

GO THROUGH GRIEF

At Bereavement meetings we hear: "We must go through our grief, not around it." What does "go through" grief mean?

It means to cry when you feel you need to, to express your anger in appropriate ways when you feel it, to muddle around in your inability to concentrate, and to wallow in your self-pity when it overwhelms you. It means to allow yourself to actively experience and appropriately express every grief manifestation that comes on you. It is only by doing this that you will arrive at healthy resolution of your grief—and a comfortable life again.

Every emotion creates energy. If we do not expend that energy by directly expressing our emotions, it is pushed down inside us and creates a pressure cooker of unspent energy. The pressure will build until it explodes in a way that can be destructive to us and to those around us.

Since I was conditioned to not express my emotions I fought them as hard as I could and tried to push them out of my consciousness. But, my unexpressed anger at life, God and the woman who hit, and killed my son resulted in frequent temper tantrum flung at my surviving children. Trying to keep myself busy resulted in even further complicating my state of confusion. By not allowing myself to cry I developed an almost constant burning in the back of my eyes and my throat felt constricted most of the time. Trying to fight my emotions buried me even deeper in the abysmal pit of destructive and prolonged grief.

I have heard parents say: "If I ever let myself go, I'll never stop crying." Yes, you will. If you allow yourself to cry, you will find that you will cry yourself out. Good, hard crying is exhausting and self-limiting.

Constructive expression of anger, such as telling the individual or God that we are angry with them, or writing a letter to the person we are angry with (and later tearing it up) will release the energy of anger. Thus it will be shorter in duration and intensity, and will eventually be resolved.

The fatigue that many of us experience is our body's natural defense against facing the terrible reality that our loved one is dead. Don't fight this fatigue, especially in the early months after your loved one's death when the weakness is most pronounced. Don't force yourself to do anything

more than you have to do to maintain your job or your family. Allow yourself more time to rest. Pamper yourself with things YOU like to do. This weakness is temporary and your energy will return in time. Fighting the weakness and telling yourself to keep busy will wear you out even more and delay the return of your strength.

Self-pity is part of grief. In reality, our loved one is not in pain, We are. No matter what the circumstances of our loved one's death, most of us believe that he or she is happy with God, so our grief is for what WE have lost. It is for what has been taken away from us.

We have a tendency to put a negative connotation on self-pity. It is the "don't feel sorry for yourself" attitude. Therefore we deny ourselves the activity of helpful indulgence in self-pity.

A compromise to this belief is a technique that works for many people. It is to actually set a time limit on how long we allow ourselves to indulge in a session of self-pity. At a time when you are hurting especially badly tell yourself: "I am going to allow myself to wallow in self-pity for a half-hour (or what ever length of time you wish) and then I will stop." What happens is that the emotions of sadness and regret are experienced and expressed, and for a period of time the accompanying energy is spent. As with other emotions that are expressed, this expression is self-terminating.

Just as our physical weakness is our body's way of shutting out the reality of our loved one's death, the inability to concentrate is our mind's way of protecting us from that reality. Don't fight the confusion you feel. Tell yourself that the confusion is normal and that it will pass. Try not to take on complicated tasks. In your occasional clear moments write out a list of things you have to do. During the confused times, check the list and try to do just one thing at a time.

Ask for help from other members of the family in doing anything that is complicated. Admit to others that you are having trouble thinking. Ask them to help you with what you have to do. Fighting the confusion only adds to it.

It is important to know that just because you experience anger, self-pity, or any of the other manifestations of grief now, does not mean that you will always experience them. Most of these manifestations will pass or lessen in intensity as we deal with them.

No one can tell you how long you will experience a certain aspect of your grief because all of us grieve differently and for different lengths of time. Be patient with yourself. Take your own

time. If you allow yourself to feel what you are feeling you will move out of that place in your grief much sooner. Fighting grief delays grief.

It is not usual for any of us to give into our emotions or pamper ourselves, but it is also not usual for any of us to have someone we love die. It will not be easy to actively permit yourself to experience and express most of the grief manifestations. Because most of them hurt, or are very uncomfortable, our tendency is to avoid them. But, to reach the other side of our grief we must head directly into the pain.

A final note. It is possible that to family and friends it may seem that we are "giving in" to our grief. That is exactly what we are doing. They cannot understand that what we are doing is beneficial to our healing, any more than they can understand what our grief is like unless they have experienced the death of someone close.

Remind yourself that it is your grief and your pain and that you know what is best for yourself. Do not let yourself be influenced by what the non-bereaved will say.

Margaret H. Gerner, MSW