



Grief and Bereavement in Accidental Death

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Grief is grief: no matter what the circumstances of your loss or who it is you have lost, grief is an inevitable and intense psychological reaction that is unlike anything else you will experience. And while you are grieving, what you are experiencing will always be the most intense and dominant aspect of your life.

Having said that, I also recognize that the circumstances of a loss may make the loss more or less difficult to come to terms with. For example, where the person dies after a protracted illness, there is an identifiable cause (which in at least some cases can be seen as unavoidable) and the survivor has some opportunity to anticipate the loss and to start to come to terms with it prior to the event. On the other hand, I think that sudden death, by accident or misadventure or malice, brings up additional issues for the survivor which can complicate the grieving process for years – the “what-if’s”.

More than 20 years ago now, my mother died at age 59. She had had some health problems for several years prior to that but I was unaware that any of them were life-threatening. Her loss was sudden and it was a shock to me at least, and part of coming to terms with that loss was that I berated myself for letting life get in the way and not making the time to visit her more often in the last few years before her death (she lived and died in England, while I was living in Canada). At the time, this was the worst loss I had ever faced and, because of the kind of relationship I had with my mother, I was devastated by it. It also seemed to me that for her life to end so young was unjust and intolerable.

Then, about 8½ years ago, I lost my 17 year old daughter in an automobile accident. Where the loss of my mother was devastating, this loss was paralyzing. In retrospect, I realize that as shocking as was the loss of my mother, it was the result of failing health and at least there was some sense of it conforming to “the natural order of things” – one sort of expects that eventually one’s parents will get older and predecease you. With the loss of my daughter, I was plagued by a myriad of feelings triggered by the fact that it was accidental (and therefore preventable), that in part it was the result of somebody’s negligence (at the time the county was trying to save money on snow clearance and salting/sanding; she died when she lost control of the vehicle on an icy road that had not been sanded), and that it seemed to me that it was contrary to all natural laws – parents are supposed to die before children, not the other way around.

But certainly one major component in my grief then and now was anger and outrage at the council members who had made such a short-sighted and stupid decision to save money on something that ended up taking my daughter’s life – to think that she might be alive today were it not for a decision to save a few dollars was almost unbearable. Even now, every time I read about a town council talking about saving money on services like that, I want to scream – as I write this, the nearby city of Ottawa, Canada, has recently adopted a policy of not sending out the snow plows until there is a forecast of at least 7 inches of snow (previously it was 4 or 5)... I wonder how many people will have to die in automobile accidents as a result of this policy before the city is sued and/or agrees that the few hundred thousand dollars saved by the decision are not worth the life of even a single human being.

I think that these are similar to the feelings many people experience when a loved one is lost due to an industrial or workplace accident. Again, there is that sense that the loss could have been avoidable, preventable, if only the employer had been more focused on employee safety and less focused on saving money. The anger, the rage, the hatred that one feels in response to such a perception is almost worse than the grief. One seems to be torn between grieving the loss of the person you love and wanting some sort of revenge against the people who took him or her away from you. In my case, I felt at times “angry that I had to feel angry”, since it felt as though in some ways the county decision had first taken my daughter from me and now was taking away my ability to focus on grieving for her – irrational, of course, but nonetheless real.

“The Five Stages of Grief”

Most of you have probably heard about “the five stages of grief”: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. What is not well understood is that the concept of The Five Stages was introduced by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (On Death and Dying, 1969, Macmillan) to describe the process she observed in terminally ill individuals in coming to terms with their own approaching deaths. She was **not** talking about survivor grief. However, since that time it has come to be used in a general way to describe the process of grieving for the loss of a loved one.

As such, the concept has some general utility. However, what worries me about it is the implication that there is some sort of schedule or time-course for grieving. This is even suggested in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association), where a distinction is made between “normal” grief, “complicated bereavement”, and major depressive episode, again partly defined by severity of “symptoms” but also partly according to whether grieving lasts longer than 2 months or 6 months respectively.

Let me be very clear about my own opinion in this regard: ***There is no recipe for the proper way to grieve; there is no schedule or timetable for grieving; there are no right or wrong ways to grieve.*** Grief is a very individual and personal thing. The only right way to grieve is to do whatever you need to do at any given moment. The only timetable for grieving is your own. There is no length of time beyond which grieving should end: ***you do not “get over” a loss like this*** – you learn to accept it to some extent, to cope with the loss, and to live with it. In some cases, depending on who you are and who the individual you have lost was/is, grieving in one form or another may well last a lifetime.

On the other hand, if you do not feel that you are making or can make progress on your own toward a degree of resolution of your loss, or if you feel that you are just not able to cope with the loss by yourself, seeking counseling or psychotherapy from a professional who has some expertise in grief and bereavement can be helpful. It is also true that sometimes grief can precipitate a major depression and you should seek professional help and treatment if that occurs (symptoms of major depression include depressed mood, “anhedonia” or loss of enjoyment or pleasure in previously enjoyed activities, changes in sleep patterns or appetite, impaired concentration, and emotional lability, with the cluster of symptoms persisting for a minimum of 2 weeks).

Coming to terms

In the beginning, most of us who have suffered a loss struggle to make sense of that loss – How could this have happened? What could I have done to prevent it? What can I do to make it go away? What kind of world is this where something like this can happen (or even what kind of god would let something like this happen)? This is about trying to make sense of the death of the person we love and miss. It is a normal reaction to such a loss.

Many years ago, the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl published a book titled, “Man’s Search for Meaning”, which is still in print. Dr. Frankl developed the ideas on which he based his book and his approach to psychiatry (which he called Logotherapy) on his experiences as a concentration camp inmate during World War II. On a daily basis, he suffered loss and grief, humiliation and fear. And he tried to make sense of his experiences. His belief, described in the book, is that the need to find meaning in life (and death), to make sense of our experiences, is universal. So in the face of loss of a loved one, this is what we do.

However, I have come to the conclusion, at least on a personal level, that it is fruitless to try to make sense of death – for me, it simply did not and does not work. But what I can do instead is to try to make sense of life – to learn how to focus on and ***force*** something positive to come from the life that person lived and the ***legacy*** she or he left behind.

This is ***not*** about “finding the silver lining in the cloud” – there is no silver lining in the loss of a loved one. Rather, it is about refocusing your thoughts and memories on who that person was when she or he

was alive, what gifts she or he has left behind that will continue long after all of us have passed on. You are who you are today in part because of that person. So are all of the other people who came into contact with that person during his or her life.

It is about honoring the memory of that person's life. It is about understanding the legacy of that person's life. It is about creating a living monument to what that person's life meant. Because that is something that never ends, that cannot be taken away from you.

Finding and creating a legacy

This may seem contradictory at first: Is the person's legacy something that already exists and your task is to define or identify it? Or is it something that you, as the person "left behind", need to create?

I think the answer is, "Both."

As with all other aspects of grief and loss, there is no single way or right way to do this. For some, it is a very private, personal, quiet thing: part of it for me was a resolution to take what I had learned from my mother and my daughter and try to make sure that I lived my life by those lessons, and that I passed on their gifts to me to other people I had the opportunity to influence in my life. I think of this as a network across time and across space: Their influence on my is not lost if I use that influence to pass on to other people, and in that way they are both immortal. Similarly, every time I interact with another human being in my life, I can choose to try to make that a positive thing or a negative thing – and the choice I make at that moment, because of how I influence that person and how that person then goes on to influence others, can ripple across the lives of many other people, people I will never meet. I think of my mother and my daughter in all those interactions, about how what they taught me and gave me I am passing on to people who have never heard of either of them – and that is another kind of immortality.

You might also choose to do this in a more public way, especially where your loss was the result of accident or malice – think of something you might do that even in a small way might help to prevent such a loss in the future. Years ago, I was involved in an inquest where I was required to provide some information to the coroner as to the sequence of events that led to the release of a convicted repeat child molester who went on to murder a young boy. I was impressed by the courage and determination of the boy's parents, who day after day showed up and stayed in court until it adjourned to the next day, listening to what must have been painful details of what had gone wrong. When I completed my testimony, they both approached me to shake my hand and to tell me that whatever came out of the inquest they were committed to activism on behalf of their son to do whatever was possible to try to ensure that no other parent had to suffer the loss they had suffered. To me, that was an example of two people who, in the face of unspeakable and unimaginable tragedy, were determined to make sure that the life (and death) of their young son would not be forgotten – that his legacy would be something positive and meaningful.

I think this is very relevant in the case of accidental deaths or deaths by misadventure. One way to do this is by creating a website designed to draw public attention to the problems or issues – to the mistakes that were made or to weaknesses in the system that contributed to your loss. This website is of course an excellent example of this. You can find a few other examples on my website (www.psychlinks.ca/pages/grief.htm). Another way is to get involved in activist groups or lobbying groups (e.g., Mother's Against Drunk Driving) which work towards systemic change, changes in legislation or public attitudes. It often takes time for such groups to have an impact but they **do** work. Write letters to the editor of your local newspaper to draw public attention to the problem. Call local or national radio talk shows. The best way to initiate change and to force those responsible to take responsibility is to raise public awareness.

But again, whether you choose to create a private legacy or a public one or both is entirely up to you – whatever works for you and helps you to accept and adapt to the loss that you have experienced. The only rule that applies to grief is the one that says there are no rules.

Seeking help and helping others

- Sometimes, and perhaps usually, we find that we cannot travel the road alone – that to come to terms with loss we need the help of someone else. This can be hard to admit for some of us. For a year after my daughter died, I blundered on somehow, thinking I was doing okay. And then one day, an old friend asked, “How are you doing?”. I answered, as I always did, “I’m okay”. He immediately replied, “No, you’re not”, and I broke down in tears. That’s when I realized he was right and that’s when I went into therapy. And yes – it did help.
- Once again: there is no timetable for this except your own, but it does sometimes pay to listen to the observations or concerns of people around you who care about you.
- Don’t hide your grief from others who care about you, especially your children. Initially, as a parent, I tried hard to grieve alone, away from my sons, in the mistaken belief that this would make it easier on them, or easier for them. After a while I came to understand that I was conveying a message to them – I was inadvertently telling them that it was wrong to grieve openly, or to “inflict” your grief on other people. Once I understood that, I was able to share my grief with them more openly, and by doing that I was telling them, “Your grief is understandable and expected, and it is okay to share it – you don’t need to hide your grief from me to protect me, just as I don’t need to hide mine from you to protect you”.
- Within the first couple of days after my daughter died, a neighbour approached me and said, “I know how you feel. I lost a son.” Now, I knew rationally that this person meant well and outwardly I mumbled something socially appropriate. But inside I felt a surge of anger. Inside my head I was saying, “No you don’t! You don’t know me. You didn’t know her. You don’t know anything about us. You can’t possibly know anything about how I feel.” Now, when I am asked by others how they might help a friend or family member who has suffered a loss, I tell them about that experience. Listen. Offer support. But don’t try to **fix** what cannot be fixed. And don’t assume that you have any insight into that person’s experience beyond your own experience – it is better to say, “I can’t pretend to know how you’re feeling but I too have suffered the loss of a loved one and if you ever need an ear please let me know.”
- You may find it helpful to participate in on-line grief forums or in local real-life support groups. You can find listings for on-line grief support resources on my website, or do a search using Google for the phrase “grief support”. In my area, there is an organization called Bereaved Families of Ontario which offers counseling and support groups. Another resources is a free monthly newsletter called “Healing Hearts”, available at www.healingheart.net (primarily a support group for bereaved parents and siblings).

A final note

It is not uncommon for someone who has suffered a loss to feel guilty for laughing or having fun or enjoying anything ever again. Resist this feeling: remember that what you are trying to do is to honor the **life** of your loved one, not his or her death. When that person was alive, you shared laughter and joy and life – the legacy he or she left behind should surely include those memories and a determination to live the way he or she would want you to live. Celebrate life. Celebrate your life, and the life of your loved one, and the life you shared. That is, in the end, how we defeat death.

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