

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Grief

What it is, and ways to cope; how to play a supporting role; what to give

When my family and I were lowering my sister, Lisa Miller's, casket into the ground, I started laughing uncontrollably. Something that sounded like a laugh anyway. It was a horrific juxtaposition, to me and no doubt to onlookers. I felt like a jackal or hyena, some sort of cackling menace. I couldn't stop. Her death felt ridiculous. Everything felt so wrong—I felt so wrong—and that must have been my way of being true to the moment.

Grief is a force of nature. Though it can feel problematic as hell, bereavement is an essential piece of the human picture, whichever way it surfaces. It may be asking too much for you to revel in your grief, but it's important for you to understand the relationship between grief and love. It's actually straightforward: the pain of loss stems from the power of love. If you didn't care, this would all be easier.

Bereavement and Mourning

LET'S TAKE A MOMENT TO DISCUSS LANGUAGE USED IN THE FIELD. *Grief* is unrestricted and occurs to some degree with any loss. *Bereavement* is specific to the death of a loved one.

Our friend Jessie compared the days after her sister died at 23 from a brain aneurysm to walking through a plate-glass window. There's the initial shock of not understanding what happened. Then days or weeks spent in bed, too injured to do much of anything, followed by the surreal experience of reentering a world that seems too loud and too bright. Getting on the bus a week after her sister's death, she was bewildered when someone yelled at the driver. *How can people be so rude to one another? Why is the world going on as though nothing happened? My sister is dead!*

Grief has a pre-loss phase, an acute phase at the time of the

actual loss, and a long tail. That tail is mourning. *She's in mourning.* It's a beautiful word and connotes the process through which grief evolves from bottomless sorrow to newfound perspective. When the mourning period ends, your relationship to the lost one has not ended—it's not something you “push through”—but has been transformed. The loss is ingrained now, a part of you. Life and death reconcile, and the world is revealed as a place that can hold everything, including what's gone. If you let it, your relationship with the person who died continues and can be rich and powerful, however different.

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Losing Support

TIP

Social visits are likely out of reach, but it may be possible to schedule a “bereavement” visit with your loved one's doctor in clinic.

OFTEN IT'S THE MEDICAL TEAM TO WHOM the family grows attached—and their attachment works in the other direction, too. Sadly for all involved, there is not much room in our health care system for ongoing contact. At the moment of death, the team must move on to the next patient. This is another way in which grief compounds.

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Grief Is Not Always What It Seems

GRIEF IS A MASQUERADER. IT PRESENTS AS NIHILISM, BITTERNESS, jealousy, self-loathing, tears out of nowhere—and sometimes inappropriate laughter. It can be numbness or flatness or lethargy; it can be full of agitation and commotion or bursts of insight or creativity. The point is, you're *altered* by it. And unless

you understand that grief presents itself in a thousand different ways, you may misjudge yourself or others.

Sometimes it's anger directed inward instead of at the deceased. People will blame themselves for not having said or done the right things before the death occurred, not saying "good-bye" or "I love you" when they had a chance. Claire Bidwell Smith, a grief therapist, sees this often: "They are so upset with themselves for not seeing it earlier, and there's so much anger, guilt, and remorse."

Bereavement is dynamic and varies in intensity as it winds its way through a person. Numbness on one side; unending tears on the other.

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Grief Can Be Isolating

REBECCA SOFFER, A COFOUNDER OF THE MODERN LOSS WEBSITE AND community, was 30 when her mother was killed in a car accident. Soffer took two weeks off after her mother's death and had barely started to grieve before returning to her job as a television producer. Three years later, she received a call from someone asking her to arrange to get her father's body picked up; he'd had a fatal heart attack on a cruise ship while traveling abroad. Stunned by the trauma of losing both parents within a few years of each other, she again dove back into work shortly thereafter. "Honestly, after each loss I felt like I was dying inside myself, and so few people knew what to do with me," she says. "Unless you're an incredibly empathic human being, if you haven't gone through profound loss yourself, it can really be difficult to effectively connect with someone moving through it. I felt like a pariah, because this topic felt so taboo. If someone asked where

my parents were, I'd say, 'In Philadelphia.' I didn't clarify that they were, in fact, underground there. It was just so much easier to be vague."

When she did come clean to people who asked about her family, it felt as though the space around her was getting sucked into a black hole. "There are few better ways to silence a conversation than to say, 'My mom just died,'" she says. "All I wanted was to feel like I could comfortably talk about my reality, not like people felt I might be contagious just because I'd used the word *dead*."

Complicated Grief

THERE'S TYPICALLY AN INFLECTION POINT AROUND THE SIX-MONTH mark after the death, when a sense of normalcy creeps back in. It's not a hard and fast rule, but when the clouds don't part and

TIP

Complicated grief is not something to overcome alone. If you recognize this kind of grief in yourself, please see the resources list in the back of the book and reach out to a mental health professional. It needs to be taken seriously.

intense mourning persists well beyond that time, it starts to bump up against what's known as *complicated* or *prolonged* or *pathological* grief.

This grief is different. It is compounded by dips into depression, a new or exacerbated medical condition, or alcohol or drug abuse. Intrusive, even violent thoughts are not uncommon, along with profound guilt. Grief has moved from a useful, if difficult, process to a harmful one. The grief itself has become an illness.

As you'd imagine, complicated grief is more common in people predisposed to mental illness or addiction or otherwise already dealing with trauma or difficult circumstances. It is also more common in people suffering the

death of a child or an unexpected death or when significant illness between you and the deceased was left unresolved. Death by a violent act or suicide is a common cause, too.

Taking Care of Yourself

You never “get over” the death of a loved one—that’s not the goal. Living on is. Here are a few ideas that may help:

- **Take time off work.** Sadly, businesses are not required to offer paid bereavement leave, but many do provide three to five days off for the death of an immediate family member. Talk to your HR department about what’s possible for you.
- **Seek out clergy, chaplains, and faith-based services.** Faith traditions have time-tested practices around death, dying, and mourning. Chaplains and clergy are trained to counsel those in bereavement. Hospital chaplains in particular are intimately familiar with supporting people of all faiths and of none. And many churches, synagogues, mosques, and other houses of worship have free programs and groups for grief support. Services often run the gamut from practical assistance, such as transportation and meals, to counseling and prayer groups. There is very likely a warm embrace awaiting you, with centuries of collective experience and wisdom to rest upon; you just need to show up ready to receive.
- **Contact your local hospice provider.** They are required to offer bereavement services to the community, whether or not your

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TIP
Most congregations will welcome anyone in need, whether inside or outside their faith tradition, with no requirement that you take up their tradition as your own.

loved one was enrolled with their program. Despite the legal mandate, the funding for bereavement programs is paltry, so the services may not be robust, but they're a good place to start. Hospice agencies are terrific local resource centers as a rule and will often keep a list of psychotherapists and grief counselors in the community who may be further helpful to you.

- **Attend support groups or find them online.** Being with others who are working through grief can bring relief (no more pretending everything is okay). These are generally facilitated by mental health care professionals or other counselors. Less formal peer groups can be wonderfully helpful as well. The common thread is a safe place, real or virtual, where you can air your thoughts and feelings and be with others who are in a similar place. Here you are more likely to be seen and heard, not judged. Inquire

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FAST FACT

Rituals vary among cultures—Hindus encourage the removal of hair during mourning, while Jews grow theirs (in the form of a beard)—but the research clearly shows that performing rituals after a loss, whatever they may be, helps to relieve grief's pain.

with the hospice agency or your clinical team or hospital, or search for local groups online.

- **Try psychotherapy.** If you're prone to clinical depression or anxiety or are experiencing suicidal thoughts, don't mess around. It can be difficult to tease out grief from depression, so err on the safe side and get help. Therapy can work wonders, even if you're not depressed.
- **Ritualize.** American culture has largely lost touch with the grief rituals of the past and the wisdom behind them: hanging crepe in the windows, wearing black, wearing an armband, to name a few. These physical symbols buy some space for you and everyone around you. People are more forgiving and respectful; expectations of

you adjust. With traditional rituals you're tapping into a time-tested collective understanding of what you're going through. With these tracks already laid, you get to step away from your swirling mind and follow an old pattern of action without the burden of thought. If, however, you don't want to follow tradition, you might gain an important but different power by creating your own ritual; a touchstone whose meaning you will always understand.

- **Journal.** Each day before you go to bed, write down one thing you've managed to do (even if it was just waking up). Or just write about your experience. There's no need to keep what you write; just get it out and throw it away if you like. Writing, much like talking with other people, is a way to understand and process what you're going through, and it can also help you not take your thoughts too literally; your mind in grief might suggest all sorts of odd things to you.
- **Get fundamental.** Since grief is discombobulating, it pays to remember the basics of life. Try taking your shoes off, and feel the ground beneath you; take slow, deep breaths; drink water; eat good food (and really taste it); sleep.
- **Make some new "family rules."** If you've lost a central part of your nuclear family, it can shake the very foundation of the unit. Writing down some family rules in a place where everyone can see them is one way to introduce much-needed stability. Things such as forgiveness, getting plenty of sleep, respecting one another's feelings, working together to get things done, and remembering to ask for help when you need it are great reminders that you are all in this together.

These ideas aside, try not to rush through this period. Grieving is a rite of passage and has immense importance in a healthy

experience of full life. When my sister died, I felt I was rewarded, both by others and by myself, for moving on as quickly as possible. The pain was intolerable, and I knew I wanted to reach a sense of perspective where everything would be in its new place, so I beelined for that outcome and left too many of my feelings behind in a pile, unrecognized and unprocessed. I wanted to get on top of my grief with force. I regret this now, intensely. In my haste, all I really achieved was putting parts of our relationship behind me sooner than I had to. Now I find myself wishing I could do it again, all the gut wrenching, so that I could feel closer to her.

Concentric Circles of Support

EVERYONE IN YOUR CIRCLE IS ALSO DEALING WITH WHAT IS HAPPENING. And it's important for you to recognize grief in yourself as well as in others so you know how to listen with compassion. In this swirl, too many things can be taken personally, leading to hurt feelings and unnecessary isolation.

Say your best friend lost her husband, and you were also close to him. Your principal job is to be a shoulder for her to cry on—even if you miss him dearly, too. But do tell someone who was a bit more removed, such as your own partner, so he or she can support you.

The psychologist Susan Silk and mediator Barry Goldman's Ring Theory offers a helpful way to visualize this concentric network of support. Here's how it works:

1. Draw a circle, and write the name of the person who is grieving inside it.
2. Then draw a bigger circle around that one, and write the names of the people who are next most affected by the event.

3. Keep drawing larger circles and listing those who are affected: friends, colleagues, distant relatives, and so forth.

Comfort goes in, pain goes out. The idea is that wherever you are in the circle, you are getting support and giving support.

According to Silk and Goldman, this is your “kvetching order.” The person in the center ring is the focal point. Your job is to listen to her and make her feel better in any way you know how. Offer her food, foot rubs, whatever she needs. She may dump her pain all over you, and your job is to take it in and hold steady, not to try to cheer her up. The concentric rings pay it forward—or outward—so when you need to cry or shake your fists at the sky, there’s a ring of support out there for you, too.

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How to Be There for Someone Who’s Grieving

KNOW THAT JUST CALLING OR SHOWING UP MAKES A DIFFERENCE. WE don’t call because we don’t know what to say. We swear we’ll visit but keep putting it off. It’s almost as though we think grief is contagious.

The grieving person may not know what he or she needs. If it feels natural and right to send a text asking “What can I do for you?,” go for it. But answering that question yourself and just bringing over a hot meal or leaving a card at the door may be even more helpful. The griever simply may not have the energy to respond to open questions or offers. A small gesture will be felt and appreciated, even if the grievers can’t bring themselves to acknowledge it right away. Here are a few ideas for what to give:

- **Comfort food.** People often forget to eat or eat badly when they're deep in grief. Dropping off a bag of takeout or a home-cooked meal is a thoughtful and easy thing to do. There are also meal registries, such as the one you might set up for the parents of a new baby, that allow many cooks to fill in dates on the calendar, so that not everyone shows up at once.
- **Photos.** Sharing your photos of the person who died, in an on-line scrapbook or a printed one, is a beautiful way to help loved ones memorialize.
- **Time away.** For those who work full-time and get no paid bereavement leave, there is little time to yell at the universe. Offer to take the kids off your friend's hands so she can get away. Or check to see if your company will let you transfer some days off to a grieving co-worker. ❖

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Bottom Line

GRIEF

Grief is a period. A state. A place with its own weather and terrain. Even when we're feeling so many emotions we can barely stand to wake up in the morning, the sweetness of having loved—and still loving—is there, too. Look for it, because you will not feel like this forever. This can be a very tender time, raw and unprotected—more exquisitely sensitive than usual; maybe more truthful. The grieving process is an opportunity, too. Take it.

