

The Journey of Grief

By Janelle Breese Biagioni

The journey of grief is one of life's most demanding processes. It is long, arduous, chaotic, and exhausting. Before a person can comprehend what he is going through or where the path of grieving will lead, he becomes tangled in this gut-wrenching question, "How will I survive?"

Common Terms

Before getting too far into *what* the journey of grief is, I want to clarify the differences in terms commonly used:

Loss – refers to the event or what happened.

Bereavement – this is the *call* to grieve and mourn; however, we tend to use *loss* or specific words like *death* or *suicide*.

Grieving – is our internal response to the loss or how we feel on the inside.

Mourning - is giving expression to our grief feelings. Dr. Alan Wolfelt, of the Centre for Loss and Life Transition, calls this "grief gone public."

The Journey of Grief

The journey of grief is not predictable or orderly. It's not a concise five-step process but rather a twisted and windy road fraught with pebbles, boulders, and unseen hurdles set to throw you off course. One day you may be going along and feeling as though life is manageable and the next day, something completely innocuous causes you to spiral into that dark hole you thought was closed forever.

The journey is not one dimensional. It isn't all emotional and it isn't all heartbreak. Grief attacks on four levels: social, physical, spiritual and emotional. You may feel physically exhausted. Emotionally you are a wreck. Socially you withdraw. And spiritually, you will question: "Why me? Why him? Why us? Why now? Why... why... why?"

The grief journey demands that life be suspended. The griever turns inward as he or she searches for meaning and understanding of what has happened, why it has happened, and how it could happen to their family. These questions are not easily answered nor can anyone but the griever answer them. Others may try to answer the "why" but it's not their place. Instead, they can help by respecting and holding the space for the griever for it is in asking the question "why" that he or she begins to reconcile the loss.

Those who have walked this path understand the struggle. Those who have not will try to fix it so the grief-stricken person is happy again. Although the individual needs support and assistance, they need to work through the process to heal. No one can fix it for them, nor can the person go around, over, or under the grief journey. The only way to the other side is to go through it.

The Work of Grieving and Mourning

The goal of grieving is not to *get over* the loss. It is a myth that time heals all. This implies that if we go through the motions of living and let time pass, a broken heart will mend and the person will be okay again. The journey doesn't unfold like that. Time does not heal all, but rather it is *what one does with the time* that heals and mends a broken heart. In other words, we must do the work of grieving and mourning.

In the early days of grief, people cannot comprehend what it will take to mend their broken heart. This is true for all types of loss: Developmental and Transitional Losses, Loss of a Significant Other, Loss of External Objects and Loss of Some Aspect of Self. These losses trigger grief responses and traditional ways of mourning. For example, a funeral is a common event to mourn the loss of another. A funeral is not always appropriate because not all losses such as catastrophic injuries and trauma are as finite as death. I refer to this type of mourning as *Extraordinary Mourning*. In other words, it is when the event takes the grieving and mourning to new heights. Brain injury is such an event and the traditional ways of mourning do not apply.

You may have heard the term *ambiguous grief*. It's not a term that I favour when describing the grief journey arising from brain injury. Ambiguous grief is too understated, and well... vague. Those walking this path will affirm there is nothing vague about their loss or their pain. It's pure hell. The term *Extraordinary Mourning* declares the event and path of recovery are not easily understood and that those impacted by the loss endure *unusual emotional distress*. This is far more fitting for what I have experienced.

Loss resulting from brain injury puts the individual and their loved ones on a unique path. Not only will they experience responses similar to other types of loss, but they also walk in a fog as others do when a loved one dies. There is a difference though. If your loved one dies, and you do the work of mourning, eventually the fog begins to lift. With brain injury everything remains similar, but different. The differences are glaring for the family involved; however, the outside world defaults to the similarities. This leads to a false perception and expectation. My family experienced this, as have many of the families I have worked with. The outside world saw us as the same family... the mom, the dad, two kids and a dog. So their perception was skewed. We looked the same; therefore, they expected we should function as the same family. My husband, albeit healed from the physical injuries was not able to participate in life as he had before. He could not return to work. He was unable to co-parent our children. And he was unable to be my marital partner... he was like a child. To function as the family we were prior to his injury was an impossible feat.

Offer H.O.P.E.

A person in grief not only needs to do the work, he or she needs to feel a sense of hope. In finding hope, people are empowered to do the work of mourning, thus leading to healing the four areas of need (physical, emotional, social, and spiritual). When I offer a person HOPE, I strive to give the following:

H: Healing – give them the tools needed to heal

O: Optimism – with sensitivity, I help them to see that life will return to a sense of good with the best outcome possible

P: Power – I teach the person to pace him or herself so they have the energy, strength, and courage to do the work of mourning

E: Endurance – I help them to balance their nutrition, rest, exercise and time for reflection so they can withstand the stress of the journey

In doing the work of grieving and mourning, you move toward reconciliation. In reconciling the losses experienced, you are able to acknowledge what has happened, what has changed, and what the impact has been. As you continue to work through your feelings and emotions and go through the sorrow, you ultimately develop a new self-identity. You are changed because of what has happened. Life has changed all around you and in order to move forward, it's paramount to embrace the new you. Start by giving yourself a big hug!

##

Janelle Breese, RPC, is an author, speaker, and counselor with expertise in grief, loss, life transitions, and brain injury. She resides with her family in Victoria, BC. She is the author of *A Change of Mind: One Family's Journey through Brain Injury* and the upcoming book, *Life Losses: Healing for a Broken Heart*. Visit her website at www.lifelosses.com and follow her blog at www.janellebreese.blogspot.com. She can be contacted at Janelle@lifelosses.com.