

Grief Triggers and Positive Memory: A Continuum

A grief trigger is anything that brings up memories related to a loss. Triggers may be obvious and easy to anticipate – like a birthday or a holiday – or they may be surprising – like spotting someone who looks like your loved one in a crowd. A grief trigger might tie to an obvious memory or emotion or it may be something that flashes into consciousness and merely leaves you with a sense of sadness and yearning.

Grief triggers are troubling because they open the floodgate for involuntary autobiographical memories. These are the memories that pop into your head without any effort on your part to recall them. They might hit you out of nowhere as you're driving down the street, sitting at your desk at work, or while you're microwaving popcorn. Many of these memories are innocuous while others, especially those associated with deceased loved ones, can leave you with a veritable range of feelings.

To clarify, these memories aren't entirely random and don't actually *come out of nowhere*; usually a sight, sound, song, smell, word, or another memory triggers them. These memories interrupt your brain's regular programming and, because strong emotion can cause a memory to imprint firmly and vividly in your mind, the intrusion may be happy-happy-joy-joy or it may make you feel like you've been hit in the gut.

For those who've recently lost a loved one, knowing these triggers are out there can cause a fair amount of anxiety. You might fear being blindsided by reminders of your loved one, their death, and their absence, especially right after a loss when your emotions are raw. Some grievers will respond by trying to eliminate and avoid reminders such as objects, people and places; others will try and battle their way through, growing less and less embarrassed by each public outburst of emotion.

In the thick of fall, under a dense fog of emotional malaise, it is always difficult for me to maintain perspective. Still, I fight the urge to fortify myself against the reminders because, although during times of darkness they seem like the enemy, my involuntary memories are usually the exact opposite. It happens often enough that a song, a place, or a face reminds me of something wonderful about my mother. Often enough that I would endure any amount of bad to remember the good.

Memories are where our loved ones continue to live after they're gone; this is why we hold onto objects that remind us of them and go to places where they feel near. True, when someone we love dies we are forevermore at risk of their memory triggering aftershocks of the pain. But inversely, if we let them, such reminders may also fill us with warmth and comfort. In time you may even find that the very "grief triggers" that once caused you sadness now fill you with a sense of love and remembrance.

Source: www.whatsyourgrief.com