

Loss, Death, and Grief
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As an old calendar year ends and a new one begins, there is much anticipation that change is about to happen. Sometimes the anticipation is seen as a good thing as in the ending of winter, the completion of a school semester, or hoping for the new spring season to plant. However, for some people the change is anticipated but not without some heartfelt sorrow. It may even be considered a sad thing. When an individual has experienced major losses, such as deaths of family or friends, tragic car accidents and injuries, divorce or other life changing events, or struggling with terminal illness such as cancer or heart disease, the sense of grief and sorrow can be overwhelming. They may not see the transition between years as a new beginning but as another year of sorrow and losses to add to the years already deep with grief.

Especially when an individual has experienced many deaths within a short period of time or over a few years, they may feel that they have not had an opportunity to grieve or adjust to the losses. They may feel that they cannot manage another holiday season, anniversary date, or birthday reminder. They may think that the more time that lapses between the loss and the present time, that the good reminders are fading and that they wish to have the intensity of loss to keep fresh the memory of the person that died.

Grief is the way a person feels, thinks, and acts as they mourn and ache for their loss. Grief can be consuming of energy, spirit, and joy. Many times a person finds that they have uncontrollable tears and are unable to feel happiness or enthusiasm for daily activities. They may forget to maintain daily hygiene or find it difficult to concentrate on simple tasks. In some cases, an individual may increase their consumption of alcohol or other drug usage; may engage in risky behaviors (high speed driving, unprotected sex), or may withdraw from contact with family and friends. They may find it much easier to ignore routine tasks such as paying bills or mowing the lawn. They may not understand how the sight of a school crossing sign or a newspaper story could devastate them with a flood of reminders and fresh tears.

In some tribal cultures, the grief period is determined by the burial customs or beliefs about death. For example, if the practice of a tribal community is that the burial should be done within a specific period of hours and not days, than for some family members that may be seen as too immediate. This practice may not feel appropriate for those who need a bit more time to adjust to the loss of a family member. Some time the tribal belief is that only a certain number of days are set aside for mourning and once those days are past, the mourning is over. Other tribal beliefs may be that all the deceased's personal belongings are given away or destroyed within a certain period of time. Family members may have difficulty adjusting to not having those personal possessions since they think they need personal remembrances of their loved one. This may create confusion and conflict about what tribal practices should be conducted and which should be eliminated as family members deal with loss and grief.

As grief becomes almost unbearable, this can lead to irrational, inappropriate, or antagonistic decision making. Family members may have increased conflict between each other; there may be hostility about who is in charge of making family decisions, arrangements, or acquiring items of value.

The reactions of grief can become complicated when there has been a succession of losses. Many times the natural or biological reaction to an immediate tragedy is to shut down emotionally, a numbing of feelings and dissipation of thoughts. Tragedy information may be too much to take in all at once,

especially if it is unexpected or totally unanticipated. People may faint, they may just drop to the floor, or they may need assistance standing or moving. They may feel like they have forgotten how to walk. They may strike out physically, run away, or scream. When many losses come one on top of the other, the layering of the losses may create a sense of being overwhelmed and the inability to process the losses in any meaningful, healing way.

If many deaths occur in secession or within a short period of time, or a major death happens (spouse, child, parent, sibling), the sense of grief and sorrow can lead to depression, or become layered along with other life challenges. The individual may not feel that there is an outlet or an opportunity to sort out the intense sense of loss and longing. They may feel burdened by the pain of the loss and by the sorrow that is constant and overshadows all other good feelings. They may feel quite tender and easily overcome by sadness with any kind of a reminder.

Tribal communities have a long history of dealing with different kinds of trauma, loss, death, and other tragedies. Many of the tribal practices and customs were established to address loss, death, and grief. Historically when cultural and spiritual practices were combined, mourning and community support was an accepted and typical part of dealing with trauma, loss, and death. Whether the tribal practice was to immediately bury the deceased, conduct ceremonies for four days, or have a three year memorial period, the process was established to make the emotional adjustments and transition toward a journey without the person being present any longer. Following tribal customs may bring much comfort and relief; there can be reassurance when hearing prayers, words, and songs in behalf of the person by family friends and family members. It is also helpful to have a specific time to mourn and to anticipate the gathering of family and friends for the anniversary time or memorial times.

In more recent time, religious services, therapy or counseling, wakes and funeral activities, and/or memorials are different ways of helping adjust in the emotional transition when death has occurred.

Grief is a consuming black hole that can swallow all the good thoughts and feelings a person may wish to retain. Grief can be twisted back into itself so much so that it may feel like grief will never go away. Grief can be debilitating and relentless in taking away so much joy or anticipation of good times. Grief is a condition of being human. Grief can be embraced for a period of time. It should be with the understanding that the love for one, whose journey is beyond this earth, should be greater than the grief. Don't let grief turn into anger, helplessness, or hopelessness.

Grief has led to the establishment of college scholarships, prevention programs (Mothers Against Drunk Drivers-MADD), benevolence (Amish community embracing the family of the gunman), sports tournaments (Browning Pipestem Golf Tournament), and other charitable contributions. Prayers, offerings, remembrances, doing service to others, and being grateful for the blessings of family can gently replace the intense feelings of grief. Talking to others, praying for others, and offering blessings for others can help make the transition easier from mourning to having more enthusiasm for life.

Many times it is the understanding of one's place in the world and the knowledge and appreciation that there is a Creator; that having gratitude allows the grief and sorrow to be replaced with soft memories. That one can have anticipation of renewal with the next season of life and the beginning of a new year; that there is hope.

This article is being submitted and made possible by the Indian Country Child Trauma Center (2009)