is an ongoing process- there are no time limits on grief. There is no one best way to grieve.**
11. Stress that with patience, self-care, and the opportunity to be with and talk with others, **persons will eventually come full circle.** They will be whole again, but yet different than the way they were before.
12. Stress that there will be **good days and bad days**, pleasant feelings and not-so-pleasant feelings.
13. **Keep your feelings separate from theirs.** If you have the need to talk, find someone who can listen. Being with them may arouse feelings and thoughts in you that may need a bit of support from someone else.
14. **Your opinions on what they “should be doing or feeling” are irrelevant.**
15. **Empathize with them. Reflect their thoughts and feelings in what you say or do. Be a friend.**

When I die give what's left of me away
To children and old men who wait to die
And if you need to cry,
Cry for your brother walking the street beside you
And when you need me, put your arms around anyone
And give them what you need to give me.

I want to leave you something,
Something better than words or sounds.
Look for me in the people I've known and loved,
And if you cannot give me away,
At least let me live in your eyes and not in your mind.

You can love me best by letting hands touch hands,
And by letting go of children that need to be free.
Love doesn't die, people do.
So, when all that's left of me is love,
Give me away.

MY FRIEND, I CARE

No one has taught us how to act or what to say when someone dies. More important, no one has taught us what it feels like to grieve. We don't know how to heal the hurt created by grief or how to live with it.

Grief is like a wound. At first, it's open, bleeding, raw and terribly painful. In time that wound begins to heal. It heals from the inside out. The pain begins to fade and eventually a scar is formed. I have a scar on my leg that I've had since the age of twelve. I'm an adult now, but when I touch that scar, it feels different than the rest of my body. Grief is like that. There will always be a scar. We will never be the same again.

Part of the problem with grief is wanting life to be like it was before. Death disrupts

our lives. Grief disrupts our lives. Both force us to change. Our life becomes different. We become different than we were. Nobody likes change when it's forced on them. Change is hard work. We become angry, but angry at what or who? "I must not be a very nice person if I get angry with a person who is dead." "What kind of a person would be angry with God?" Yet that is exactly what happens. Death makes us angry and it questions our faith. We're angry that we are alone, angry that we are forced to change and angry that the person we care about is gone from us. We feel guilty and depressed, because we don't realize that anger is a natural emotion. If we don't feel comfortable directing our anger at someone or something, we'll settle for being angry with ourselves.

Grief has physical sensations. Our heart

is screaming; it physically hurts. There is a knot in our stomach and a sinking feeling happens when we think about the person who is gone. When we think, we feel and when we feel, we hurt.

Grief brings with it fear. When someone around us dies, we are reminded that we can also die. We are reminded of how little control we seem to have over our life. The illusion that other people die, but not me, is taken away. It makes us afraid. We don't realize we're afraid, we just know we are uncomfortable and we hurt inside.

Most of us have a belief in some kind of an after life. An after life of peace, love and beauty. Even a belief in nothingness brings peace from suffering, confusion and the hard work of living. If we believe that the person who is dead is in a "better place"

why do we hurt so badly? Why do we feel so miserable?

We hurt because we feel sorry for ourselves, not in a negative way but selfish never the less. Grief says "I miss you," "I'm sad you're not in my life anymore," "I'm scared," "I want you back," "I'm lonely," I grieve for me. Grief is my feelings about me, not my feelings about you.

What do we do about this feeling of grief? How do we heal the wound? How do we live with the scar?

We need to understand grief is a normal natural reaction to the loss of someone or something. Each of us is going to handle our grief in our own way, just like we handle any other emotion.

Some of us will show our grief. We'll cry, look sad and withdraw from those around us. Some of us will hide our grief. We'll cry in private and wear an "I'm doing fine" face in public. Still others of us will pretend, even to ourselves, that we're OK, not hurting. We're the ones that keep very busy, we run, if we slow down, we'll hurt.

What we must remember is male or female, cry or not cry, we will feel and experience grief. When we accept the grief, the hurt within us, we can begin to move forward in a healthy manner. How we express grief is not an issue, that we allow ourselves to feel the grief is very important.

When someone close to us dies, our first reaction is shock. Even when we know that a person is dying, we are never fully prepared. Shock creates numbness. We go on automatic pilot. We make funeral arrange-

ments, participate in the wake, visitation and funeral. We do all the right things, put one foot in front of the other and go through the motions, but we are numb. We care, talk, do, but all the while, not really thinking or feeling.

In the weeks that follow the funeral, neighbors bring in food; church ladies visit; children call; business and estate details are attended to. Busy! Busy! Busy! Then one day the food stops; the calls stop; the work is done and we're all alone. Now we think, now we feel, now we hurt. Now we feel sorry for ourselves, now we experience real grief.

Everyone has settled back into the normal routine for their lives, but our routine has changed. There are now empty spaces. Space left by the person who died. Spaces we don't know how we'll ever fill.

This is the moment we begin to think we're going crazy. "I must be losing my mind." "I was better at the funeral than I am now." Not crazy, the numbness has worn off. Healing can begin.

There are no pills, no words to heal grief or take the pain away. Only time. The first year is hard. First Christmas, first anniversary, first birthday, first deathday. The second year is hard. Second Christmas, second anniversary, second birthday, second deathday, but slowly, ever so slowly, time begins to lengthen the space between the hurt.

At first we think about the person continually. Then there's a time where we actually watch an entire TV show without thinking how much they would have enjoyed it. Then there's an afternoon luncheon where we

even laugh without feeling guilty. Time stretches and stretches. Five, ten, twenty years -- a word, a picture, a memory can touch the scar and it will hurt. The intensity is still there, the scar just isn't touched as often.

Healing the wound of grief is allowing ourselves to feel the pain, to recognize "I'm missing her," to cry, to experience the intensity of the moment and then to move on. We wipe our eyes, dust ourselves off and move forward into living the day. We know the pain will come again. It will be felt and experienced again. We will move forward again, and on and on.

The death of an important person in our life can leave us with some unfinished business. Something we wish we had said or done before they died. No relationship is

perfect. Life is full of ups and downs, good moments and difficult moments, happy memories and sad memories. In order to have an "infection free" healing we need to clean our grief wound of unfinished business.

What we need to release is very private, just between ourselves and the person who has died. To release this, we can put our thoughts on paper. Write a letter to the person who is gone. Write about the good and difficult times, say all the things that couldn't be put into words when they were alive. No one will see this. It is for our eyes only, so no holds barred. Let's straighten out the relationship once and for all.

Writing makes us think. It makes us sort everything out, gives scattered thoughts an orderly place in our lives.

When we're finished we need a special release for the letter. Burn it and scatter the ashes to the wind. Some way, let go of it. Send the message on its way.

We can never understand or accept the death of an important person in our life. It will never be OK for our mother, father, husband, wife, children, or anyone close to us to die. No one will ever have the answers to the questions of "why" or "what if." No one will be able to make sense of the tragedy of loss. It is useless to try.

What we can do is acknowledge the irreplaceable loss and try to live each day as best we can. Let our act of living, feeling joy, allowing ourselves laughter and renewing our interest in life be the tribute of our love and respect for our loved one who has gone before us. Grief is appropriate, but it

must be allowed to heal. Our tears and our mourning cannot convey the depth of our sadness. Our inability to further enjoy life does not measure our loss. The quality of our relationship with the person that has died is found in our strength, our resilience and our ability to create a new and meaningful life.

DO'S AND DON'TS

don't remove or throw away belongings for at least several months.

do wait until you are thinking more clearly. You need to give thought to what you wish to keep.

don't wash all the worn clothing right away. **do** enjoy the lingering smell of your loved one. Wearing their favorite article of clothing can be very comforting.

don't be surprised if you see or hear the person who is dead.
do know that phenomenon is normal and happens to a lot of people.

don't sell the house, move or make major decisions for at least a year.
do consider your options, plan ahead and seek advice.

don't avoid talking about the person who has died.
do use their name, tell their stories and share your memories.

don't be afraid to say negative things about the person who is gone.
do remember that no one is perfect. See the relationship for what it was, not how you wanted it to be.

don't hesitate to say "I'm having a sad day."
do reach out to your friends and family for support.

don't stop loving and living.
do the best you can to find a good in each day.