GRIEF

In Memory of My Sister, Lisa Greene



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INTRODUCTION

Grief is the process that allows us to let go of that which was and be ready for that which is to come. Everyone deals with the emotional pain of loss during the course of a lifetime. Feelings of grief may result from the death of a loved one, a divorce or even a beloved pet. Each of us has experienced loss; or will lose, something dear. Dealing with grief is no easy task. As someone well-acquainted with death and loss; I know firsthand. Loss visits us all in one form or another, and where loss is, grief is sure to follow. But, take it from me—the only way to deal with grief is to really deal with grief. And the grief that follows doesn't come with a road map. But it's that unknown that can help see you through. At such a time, it doesn't serve to deny the pain. Grief is a natural process; and there is an emotional logic to it. Riding it, as opposed to fighting it, will lead to healing. It helps to observe it with compassion, to experience it without being swallowed by it. Grief is a natural response to loss. It's the emotional suffering you feel when something or someone you love is taken away. The more significant the loss, the more intense the grief will be. You may associate grief with the death of a loved one—which is often the cause of the most intense type of grief—but any loss can cause grief. Understanding the process and knowing what to expect can help you cope. Your pattern of progressing through your grief will be uneven, unpredictable and unique, with no specific time frame. But the more you learn about grief, the better you can cope with it. In the beginning, it will seem as if your grief is running you, but in the end, you can learn to run your grief. When you understand what is happening to you and have some idea of what to expect, you will feel more in control of your grief and will be in a better position to take care of yourself, to find your way through this loss and to begin rebuilding your life.

THE FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF

There are several models of grief that can provide a framework for what to expect and can help us "move on." One of the most renowned models is "The 5 Stages of Grief," originally developed by the great Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. Before actually describing these stages; I would like to emphasize that I'm not talking here about a fixed sequence of events, in which Point A is always followed by Point B, and so on. The greatest value of this model is to emphasize that grief is not one-dimensional: It manifests in a jumble of intense emotions. The 5 Stages of Grief are not intended to be worked through and "checked off," like a list. Rather, they are guideposts, helping us identify and understand what we may be feeling. Not everyone will experience every stage; and many people will go through the stages in a different order. In general, however, grief will include the following 5 phases. Let's take a look. Typically, the stages of grief are described as:

DENIAL

Denial is often the first stage of grief. Typically, the first reaction to news of impending doom is shock or disbelief, followed by denial: It's not true, it can't possibly happen to me, there must be a mistake–this kind of thing only happens to others, doesn't it? Depending on the individual and the situation, the denial stage may also be the shortest lived of all the stages. As with the other stages of grief, denial can reappear, even after you think you've accepted the loss. This stage includes feelings of shock, numbness, and disbelief. It's not that we're denying that the death or loss has actually occurred, but rather, it's a sense of, "I just can't believe this person I love isn't going to walk through that door anymore." Yet, the feelings of this stage also protect us. If we were to take in all the emotion related to the loss right away, it would be too overwhelming. Instead, our body and mind has a little time to adjust to the way things are now without the deceased.

BARGAINING

With bargaining, there's a sense that we just want life back to the way it used to be. We wish we could go back in time, catch the illness sooner, see something we didn't see. We may also feel guilty, focusing on "If only…". Bargaining can begin before the loss occurs or after.

If the death or loss was anticipated, such as in the case of illness, bargaining may have been going on for a while—we bargain with God to please "spare" our loved one; we say we'll "do anything" to keep them here. If the death or loss was sudden, we may wish we could bring them back or go back in time and change things. Bargaining keeps us focused on the past. It prevents us from feeling the emotions of the present. But bargaining can be helpful too. Once we accept that our loved one is dying, we can use bargaining to ease our minds and theirs, praying for a "peaceful passing." Or once they have passed, bargaining can help us focus on the future as we pray to "be reunited with them someday."

DEPRESSION

Depression is one stage of grief that may be present throughout the process, in varying degrees. Depression following a loss is more than sadness; it involves feelings of loneliness, numbness and insecurity. During the depression stage, you may find that your negative habits are worse and routine daily activities may seem extraordinarily difficult. We feel like we don't care about much of anything and wish life would just hurry up and that time would pass on. Some days may be easier than others as your mind copes with the depth of the loss. Accept that depression is part of the healing process; accept it for what it is. There is no predetermined order for working through emotional loss; depression may come and go during denial, anger and even acceptance. This part of the grief process can last for some time—there's no set "time limit" for the emotions of grief. So be patient with yourself and remember honoring your feelings is a way to continue to heal.

ANGER

Anger may be the first emotion you feel, or it may take time to show up. Like depression and denial, anger may ebb and flow throughout each stage of processing your grief. Anger may be directed at yourself, a loved one or the universe. It can be fleeting; or you may sustain it for weeks. Some will express anger easily and toward anyone or anything, but many of us will suppress the anger instead, keeping it bottled up or even turning it inward, toward ourselves. Anger turned inward is guilt—guilt that we "should have done something," or even guilt that we feel angry toward the deceased. But anger is a natural response to loss. And if we're able to identify and label our anger, it can help us express it in healthier ways that don't hurt others or ourselves. Saying, "I'm angry," and letting yourself feel that anger is part of the healing process.

ACCEPTANCE

True acceptance is the final stage of the grieving process, but it does not magically dissolve your other emotions. Understanding the reality of your loss is part of acceptance, but you must also make peace with it to find true acceptance. You'll know you've accepted your loss when depression blends into an acceptable level of sadness, denial and bargaining are replaced by understanding and anger is more manageable and eventually disappears. The experience of "depression" is what leads to "acceptance". Many people mistakenly believe that "acceptance" means we are "cured" or "all right" with the loss. But this isn't the case at all. The loss will forever be a part of us, though we will feel it more sometimes than others. Acceptance simply means we are ready to try and move on—to accommodate ourselves to this world without our loved one. This process can bring us closer to the one we loved as we make sense of how life was and process how we want life now to be.

Understanding the 5 Stages of Grief can help us realize our grief is "normal" and help us navigate the varying symptoms we each experience. Mostly, however, understanding the 5 Stages of Grief can reassure us that we are not alone in our grief—that grief is one experience, we will all have (or will have) in common. And that means, if we choose to, we have plenty of experienced souls to whom we can turn for support and guidance through our times of grief.

THE GRIEF PROCESS

Grief is a standard yet highly personal response to loss. Neither an illness nor a pathological condition, it is a natural process that, depending on how it is managed and understood, can lead to healing and personal growth. Grief is extremely powerful. It can catch you totally unprepared, knock you off balance and shake you to the core. It can be painful beyond words — physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually — and it can change your life completely. Grief serves to remind you how fragile life is and how vulnerable you are to loss. It can make your present life seem meaningless, and take away your hope for the future. Acknowledge that your loss is worthy of grief and accept that you must endure the very real feelings of sorrow.

Grief work is very hard and takes enormous energy. Much as you may want to do so; there is no way to avoid this grief of yours. You cannot wait it out; you won't get over it quickly, and nobody can do it for you. It's called grief work because finding your way through grief is hard work, and if you put it off, like a messy chore it will sit there waiting to be done. And the longer it waits, the harder it becomes. Grieving differs among members of the same family, as each person's relationship with and attachment to the deceased family member, varies. How you will react to death depends on how you've responded to other crises in your life; on what was lost when this death happened (not only the life of the person who died, but certain aspects of your life as well. Your way of life; who you were in your relationship with that person and who you planned to be impacts the process. You are grieving the hopes and dreams for the future and the loss of the person's role in your family.

Certain manifestations of grief are typical, common and normal. Although grief is as individual as you are, some feelings and reactions are universal. Take time to look, listen, experience and understand them. They are nature's way of getting your attention. Grieving is not a reaction to a single event, like an illness that can be cured and from which you will recover. It's more like a deep wound that eventually heals and closes, but whose terrible scar remains and still can hurt at times. Time does not heal grief. Time is neutral. It is not the passage of time alone that heals. It is what you do with time that matters. Now that this death has happened to you, you must decide what you can do with your grief. Grieving is an active process, not a passive one, and recovery is a choice. Coping with grief involves many courses of action, and as you find your way through this first year of grief, you will learn how to use this grieving time to help you heal yourself. There is no right or wrong way to do the work of grieving. There is only your way, and you must discover it for yourself. There is no magic formula, no short cut, and no easy way out.

Grief can impact all spheres of a person's life. Some will feel angry and reject previously held beliefs, while others may find comfort in their faith or spirituality. You

may experience grief not just for the person, but also for your expectations in your relationship with them that were never met. While symptoms vary widely from person to person, there are several physical, mental, and emotional symptoms that are commonly experienced in the grief process.

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS INCLUDE:

- Headaches and body ache
- Tightness in chest
- Fatigue or exhaustion
- Sensitive skin
- Dizziness
- Shortness of breath
- Increased illness
- Oversensitivity to noise
- Heart palpitations
- Loss of appetite or weight gain

MENTAL SYMPTOMS INCLUDE:

- Forgetfulness
- Sleep difficulties (too much or too little)
- Inability to concentrate
- Confusion
- Decreased decision-making or problem-solving abilities
- Low self-image
- Self-destructive thoughts

EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS INCLUDE:

- Depression
- Anger
- Helplessness
- Anxiety
- Mood swings
- Hysteria

DEALING WITH GRIEF

There are many things you can do to help mitigate the overwhelming feelings that accompany a major loss. One key component of dealing with grief in a healthy way is to simply let it happens. Allow yourself to feel each emotion as it arises. Take some time each day to truly accept the loss of the loved one and to reflect on your relationship with them. Experiencing pain, anger, depression, even numbness is completely normal; trying to push down or brush off these emotions is unhealthy and can delay the healing process. Grief can often make it difficult to function in day-to-day life. It's a good idea to lighten your schedule as much as possible in the days, weeks, and months following a loss. Keep the following tips in mind –

TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOURSELF

Make sure you are taking good care of yourself, mind, spirit, and body. Some people find creative projects and hobbies to be therapeutic outlets. When you're grieving, it's more important than ever to take care of yourself. The stress of loss can deplete your energy and emotional reserves. Looking after your physical and emotional needs will help you get through this difficult time. The mind and body are connected. When you feel good physically, you'll also feel better emotionally. Combat stress and fatigue by getting enough sleep, eating right, and exercising. Don't use alcohol or drugs to numb the pain of grief or lift your mood artificially.

HAVE A SUPPORT SYSTEM

It is also very important to make sure you have a support system; as no one should be expected to grieve alone. Reach out to friends and family; don't wait for them to come to you. Talk to people about your feelings, and ask them for practical assistance if you need it: cleaning the house, looking after the kids, preparing meals, etc. You may also find comfort in attending support groups and grief meetings; where you can express your grief openly to others who have experienced loss. The single most important factor in healing from loss is having the support of other people. Even if you aren't comfortable talking about your feelings under normal circumstances, it's important to express them when you're grieving. Sharing your loss makes the burden of grief easier to carry. Wherever the support comes from, accept it and do not grieve alone. Connecting to others will help you heal. Now is the time to lean on the people who care about you, even if you take pride in being strong and self-sufficient.

Draw closer to loved ones, rather than avoiding them, and accept the assistance that's offered. Often, people want to help but don't know how, so tell them what you need—whether it's a shoulder to cry on or help with funeral arrangements.

FACE YOUR FEELINGS.

You can try to suppress your grief, but you can't avoid it forever. In order to heal, you have to acknowledge the pain. Trying to avoid feelings of sadness and loss only prolongs the grieving process. Unresolved grief can also lead to complications such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and health problems. Express your feelings in a tangible or creative way. Write about your loss in a journal. If you've lost a loved one, write a letter saying the things you never got to say; make a scrapbook or photo album celebrating the person's life; or get involved in a cause or organization that was important to him or her.

PLAN AHEAD

Plan ahead for grief "triggers" Anniversaries, holidays, and milestones can reawaken memories and feelings. Be prepared for an emotional wallop and know that it's completely normal. If you're sharing a holiday or lifecycle event with other relatives, talk to them ahead of time about their expectations and agree on strategies to honor the person you loved.

Postpone major life changes.

Try to hold off on making any major changes, such as moving, remarrying, changing jobs or having another child. You should give yourself time to adjust to your loss.

BE PATIENT.

It can take months or even years to absorb a major loss and accept your changed life. Accept that life is for the living. It takes effort to begin to live again in the present and not dwell on the past. Don't let anyone tell you how to feel, and don't tell yourself how to feel either. Your grief is your own, and no one else can tell you when it's time to "move on" or "get over it." Let yourself feel whatever you feel without embarrassment or judgment. It's okay to be angry, to yell at the heavens, to cry or not to cry. It's also fine to laugh, to find moments of joy, and to let go when you're ready.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The sadness of losing someone you love never goes away completely, but it shouldn't remain center stage. You should not be so preoccupied with the person who died that it disrupts your daily routine and undermines your other relationships. Find ways to cope with your grief. It's important to note that some ways of coping with grief are helpful, like talking to others or writing in a journal. Others may be hurtful or destructive to the healing process, like abusing substances or isolating yourself. Healthy coping skills are important in resolving a loss and helping you move forward in the healing process.

Remember, with support, patience and effort; you will survive grief. Someday the pain will lessen, leaving you with cherished memories of your loved one. Accept that loss is a basic part of our life cycle. When this fact is understood and accepted, we will begin to seek other, inner sources of security and happiness. Answering these questions might motivate us to change our life style, live a more meaningful existence, improve our character, purify our love, or investigate the deeper truths of life. A writer puts it this way "Grief is a journey, often perilous and without clear direction, the experience of grieving cannot be ordered or categorized, hurried or controlled, pushed aside or ignored indefinitely. It is inevitable as breathing, as change, as love. It may be postponed, but it will not be denied."

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