

GRIEF AND LOSS – With Love from Dr. G

Six months have passed. For some, life has returned to its normal ebb and flow. For some, the struggle continues. If you lost someone on Oct 1, 2017, then you may still be grieving the loss of your loved one. But there are many different kinds of loss that we may grieve after a traumatic experience and that is not limited to specific people who died. I've heard from many folks in our community who appear to be mourning (or at the very least, report struggling) with other losses – losing a sense of naivety, safety, direction or focus, the “self,” meaning and purpose in life. Many people have also lost relationships, even very close lifelong relationships, romantic relationships, and marriages. There is certainly no lack of *things* that we may be still grieving, so perhaps it is beneficial to explore how we can process our “losses” in the healthiest way and how we can best move through our pain.

WHAT IS GRIEF? Grief is understood to be the internal experience (i.e., what is going on inside of you) that you have when someone or something has been lost. Mourning is often referred to as the external or outward appearance of grief – what is communicated or expressed to others about your loss. The experience of grief is universal, and likely a phenomenon that all people on Earth may have at some point in their lives. However, mourning may vary as it is influenced by culture, religion, and societal norms. Grief is *not* a static thing we get rid of, get over, or figure out. Grief is a dynamic process that we need to learn to integrate into our daily existence. We hope that over time, the extent to which we suffer will lessen and our pain will be eased.

There is much ongoing research on the area of grief. My guess is that most of you have heard about the commonly discussed “stages” of grief. These are: shock/disbelief, denial, bargaining, guilt, anger, depression, and acceptance/hope. In reality, not all people experience all of these stages following loss, and also not necessarily in this order. Thus, a model like this may have limited utility. Additional emotions people often feel in the context of grief include confusion, humiliation, despair, and yearning. People can move in and out, and backwards and forwards among all of these stages and different emotions. Furthermore, grief can be complicated with feelings of guilt, shame, or unresolved issues leading to a lack of closure. When a grief reaction lasts beyond one year, we call it “prolonged” grief.

Grief is an experience that we can learn to embrace, sit in, and allow ourselves to move in and out of, mindfully. We want to find ways to express our pain that are not damaging or destructive to our lives. For example, journaling is highly recommended as a therapeutic and beneficial strategy for expressing our grief. On the other hand, drinking

excessive amounts of alcohol or using drugs to help numb the pain are not likely to help in the long run, and will most likely make problems and symptoms much worse.

TIPS TO MANAGE GRIEF:

- **Be compassionate with yourself and others.** Try not to place a timeline or a set of expectations on yourself or others. Grief takes time and everyone grieves differently. Be patient and kind. And always...remember your compassion statement: *I am having a moment of suffering. Suffering is a part of life. May I be kind to myself.* Understand that you do not need to solve any problems, fix anything, or “DO” anything (for yourself or anyone else). Just simply “be.” Compassion for others and compassion for self are one in the same (refer to [WHY COMPASSION MATTERS](#)). And if the loss has happened to someone you love, and you simply want to be supportive to them, then remember to be authentic, empathic, and patient. And whatever you do, please do NOT jump in their bucket and try to change or fix their thoughts, feelings, or behaviors (refer to [DR. GHAED'S BUCKET RULES](#) and [LEADING BY EXAMPLE](#)).
- **Be mindful.** Remind yourself that the past cannot be changed and thus beyond reflecting upon the past briefly, it may not be helpful to ruminate (i.e., think obsessively) about it. Also, try to be present both in your moment-to-moment experience of your life, and your emotional experiences. You are suffering a loss; if you have lost a loved one, then know that you do *not* honor them by also forfeiting your life (physically or mentally). You honor them by living, by thriving, and you know in your heart that is exactly what they would want for you. If you have suffered another kind of loss, then know that you must let it go in order to make space for something new, for the next phase of your life. On a final note, try not to make irreversible, impulsive, life-altering decisions when you are in crisis. Wait until the crisis has abated before you decide to quit your job, get married, get divorced, have a sex change, move out of the country, or change your name. Just wait. Be mindful (i.e., *pay attention, on purpose, in the moment, without judgment*) of your current situation and emotional state.
- **Accept and embrace**...all of your emotions, even the uncomfortable ones. Understand that all emotions serve a purpose, and we need all of them in order to function well (think about the headquarters in the Pixar film *Inside Out*). And we need our emotions to function together, in balance. We also need to express our emotions. Understanding and acknowledging the internal experience (grief) is a great starting point, but we benefit greatly when we also learn how to express our internal experience outwardly to other people. This allows us to foster

compassion in them and for ourselves, and it allows us to communicate any help or support we may need. We do not succeed alone. We need people, and we heal and process best in the context of our close relationships with other people. Social support is the key to healing and recovery, so if you have limited social support, then find a group, or seek professional help. When our minds are closed, we see no help available even though it may be right in front of us. But, when our minds are open, there are infinite possibilities and plenty of support.

*Don't run away from grief, o' soul
Look for the remedy inside the pain
Because the rose came from the thorn
And the ruby came from a stone
--- RUMI*