

## Expressions of Grief

The ten “expressions of grief” are understood to be a series of grief-experiences that characterize normative grieving. This is not to say that everyone goes through all of the expressions in a row, nor that everyone will experience all of the ten expressions of grief. The ten expressions are about the road the majority of humans must travel in order to get back into the mainstream of life. It is impossible to differentiate clearly between each of these grief-experiences, for a person never moves neatly from one to another.

### **“WE ARE IN A STATE OF SHOCK”**

When the sorrow is overwhelming, we are sometimes temporarily anesthetized in response to the tragic experience. This shock may last...(up to one full year). Sometimes at the funeral home we see the sorrowing wife and find that she is almost radiant as she greets those who have come to offer their sympathy. People say, “What serene faith she has!” Yet the truth of the matter may well be that this woman is experiencing a temporary anesthesia which is helping her along until she is ready to move on to the next stage of grief. Shock is a temporary escape from reality. As long as it is temporary it is good.

This is one of the reasons it is good for us to keep busy and continue to carry on as much of our usual activities as possible during the period of crisis. It is certainly not good to have someone take over completely for us at such a time and make all our decisions for us. The sooner the person has to deal with the immediate problems and make decisions again, the better.

### **“WE EXPRESS EMOTION”**

Emotional release comes at about the time it begins to dawn on us how dreadful this loss is. Sometimes without warning there wells up within us an uncontrollable urge to express our grief. And this is exactly what we ought to do: allow ourselves to express the emotions we actually feel. We have been given tear glands, and we are supposed to use them when we have good reason to use them. In our society it is very difficult for men to cry.

Many men think that crying is not only a sign of weakness, but that letting themselves go emotionally might lead to a “nervous breakdown.” Men seem not to understand that it is the person who holds himself tense, who refuses to let go, who may be in for trouble. Emotion is essential to a person and to try to repress it is to make one less than a person. We need not apologize for emotion in our grief. We ought to express the grief we feel. Some will be too embarrassed to grieve openly; but then they ought to go off by themselves and let their grief take its natural course in any variety of ways.

### **“WE FEEL DEPRESSED AND VERY LONELY”**

Eventually there comes a feeling of utter depression and isolation. It is during these days that we are sure that no one has ever grieved as we are grieving. No one has ever grieved EXACTLY as we are grieving, but the awful experience of being utterly depressed and isolated is a universal phenomenon. We should remind ourselves that this is to be expected following any significant loss and is normal and a part of good healthy grief. Depression is much like a very dark day when the clouds have so blacked out the sun that the sun doesn't seem to be shining at all. The sun IS shining, but something has come between the people and the sun. Depression is like this: Something has come between the person and God and between the person and his fellow men so that he feels tremendous loneliness, an awful sense of isolation and he can't seem to break through it. But one day it will pass. Dark days do not last forever, even though the person lost in the depression seems to think they will. For some the clouds roll away seemingly all at once. Something happens within them, or some important event triggers a movement toward the next stage of grief. For others it takes longer, stretching the weeks into months.

### **“WE MAY EXPERIENCE PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS OF DISTRESS”**

Many patients become ill because of some unresolved grief situation. Usually the patient first goes to see a doctor with a physical complaint. Then it is found out that they have sustained a great loss during the past months or year or two (or more). It is clear that they have not yet worked through some of the central problems related to that loss. Some of them who have physical symptoms of distress have stopped at one of the stages in the ten-stage grief process. Unless someone can help them to work through the emotional problems involved in the stage in which they seem to be fixed, they will remain ill. The patient must work through his/her feelings of loss.

### **“WE MAY BECOME PANICKY”**

We find ourselves becoming panicky because we can think of nothing but the loss. We try to get our mind off the subject, but soon we are right back again where we started. This hinders our effectiveness in anything we are trying to do. Our work shows we are not producing the work of which we are capable. We worry about our mental health. We have to ask people to repeat questions, and this worries us, and they wonder what is wrong with us. We simply cannot concentrate. Inability to concentrate in time of grief is just as natural as it can be. When a person begins worrying about losing his mind, he often panics. He becomes almost paralyzed with fear, and that throws him into this panic. This is why it is important to understand something about the grief process in advance of the crisis. When we have been briefed about some of the tricks that grief plays on our minds, then we are not overwhelmed by the disturbing thoughts that seek to take over. It is the panic of thinking we are going through something wholly abnormal that throws us deeper into despair. But it is normal, it is normal! It is comforting to know that even panic is normal.

### **“WE FEEL A SENSE OF GUILT ABOUT THE LOSS”**

We should make the distinction between “normal” guilt and neurotic guilt. Normal guilt is the guilt we feel when we have done something or neglected to do something for which we ought to feel guilty. Neurotic guilt is feeling all out of proportion to our real involvement in this particular problem. An illustration of normal guilt: When we lose a loved one through death, it would be hard to conceive of any of us who had lived closely with the departed one who would not feel guilty about some of the things we did not do for this person when he/she was alive, or the things we did do that hurt this person when he or she was with us. We need to ask forgiveness and come to terms with this guilt. Neurotic guilt is often intertwined with real guilt and it is difficult to separate one from the other completely. EVERY person has some neurotic guilt feelings; it is a matter of degree. We need to be aware of

these neurotic tendencies. Unresolved guilt and misunderstood emotions of this type can make us miserable for years, or they might come out in a variety of physical symptoms of distress. It is important for us to face our feelings of guilt and not be afraid or embarrassed to talk about our guilt feelings with those who have been trained to help us when the going gets rough.

### **“WE ARE FILLED WITH ANGER AND RESENTMENT”**

As we come out of depression, we may be more able to express some of the strong feelings of anger and resentment of which we may not even have been aware. Anger and resentment are a part of good grief in that they are normal for every human. If allowed to take over, they can be very harmful, yet they are normal and can be overcome. When we have something precious taken from us we inevitably go through a stage when we are very critical of everything and everyone who was related to the loss. As humans, we are always looking for someone to blame. We may be hostile toward the doctors, the nurses, relatives and even God.

### **“WE RESIST RETURNING”**

Although we may be quite well along in our grief work and really want to get back to our usual activities, something inside us resists returning. Our loss has been something special and we feel that other people just do not understand how great the loss was. They are off talking about other things and we are left with our sorrow. Everyone has forgotten our tragedy. Somebody has to keep the memory of it alive. We must not allow things to get back to normal again. We also find that when we attempt to get back into life again, it is much too painful. We would rather grieve than fight the battle of coping with new situations. We want to stay with the grief...the familiar.

We also resist returning because our modern way of life makes it so difficult for us to grieve about any loss in the presence of other people. We are forced to carry all the grief within ourselves. Grief seems to be out of place in our society. We offer our sympathy to our grieving friends immediately after their loss has occurred, but from then on we say in effect: “Now, let’s get back to business as usual again.”

Most people who are grieving are very considerate of others. They do not wish to force their troubles on other people.

#### **“GRADUALLY HOPE COMES THROUGH”**

Now and then we get a little glimpse of hope in one experience or another. The cloud begins to break up, and rays of light come through. We may be in deep grief anywhere from a few weeks to many months (to years). We are never quite sure how long grief is going to last. We must remember that no two people are the same, nor are any two grief situations identical. Some do not express their feelings overtly and don't seem to need to. Within themselves they probably struggle with many of these stages, but are able to handle these problems by themselves, and they don't want anyone “meddling” in their lives by trying to help them in their grief. The great majority, however, need to express their emotions. They need the affection and warm encouragement of those around them. With this help, they find that other experiences in life can be meaningful again. Rabbi Joshua Liebman in his book, PEACE OF MIND, SAYS, “The melody that the loved one played upon the piano of your life will never be played quite that way again, but we must not close the keyboard and allow the instruments to gather dust. We must seek out other artists of the spirit, new friends who gradually will help us to find the road to life again, who will walk that road with us.”

#### **“WE STRUGGLE TO AFFIRM REALITY”**

We finally begin to affirm reality. This does not mean we become “our old selves again” for when we go through any significant grief experience we come out of it as different people. Depending upon the way we respond to this event, we are either stronger people than we were before or weaker – either healthier in spirit or sicker. Some never really work through their grief, and months and even years later are still fighting battles within themselves. Others, although they have grieved deeply, come to realize that everything has not been taken from them. Although life will never be the same again, they begin to sense that there is much in life that can be affirmed, and to affirm something is to say that it is good.

As we begin to struggle to affirm reality, we find that we need not be afraid of the real world. We can live in it again. We can even love it again. The dark clouds are beginning to break up and occasionally for brief moments rays of the sun come through, and hope once more becomes a part of our outlook on life.

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