

The Many Faces of Grief

Coping with the Loss of a Loved One

by Debbie Cox Schwalbe



He is here. He is among us. He is in every snowflake, in every creature we see flying across the vast prairie farmlands, in every sunrise and sunset, and every magnificent flower.

He is also in our memories of loved ones who are no longer with us. His presence is with us in both the darkness and in the light of our lives. He is with us, whether we feel Him or not.

While we may not recognize Him as the God of Love after we've lost a loved one, it's important to remember He "loaned" this person to us during their brief stay on this earth for many reasons; some of which we may never know or fully understand.

God knows what we need much more than we know our needs. He does everything for a purpose. It's our responsibility to figure out where He is in our lives and what the purpose(s) is/are for our loved one to be placed in our lives. I'm sure you can identify with that. After all, God is the giver of all good things and therefore, the pain of losing someone should not be because of Him. Right?

I beg to differ. Just because I have loved and then experience the pain of loss, doesn't mean my Father doesn't love me or is punishing me. It means His plan for our loved one has been fulfilled. I now need to figure out how the "gift" of having them in my life has blessed me.

The loss of a loved one through death can be very painful. So much, that it can either bring us closer to our Father or distance us from Him. We sometimes fail to see His plan for us (and our loved one). The beauty of His gifts can be shrouded with a dull, heavy covering that is difficult to lift.

This occurs especially in the early stages of our loss. In his chapter on *The Faces of Grief*, H. Norman Wright (2004, *Experiencing Grief*) describes grief as the "bottom falling out on your world; the solid footing that you had yesterday is gone." Wright explains that in grief, typical emotions may change into "raw and fragile" ones causing us to feel as if we're losing our minds. He then discusses mourning as the other component of grief indicating mourning is a "recovery process" in which we process

and express our grief. He states mourning is a healthy and God-provided choice we make in order to endure the pain of our loss.

When I read the word "choice" it was as if a light bulb went off inside of my head, immediately helping me to feel more empowered to endure this pain. Sometimes our pain can feel as if we are Velcro and the other half of it has been quickly ripped from us. This pain can be the worst we have ever experienced. Further, what only adds to this pain is the unknown; wondering if we will see this loved one in Heaven. Wow. Now that's big.

"So, how are you doing?" is a typical greeting we usually receive when we run into people while out shopping, at church, or anyplace else. Our response usually follows along the lines of, "fine", "pretty good", or "hangin' in there." But, has anyone ever responded back to your response by saying, "No, how are you, really....?" My guess is you don't hear that very often, if at all.

The question is, are you comfortable giving an honest, heartfelt response to this type of inquiry instead of a generic one? After all, we tend to not want to revisit situations that remind us of a painful experience. We may want to talk about our pain but the other person may wish only a surface level of depth. After all, the other person may not have time to get into an in depth conversation.

Even though God created us to be resilient creatures, we are still human and we do miss our loved one. To complicate matters, we are often unable to find this "middle ground" between understanding our needs and finding others who really do care but have difficulty in making themselves present for us.

Micah 7:8 (CEV), says, "I may have fallen, but I will get up; I may be sitting in the dark, but the Lord is my light." While we have the Word's blessed assurance our Heavenly Father is with us through our difficult journey, most of us still continue to have the need to reach out to others in our time of sorrow. How do we maintain this "balance?" It is only through God we can find the peace and assurance we are not alone?

In both my professional and personal life-experiences, I have learned there is a sort of “disconnect” between what our brain tells us and what our heart is feeling. We can reason out the “whys” of things that make sense in a pragmatic sort of way, but we as loving, feeling creatures, can feel quite differently.

I’ve always wanted to know the “whys” of things. I distinctly remember many years ago when I was in grade school, my oldest brother did his due diligence to help me with my math. He once became so frustrated with my asking “why” the answer to a math problem was what it was, that he beleagueringly responded by saying, “It doesn’t matter why, it just is!”

Well, that threw me into a tailspin of not being able to relate to math. As an adult, I am better able to accept the fact we may never know “why” certain things happen. Even though my first inclination is to wonder the “whys” of life, I sometimes have to remind myself that it is what it is.

There are many emotions we experience while in our mourning process. Some of us may experience physical symptoms such as loss of appetite, restlessness in sleep, a change in sexual activity, etc. You may experience an intense preoccupation with the image of the deceased, and memories may recur with strong feelings of loss. You may feel a sense of guilt, where your focus may be more on the difficult times in the history of the relationship.

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Jon A. Tanzys
is a Certified
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233-1080

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We may experience hostile reactions such as anger at others, whether it’s with medical people, friends, or family who neglected our loved one, or anger at ourselves for failing to meet our loved one’s needs. One may even feel as if they are in a vacuum and do not know how to fill it. Some pick up the traits, activities, or interests of a deceased loved one.

I need to tell you, if you have experienced some of these descriptions of symptoms, you are considered to be mourning in a healthy way.

Other “normal” or functional reactions may include, feelings of helplessness, numbness, even joy, and acceptance. Physically you may experience weight loss, a lack of hygiene, exhaustion, and a change in appearance. Common reactions may include impaired judgment, sensitivity to music, noise, and to lights. One may daydream, avoid people, become moody and/or explosive, and lash out at others. It may be difficult to make decisions, or have impaired decision making skills. This is “why” we, the person in mourning, are advised not to make significant decisions while at least in the first year following the death of a loved one.

Our thoughts may also include denial, confusion, inability to focus on matters at hand, or depression. We may tend to glorify the olden days, or even experience lowered self-esteem. I realize this is not a list of pleasant things. However, our feelings when we lose someone through death are often unpleasant. The issue of how prolonged and invasive our reactions are is key to a healthy recovery. Should you or someone who you know seem to be unable to move past the functional side of mourning, I strongly recommend professional help with a pastor or counselor be pursued. There are many avenues to explore that will enable one to get back on the track of going forward.

The message of this article is intended to be one of hope. Usually we are more “normal” than we realize. Most importantly, however, is the fact we are not alone in our pain. We do have the blessed assurance of Jesus who loves and cherishes us. To conclude this article I’ve chosen a verse of Truth that illustrates the hope that comes from the Lord. Perhaps you can come up with one of your own that suits your needs more appropriately.

“What joy for those whose strength comes from the Lord, who have set their minds on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. When they walk through the Valley of Weeping, it will become a place of refreshing springs. The autumn rains will clothe it with blessings. They will continue to grow stronger, and each of them will appear before God in Jerusalem.” Psalm 84:5-7

May our Lord strengthen you and keep you in His loving arms today and forever.

Debbie Cox Schwalbe is a Family Therapist with Lutheran Child and Family Services. She accepts individuals, couples, and families. You can make an appointment by calling LCFS at 1-800-252-2873.