

Grief Has Many Kinds of Expressions
Dolores Subia BigFoot, PhD © 2010

Grief has many different expressions; grief is in response to loss. When our small dog, Wee-Wee Dude died; our big dog, Goe-Tuss, laid on the grave for hours and would return each day to the small mound. In times past, before the loss of his companion, Goe-Tuss rolled on his back in obvious “relaxation” poses and ventured in different places in the yard, never in one spot. Once the grave filled, he laid on his belly with his paws over his face and did not leave that place.

Grief strikes when that which we hold dear and cherish greatly is no longer with us or when an intimate relationship/friendship ends especially when it is out of our control. Grief can occur when what was normal, typical, expected, or “taken for granted” changes due to some event and those thoughts, feelings, and expectations are not longer possible or the same. Grief can also come when reminders or current events have similar characteristics of what was before. Loss can be any number of life events, most recognizable are death of a love one, divorce, illness, serious accidents, unemployment, natural disasters (floods, fire, tornados) and similar events results in death, relocation, or a shift in what was typically expected to happen. Loss will change relationships, wife to widow, married to being single, father to being without a child, healthy to diagnosis of terminal illness, or family with children to a family with less children. When an individual experiences a loss or many losses, it may seem that life has become unbalance and overwhelmingly sorrowful. A person may sit and stare for hours without realizing what they are doing; others may find anger and revenge a more malleable emotion to express, others may be motivated to seek solace in helping others. There are a great many ways that people react when grief and loss wash over them.

Grief, loss, sorrow, bereavement, sadness, heartache, mourning, anguish, or simply uncontrollable tears are different ways that individuals describe how they feel when loss occurs. Some people may become very self-destructive when they have a loss, they may drink more, engage in risky behaviors such as fast driving, indiscriminate sexual activities, change jobs, sell their home, substance abuse, be susceptible to harmful requests (giving money or allowing someone access to their home and assets); or they may become consumed or obsessed by understanding death and dying.

It is an unfortunate fact that American Indian people experience loss and sorrow at a more frequent rate compared to the general population. American Indians have a higher rate of suicide, homicide, child maltreatment, violence, and other kinds of early death due to complications of diabetes and/or heart disease. Parents may experience the loss of one, two, or more children. Adolescents may experience the loss of siblings, parents, grandparents, and friends. Adult children may have grandchildren, siblings, or a spouse died within short periods of time. All of the people who experience loss may feel so overwhelmed they are unable to function adequately to work, care for their other family members, or managed their business affairs in a productive way. They may become depressed and/or suicidal. In response to grief and sorrow, parents compensate by drinking or substance usage, there are the additional factors of adverse experiences, i.e., children being removed from the home and placed in out of home placements due to parental abuse of drugs or alcohol. Once a child has one such trauma such as removed due to unsafe parenting, those children have a higher risk of being victimized multiples times over. This can occur as a result of either the repeated unsuccessful attempts to return a child to the home and the parent inability to maintain sufficient stability to care for their child or the continuous removal of the child and the potential for re-victimization in out-of-home placements by poor supervision. This sorrow is compounded by the repeated losses suffered as children are removed and

parents are unable to build appropriate relationships with their children and among siblings or other extended family.

Grief can be very consuming of thoughts, energy, spirit, emotions, and reactions. It can affect all aspects of life - emotional, physical, mental, spiritual, and relational. It can be in waves, slowly building momentum to come crushing upon a person leaving them feeling highly vulnerable as it ebbs away, only to start building again. It can strike unexpectedly, disarming a person spiritually and creating a bigger void. Grief has many forms and shades that leads to hurt, anger, sadness, sorrow, and desperation.

A person can experience grief in all aspects of themselves, emotionally with intense feelings of loss, tearfulness, weepy, or unable to feel joyful about anything. Physically a person may have a lack of energy and motivation to even take care of daily hygiene, eat, or sleep. There may be the inability to work or do daily chores. Mentally a person may be unable to concentrate or form coherent thoughts or communicate in appropriate ways. There may be intrusive, disturbing, distressing, painful, upsetting, troubling, or uncomfortable thoughts. Each of these will affect the spiritual and relational elements in different degrees. Spiritually a person may question why and not be reassured or find support in spiritual activities. The relational element may involve the poor or inappropriate interactions with other family members, friends, co-workers, and other connections including animals or pets, the environment, and organizations. This relational element can involve any kind of relationship, for example with other people, with education systems, with safety and the law, or with co-workers. When someone is consumed by loss they may not pay bills on time, they may spend too much time gambling, they may try "to fix" others, calling attention to the shortcomings of others. They may sleep all the time or stay up all night. They may take off and not let others' know where they are. They may suddenly make decisions that don't seem to make sense. The end result is that they are not engaging in healthy or productive relationships with their family, friends, or co-workers.

Unbridled grief can lead to major depression, complicated grief, suicide, substance abuse, disruptive relationships and other maladapted behaviors resulting in more grief, sorrow, and inability to function. Many people in grief may not fully comprehend the dynamics when a particular devastating event triggers a thought or a feeling leading to a strong interaction between thoughts (mental) and feelings (emotional), that leads to certain behaviors or actions (physical), the effect on self and others (relational) and the unbalance experienced in understanding one self (spiritual). For example, after a death of a child, the person may wonder what to do, to relocate to get away from where they think painful memories are most prominent. The loss is the triggering event (death), the range of thoughts may be, "I hate this place, I need to get away, I always wanted to leave, I can't stand being here anymore;" the feelings may be sadness, weepiness, sorrow, anger, rejection, feeling disconnected from others; the behavior may be to drink, to pick fights, to leave, to move away, or withdraw from family and friends. This will result in being disconnected in the relationship with others; that is they are no longer functioning adequately as a parent, or being a relative to others. This person may question why they are alive, their sense of meaningfulness, their sense of worth and their capacity to achieve any kind of joy after experiencing a loss. They may feel no or little spiritual connection with a greater power to help them heal. They may make critical decisions through a heavy haze of grief not realizing the total consequences or so caught by grief they can't think beyond their pain.

Unfortunately it is a fact, that American Indians experience more losses and that our children suffer from adverse childhood events that result in poor adult mental health. Tribal people are establishing various programs to assist in the grieving process and lessen the potential for more harm. Many communities are hosting wellness conferences that focus on wellbeing and balance (emotional, mental,

physical, spiritual, and relational aspects of self); SAMHSA Garrett Lee Smith Suicide Prevention grantee are focusing on prevention and intervention with youth and their families at risk for suicide; Department of Justice recently announcement more attention and funding to prevent violence crimes in Indian Country; national organizations working in disaster response are targeting reservation and tribally communities, individually families are hosting memorials and other events promoting healing and wellness, and some tribes are sponsoring grief and healing conferences.

Grief is a natural reaction to loss; it is expressed in many different ways. Understanding that counseling, time, being involved with family and friends, working, or compassionate service to others in need has a healing way. Memorials, offerings blessings and prayers, singing songs and use of music, and other activities can greatly help the healing process.

What we can say is that grief is a basic emotion. Humans as well as other creatures mourn when they experience a serious loss. Understanding that mourning it is more than just missing someone; it is an overwhelming feeling of something has been ripped from the essence of oneself. There is help, as can be shown in the Circle of Healing there are many responses to grief and there are many methods to healing.

Individuals experiencing overwhelming grief may seek mental health services; fortunately mental health providers have a structured protocol that is very effective in dealing with complicated grief, a common diagnosis for many American Indian people with multiple losses. More information can be found at www.muse.edu. Other resources are at www.icctc.org; www.ihs.gov (suicide page); www.nctsn.org; www.okinnovationcenter.org. Others can turn to spiritual teachings and support, family, or other professional services.

This article is made possible through the support of the Indian Country Child Trauma Center and Project Making Medicine at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center. Dolores Subia BigFoot, PhD, is an Associate Professor at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center and an enrolled member of the Caddo Nation of Oklahoma with affiliation with the Northern Cheyenne Tribe of Montana.