

The Medley That Is Grief

When Grief Seems Never-Ending, How Can I Get Through It All?

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Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines the word *medley* as: "2: a diverse assortment or mixture; especially: HODGEPODGE. 3: a musical composition made up of a series of songs or short pieces."

When I was in high school the holiday concert my orchestra put on every year included a medley. The medley was a chaotic hodgepodge of music that I would never in a million years choose to put together into one piece. To top it off, the piece concluded with a sharp clap of wooden bars that the percussionist (bless his adolescent soul) never timed right, and the "whip" sound it was supposed to imitate got lost in the shuffle and the audience was left wondering if it really was the end, after all.

I'm making a leap here so keep your mind open: *Grieving is like a musical medley.*

If you like medleys, then forgive me. I do try to keep my mind open as well, and remember that many artists, including Black Sabbath and the Beatles, have composed medleys. This form of hodgepodge is not relegated solely to violins swooning with sappy holiday music. Still, they are, like the definition says, a diverse mixture of things put together, and are often (in my definition) never ending.

Grief can feel never-ending, and it can also feel like the worst overlapping hodgepodge of emotions the mind and body could ever create. If you've experienced what I'm talking about, then congratulate your psyche for composing it's own unique and diverse medley of emotions. If these were translated into notes on a page, and then music, perhaps the beauty of it all would be more obvious. Yet it probably doesn't feel beautiful when you're sobbing so hard you think you might throw up, or when you're wandering around the grocery store trying to remember the list that you lost somewhere, which took you hours to write. Maybe you've

wanted to just throw a tantrum right there in the spaghetti aisle, and wondered why you so quickly turn from sadness to rage to not believing that it ever really happened.

Welcome to grief. The beauty may not be apparent until years after you've experienced a loss, but no matter. The real question is *How Am I Going To Survive Right Now?*

Loss is everywhere, but where's the grief?

If one thing is true in life, it's that everything changes. Seasons change, cars change, sadness changes, bodies change, relationships change... and we all will die. Whether a change is what we want or not, what usually ensues is some kind of grief, and as inevitable as death is, the journey with grief is one step behind it as a necessary rite of passage in life.

Every change brings with it a loss, and every loss has the ability to affect us in significant ways. The suffering economy, a move away from land that has been home, wars, the loss of a job, divorce and the death of a loved one can all have a profound impact on our lives. We each deal with these events and transitions differently, yet there are common threads through the process that can act as landmarks and points of solace along the way. Simply knowing that feeling guilty is a normal part of the grief process can be a tremendous relief for those who are grieving. Therapists and grief counselors call this "normalizing," and it's also the reason why grief support groups are one of the most helpful resources for those who have lost a loved one. Knowing we're not the only one who has felt this way can help to bring us that much closer to accepting, and healing, our experience.

A huge challenge in our culture is that there is little, if any, modeling or room that we've created for the purpose of grieving. The normalization process for someone who has experienced a loss doesn't "just happen." Most of us aren't accustomed to being in a room full of wailing family members after a death, or dancing with a group of people on a loved one's grave, or even verbalizing to a neighbor that we can't stop crying. I always wonder how things would be different for us if there was the space and time to express the emotions that accompany grief... from sadness to anger to guilt to confusion and even to happiness. After my father died, I found a counselor who listened to me, provided space for me to tell stories about him over and over again, and who cautioned me in my impatience with my process. She told me specifically about the Jewish tradition in which the headstone of the deceased is unveiled after 12 months of mourning. When I heard this, it struck me that I had never been privy to *any*

kind of ritual honoring the dead or honoring the mourning process save for walking up to my grandfather's casket when I was 7 and staring at his eerily empty body. After that, my exposure to the grief process was confined to coming upon my mom in tearful moments. I watched her quickly gather herself to move on to the next, seemingly more important and less embarrassing moment. Thus, I was surprised (and dismayed) to learn as an adult that grieving takes a lot longer than I had expected it would, and that it doesn't necessarily "go away."

What is "normal" anyway??

Grief will always have a similar, yet unique, tone in each person experiencing it. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross was one of the first people to outline specific stages of grief in her book, *On Death and Dying*, which was first published in 1969. Kübler-Ross was a physician who devoted her life to studying the dying process, and as she learned about death she also learned about grief. Her five stages are:

- Denial ("This doesn't make any sense." "It didn't *really* happen.")
- Anger ("Those doctors killed my husband!")
- Bargaining ("It should have been me..." or "If only I had...")
- Depression ("I can't imagine living a life without her...")
- Acceptance ("My life is completely different, but I can move on now.")

Since 1969 Kübler-Ross – and others – have re-visited this model and proposed that the stages are not as orderly as she first thought. DABDA doesn't necessarily happen in that order and people can cycle through these stages over and over again in completely different orders. When one reaches the stage of acceptance, it does not mean that the grieving is finished forever. Similarly, a person can be in the bargaining and anger and denial stages all at the same time, or cycle from anger to depression back to denial again.

Other models have popped up since, and one that is used widely in grief education is Worden's *Four Tasks of Mourning*. These are:

- 1) Accepting the reality of the loss
- 2) Experiencing the pain of grief

- 3) Adjusting to an environment in which the deceased is missing
- 4) Emotionally relocating the deceased and moving on with life

Both of these models act as a baseline from which we can understand what a normal grief process looks like. It's important to point out, however, that "normal" can look like so many different versions of these models, and emphasizing the normalcy can belie the fact that grief feels entirely crazy at times. Memory becomes impaired, time can seem distorted, episodes of extreme emotionality pop up with no warning, personal hygiene suffers, dreams may suggest that the reality of the loss is a hallucination, or a bad dream itself, and even physiological changes in the body can occur. Holding a wide view of what normal looks like can be an incredibly profound source of comfort for most people who are grieving.

I don't care anymore if I'm normal. I just want to know how I'll survive this!!

Enough already, you say? Alright, then. I have some good news, and some bad news. The good news is that there's nothing to *fix*. Everything you're feeling is telling you that you're exactly where you should be with your grief. This medley of emotions is exactly what you should expect.

The bad news is that in order to get through this grief, you have to *feel it all*.

Grief is often suppressed to the point that it festers and grows... any repressed emotion builds until it becomes something else, something transformed and projected on to someone or something, or placed back on to ourselves. Sadness turns into anger, anger into rage, rage into depression, depression into a disconnection from family, friends and the workplace. This is when grief needs to be "fixed." And still, the only way to fix it is to turn the faucet back on – let the feelings come out. Our emotions need to be nurtured more than our cell phones, more than our cars, more than our mutual funds, even... without this nurturance we are neglecting the very essence of what it means to be alive and the power that is behind the most profound aspects of life.

Surviving through simple rituals...

In some cultures, people turn to ritual to help them access and express emotions. Rituals can act as the structure into which people fall when everything around them seems to be falling apart. Malidoma Somé, who is from Burkina Faso, teaches about the place of ritual in society and how it is essential for the health of a community. He describes ritual as a way for people to more fully embody the inner experience they are having, as well as a way to connect with the “Otherworld” and with other members of the community.

In our society we are so adept at censoring ourselves – using our minds to analyze and judge our experience on a moment-to-moment basis, and this is so ingrained that the natural process of grief often becomes interrupted. Ritual can inherently allow the mind and body to let go of the inner critic, and drop in to the experience that is happening inside the body. Emotions happen in so many different places inside the body, and sometimes simply talking about an experience is not enough to access the *full* experience that we go through. Where Somé is from, rituals are used consistently as a means to help members of the community express their grief together. Everyone present is able to witness, and be witnessed, in the pain and sadness that is the human experience of loss. Having members of the community hold this amount of emotion and energy is a profound way to help *everyone* move through grief, and integrate the loss into a deeper way of living.

In this country we often don't have community rituals like this, but it's always possible to create a ritual for yourself that is personal and meaningful. Altars are one way to create this structure, as are many environments in the outdoors. Creating an impromptu circle of rocks underneath a tree, within which you sit for a time, and then crossing over a threshold of branches can be symbolic of moving beyond the one year anniversary of a loss, and is a potentially profound and simple way to mark the passage of time and emotions. It might not be an outwardly emotional experience, but it may invoke some emotions that had been deeply stored for some time.

Surviving by watching nature do it...

Watching leaves be lifted off of branches in a gust of wind and then seeing winter on the naked trees can be an instant window into loss. The seasons are a good reminder of the cycles

of life and death, and metaphors are everywhere to help reflect our inner experiences and show us all that life is constantly changing.

I work with people who are grieving, and sometimes I take them outside. My job as a therapist is to listen, reflect, guide and offer perspective – yet I often feel that nature does a better job at all of this than I ever could. The outdoors offers the consistent reflection of inherent and unconditional perfection, the acceptance of all of our emotional states, an immediate and easy way to touch in to all of the senses, and the space within which to literally move through difficult emotions. Because emotions are ultimately chemical, without movement they become stored in our bodies. Moving our bodies moves these chemicals, and helps our systems process and *remove* them.

Surviving through art...

If you don't have a creative outlet, find one. Inside each of us there is a budding artist, waiting to bloom, and creative endeavors can be a fantastic way to let go and let loose. If you have an aversion to a certain medium because of trauma from your childhood, find something else. Even if you do have "art trauma", try to befriend your inner writer, or painter, again. No one has to see the finished product. There doesn't even have to be a "product." Sometimes just the act of banging your fingers on a keyboard can feel like a relief, no matter what keys you're pressing. Leaning into a pastel crayon and making the darkest, thickest streak on a piece of paper you've ever made can feel like a relief. At the end of it all, you may even be surprised at what comes out.

The band will play on, but the song will change.

Grief needs to be nurtured, taken time with, and paid attention to. It's important, if you're grieving, to find people you trust who you can share your stories with. Grief support groups are a fantastic way to build this into your life, and if you live in an urban area finding a group for yourself most likely won't be hard. If you live in a rural setting and can't find a support group, it may be helpful to simply tell a close friend that you'll be needing some support for a while, and ask if you can call them or get together on a regular basis. It's important to take the time to cry, and to find a space where you can let go into the sadness without having to hold back or censor yourself. It's important to rest. Grief can be exhausting.

And, the number one thing you can do is to be gentle with yourself and always keep in mind that you are, in essence, “skinless” right now. Treat yourself like you would treat anyone else who was feeling that raw.

You can count on things changing, and that means that your grief will change too. You’ll reach a place where you can share your story without breaking down, where you can choose to feel it instead of being controlled by it, and where contradictory emotions about your loved one aren’t so confusing. *Your* medley of grief will show you so much about yourself and your life, and at some point, the music will make sense... it might even sound good.