

When Grief Shows Up Unexpectedly

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Grief doesn't always knock on the door politely. Sometimes it slips into ordinary moments when we least expect it. Recently, I was in a photo studio for something as simple as a new headshot. I smiled for the camera, adjusted the lighting, and then — without warning — a wave of sadness hit me so hard I could barely breathe.

The thought came: "I'll never take another picture with Daddy." Just like that, the world blurred.

I started thinking of every picture we'd ever taken — all those snapshots of smiles, celebrations, and quiet days together. I've looked through them all before, but this time, it felt different. There was no more "next time." No new memories to capture. That realization triggered twelve hours of deep, aching grief, as raw and heavy as the first day my dad passed away.

And I couldn't understand why. Why was it hitting me this hard again, after so much time had passed?

Understanding the Brain in Grief

As I later discovered, what I was experiencing wasn't strange at all — it was how the brain processes love and loss. Grief doesn't move in straight lines or follow tidy timelines. It lives in the wiring of our attachment — those same neural pathways that once recognized a loved one's face, voice, and presence. When a memory or moment activates that pathway, the brain can't always distinguish past from present. It lights up just like it did the day we said goodbye.

So when I stood in front of that camera, my brain wasn't in a photo studio — it was back in that sacred space of loss. That's why grief can be triggered anywhere: a smell, a sound, a song, or even something as simple as a camera flash. It's not a sign of weakness or regression. It's evidence of connection — that the love remains real, and the bond still matters.

Allowing the Wave to Pass

When these waves of grief come, we have two choices: fight them or let them move through us.

That day, I chose to let the tears fall. I let myself remember, miss, and mourn. Eventually, calm came — and with it, gratitude. Because though I can't take another picture with my dad, I can keep living in ways that honor the life he gave me.

If you've felt a sudden wave of grief that surprised you, please know: you're not going backward. You're being reminded that love leaves an imprint that time can't erase.

Learn More

If this resonates with you, I've put together a short handout to help when grief waves come. Grief is not the absence of healing. It's the heartbeat of love remembering where it once belonged.

Dr. Cindy H. Carr, D.Min., MACL