

# Recovering from a Major Loss

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I sat there holding him, not believing what was happening. Time stood still as I futilely attempted to revive him. Only moments before he was calm and ordinary. My other children stood beside me, but I was only peripherally aware of them. He was dead. I felt a scream welling up from somewhere deep in my soul, and then I felt nothing. The hollow shell that had been me, stared out the ambulance window, piecing together the hours before, feeling nothing and not understanding how I could be so calm. As time passed images of the scene of his death flashed before my eyes, over and over like a broken record in my brain. I was afraid to tell anyone what was happening.

As I began to accept the finality of his death, the tears that previously refused to flow fell uncomfortably, unexpectedly. Then, from within, a spirit voice said.... somehow it was my fault. Nothing anyone could say could shake that feeling. Time and life went on. I still had to care for my daughters and maintain the household.

Finally the emotions were too much and I lost control, screaming and throwing things. I collapsed in tears, held my daughters in my arms and apologized for my outburst, assuring them that it was not their fault. How each of us experiences grief is wholly individual, yet each of the stages is part of the process. The process often lasts many years, often haunting us like dark shadows through our entire lifetime. The process is complicated when we have experienced prior losses and have unresolved mourning. Many of us try to avoid the intense distress, and the expression of emotion required for the grief process to proceed. Yet the only way to heal is to work our way through the pain. The task can seem overwhelming, if not impossible, in the beginning. A starting point is to accept our own way of grieving, to recognize the differences in the way we thought we would feel at the start, and how we actually feel. Fear of other people's reactions to our pain can also block its expression. Crying and sad behavior are acceptable when a person has survived a major loss, and will not necessarily result in disapproval.

ing behavior from others. Instead, this sadness is an understandable and appropriate reaction.

Acute grief often elicits robot-like behavior, numbed feelings, shock and intense disbelief. This disbelief and protest of reality are a normal part of the grieving process. Alarming imagery is also common to the grieving person, as they fear they may be losing their mind. Yet this preoccupation with the images and flashbacks to the scene, are normal.

As the wounds begin to heal, feelings damaged to the point of deadness, like nerves damaged from a third-degree burn, begin to revive. Stabbing deeply and extremely painfully, each individual nerve wakes up. While this is happening, we often try and avoid dealing with the pain. This denial is normal, but living through the pain is the only way to recovery.

Guilt is natural in the process, and it is extremely powerful for some people. Part of what makes it so is that it gives the person something they ache for; a sense of control. If they can find something they could have done something the tragedy makes sense. There is nothing quite as debilitating as the sense of helplessness that follows deep loss. Guilt and bargaining serve the purpose of removing some of that helplessness.

Anger is another normal reaction to loss". Many people never allow themselves to express their pain freely. Rather, they hold in their feelings, letting them fester and infect their entire lives. They deny the existence of their rage and feel guilty for it's presence. Yet, giving the anger an outlet, in a safe way, can release tension and free the person to feel again.

The recovery process is not simply a matter of "getting over it". People recovering from loss never return to being the same person they were before the loss. There is a recognition of what has taken place and an acceptance, which comes with examining basic assumptions about their world and themselves, and how that must be changed. The basic tasks of recovery are to accept the loss intellectually and emotionally, followed by a change in perception of the outer world that matches the new reality. Intellectual acceptance requires an understanding of what has occurred. This is not to say that answering the question "Why?" is sufficient to recovery, but it is a necessary step.

Asking questions of friends, medical personnel and clergy can help to come to an answer. Of-

ten a logical explanation is not possible, as fate frequently deals out illogical tragedies. Yet finding an understanding of what the loss means to us personally can fulfill the need for an explanation.

Emotional acceptance comes when floods of pain and remorse no longer jolt the person when reminders of the loss appear. Repeatedly confronting each element of the loss until the intensity of emotions becomes tolerable, and pleasure outweighs misery, is the painful path of recovery. The difficult process takes time, and requires a nearly obsessive review, repeatedly going over the same incidents and thoughts. Sharing with others who have suffered a similar loss can be immensely helpful in working toward emotional acceptance, since friends and family may have great difficulty with allowing the free expression of pain. As the recovery process moves along, the pain becomes less continuous and oppressive. While pangs of grief may continue, in a healthy recovery process, they do not permeate the person's life, contaminating their every thought.

The final task of recovery from grief is the change in perception of yourself and coming to grips with a new sense of ourselves. Before the loss, our identity included the presence of a person or thing which was an important part of who we thought we were. Now we must find a new identity, since holding onto the old one puts us at odds with reality.

What this means for us depends on how well we have accomplished the emotional and intellectual acceptance of the loss. This usually means moving on in some new direction, and finding a replacement for the old identity. AIDS patients may find an identity in working with other AIDS survivors. Widows can become active volunteers. Whatever the source, this new perception of ourselves is the mark of a healthy recovery.