

OPINION

How do we face grief if we are robbed of the word's true meaning?

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Detail from the painting *The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons* by Jacques-Louis David, 1789.

PUBLIC DOMAIN



The Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons by Jacques-Louis David

<https://cmplenary.com/plutarch-resources/publicola-resources/lictors-returning-brutus-bodies-sons-jacques-louis-david/>

The Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons (Musée du Louvre, Paris), which Jacques Louis David painted on the eve of the French Revolution and exhibited shortly after the fall of the Bastille in 1789. The subject, drawn from Roman history, found great resonance in the context of contemporary events. The canvas depicts an episode from the life of Lucius Junius Brutus, who put an end to the brutal regime of Tarquin, Rome's last king, and established the first Roman Republic, only later to find his two sons embroiled in a royalist conspiracy. True to his political convictions, Brutus condemned his sons to death. The novelty of David's painting is its focus, not on the executions but on the wrenching domestic aftermath.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/371418>

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“I can’t get my favourite biscuits – they’ve been discontinued! I’m grieving the loss.”

As a psychotherapist specializing in grief, an algorithm put this post on my social-media feed.

Readers piled on with helpful responses – “Try this other brand,” offering recipes and so forth – but nobody questioned the use of the word grieving.

A younger friend told me he was “mourning the loss” of his favourite scented candle and had found the website for Estée Lauder’s [Gone But Not Forgotten program](#) (an expression often used at funerals), which specializes in sourcing people’s favourite discontinued products.

“Grieving” biscuits, “mourning” scented candles?

Words matter. We need these words – grief, mourning – for significant life-altering events: death, receiving a life-changing health diagnosis, eco grief for the climate crisis and so forth. When we use them to capture our feelings about decidedly minor inconveniences, we dilute their meaning.

The word grief gives us a sense of proportion equal to loss. It’s defined by the Oxford dictionary as “the anguish experienced after significant loss, usually the death of a beloved person. Grief often includes physiological distress, separation anxiety, confusion, yearning, obsessive dwelling on the past, and apprehension about the future.” There’s something seriously awry if we feel this level of distress about the absence of a particular biscuit or candle. Misusing the language of grief deprives us of one of our best tools for coping with loss – our words. Putting our grief into words can ease our pain.

Let me explain. The intense pain of grief is isolating; it not only isolates us from others, it isolates us from ourselves. We can feel thrown onto an alien planet where we no longer know who we are or what life is. But using the right words at the right time facilitates our understanding of our grief. Moreover, putting our emotions into words lessens our grief and releases our pain, enabling us to heal.

Although grief is a natural process that everyone experiences, talking about it is still taboo. This leads to ignorance and often means those who are grieving do not receive the support they need.

And there are a lot of people who are grieving – an “astounding” number, according to Shelly Cory, executive director of Canadian Virtual Hospice and one of the founders of the Canadian Grief Alliance, who told the CBC: “We’re looking at grief as the hidden health crisis in this whole pandemic.”

This crisis is being addressed, in part, thanks to a \$1-million [investment](#) to the Canadian Grief Alliance by Health Canada to improve support for grieving Canadians. Announced in late 2023, this investment will help fund the Advancing Grief Literacy in Canada project, which will draw on the knowledge and experience of grief specialists and those who grieve to expand understanding and familiarity with grieving, and which will eventually lead to an action plan being submitted to the federal government in 2025.

As a British psychotherapist, I applaud this funding – and feel a bit jealous. I was a commissioner on the [U.K. Commission on Bereavement](#). A key message in our report, [Bereavement is Everyone’s Business](#), was that more funding was required. Unfortunately, the funding has not been forthcoming and I have dwindling expectation of it being realized.

So given the seriousness of the deficit between what the bereaved need for practical support and what is on offer, why do I balk at the use of words such as grief and mourning for a product that is no longer available?

It represents a more significant issue. In the past decade, there has been a shift in how openly mental health is discussed. Awareness is vital to change our mental-health landscape. In raising awareness, it endeavours to ensure effective treatments and support for those who need it. But, with the raising of awareness, there has been a proliferation of psychiatric terms to describe common human emotions. Awareness without proper understanding can do harm.

[There is now a disorder for ‘prolonged’ grief. But what does ‘normal’ grief look like?](#)

I had a patient whom I’ll call Matthew. He was 47 years old, the father of two girls, 12 and 14 years old, whose mother had died after slipping and striking her head on the icy pavement a few feet from their front door. Coming to terms with the circumstances of her death was not the least of Matthew’s challenges. He grieved for the future – the future he’d had every right to expect – and the idea of parenting his daughters alone was overwhelming. I remember him hunched over, his fists pressed into his eyes, the purple veins in his hands

popping out, wanting to physically displace the anguish. It was a scene of utter desolation.

Imagine Matthew seeing a post on social media about “grieving a biscuit brand.” The fury it would ignite in him, how undermining it would be. When the concept of grief is watered down, it robs us of the language to describe our experience; it could lead us to feel doubly alone. Furthermore, for whom do we feel tender compassion if everyone is grieving the far end of everything? People who suffer a life-changing event need our compassionate companionship; we would suffer compassion fatigue if we are pulled to respond to every minor grief.

The language for casual and minor disruptions must fit their nature. Minor. Not to hijack words that evoke actual suffering and thereby diminish their meaning. Furthermore, pathologizing normal human emotions brings with it the risk of conflating a feeling with a fact: Being worried but calling it anxiety can lead to anxiety. What we tell ourselves about ourselves influences our mind-body response and, thereby, our mood.

I have a particular dislike of the growing usage of the word trauma. Using it for dramatic effect. Apparently, everyone is traumatized these days. This is not the case. Research has shown that 20 per cent of those who suffer a traumatic experience, like Matthew, develop PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder).

In her 2022 book *Losing Our Minds: The Challenge of Defining Mental Illness*, the British psychologist Lucy Foulkes describes the discussion about mental health going from “famine to feast.” When it comes to mental illness, she is a courageous advocate for the correct use of terminology. My thinking aligns with her thesis in the book: “Everything we might think of as a ‘symptom’ of mental disorder – worry, low mood, binge-eating, delusions – actually exists on a continuum throughout the population.” She describes how our feelings, behaviours and thoughts are a response to external difficulties and our internal stress, which can mimic mental illness if they persist. Fortunately, for most of us, we recover.

[Grief in the time of coronavirus: How will the way we mourn change?](#)

She encourages us to name what we feel because distress is painful to experience alone – go ahead and vent your sadness and frustration about not being able to buy your favourite biscuit brand – because what may be mild could become a severe problem if not expressed. Her essential point is that we

need to find a way to talk about painful emotions and, at the same time, let it be known that experiencing them is normal, not a sign of dysfunction. This means resisting the temptation to label all negative feelings with psychiatric terminology.

The journalist Eleanor de Jong, who lives with bipolar disorder, has said, “Using psychiatric terms to describe common human experiences is simply not truthful.” She’s observed with concern how normal emotional pain, such as grief and heartbreak, is being medicalized. The widespread use of psychiatric terminology to describe the ordinary human emotions of adversity bothers her. She longs to be emotionally upset rather than having the life sentence of bipolar disorder. She believes it trivializes those like her who daily battle with severe mental illness and undermines how devastating their experience is.

I know it is not helpful or even possible to police language, and yet, I want to make a bid to preserve the word grief for the significant catastrophic events of our lives. The work of grief is to face the reality of the loss. How can we do this if we are robbed of the word’s true meaning?

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-how-do-we-face-grief-if-we-are-robbed-of-the-words-true-meaning/>

It would seem human stupidity is over-running everything. But I think adding a certain measure of “intelligence” to the mix is what makes the fallout especially pernicious. Eloquence and confidence make these ignorant voices louder. The sane and wise are drowned out by them; once all the impetuous claimants on our attention have worn us out, we have no energy left for better things. People who “really know” are quieter about it; they understand how nuanced things are, and how difficult it is to truly convey something accurately and have it actually recognized by others. How much do we really share understandings? Wisdom takes time and suffering—and the right response to it—and the kind of faith that places the final “Truth” in “the hands God” to be further taught to an honest and humble supplicant, never finally accomplished in human terms. TJB