

An Approach to Working with Grief

Grief is not a feeling. Grief is what you do. Grief is a skill, and the twin of grief as a skill of life is the skill of being able to praise or love life. Which means whenever you find one authentically done, the other is very close at hand. Grief and the praise of life, side by side.

– Stephen Jenkinson, from “Griefwalker”

When the way we see ourselves in the world is fundamentally altered, grief is the process by which we work with identity, relationship, and worldview such that we heal, reorient, and transform. We might then say that grieving is the skill of consciously engaging that process of healing by repeatedly, courageously turning toward our felt experience, particularly in the midst of transition, ending, and death. In this context, grief is not the injury, but the treatment, not the fragmentation, but the gathering again into wholeness. Therefore, grief is not to be avoided, but met, listened to, even revered. One benefit of framing grieving as a skill is that it communicates the possibility of active cultivation and maturation. Paradoxically, this framework empowers each of us to *choose* our grief—not begrudgingly or with resentment, but with resolve and whole-hearted commitment.

Grief impacts the physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, relational, and behavioral elements of our lives and must be attended to in each of these domains. The receipt of a terminal diagnosis, the death of a loved one, moving from a childhood home, retiring from meaningful work, and a significant breakup are all examples of times when it might be beneficial to have professional support, though none of these necessitate it. What follows is not a “one size fits all” model, as strategies should be responsive to an individual’s or family’s experience and conditioning, but there are patterns and rhythms to grief that can be spoken about in general terms.

Education: In a grief-illiterate, death denying culture, the dismantling of misleading and harmful narratives about what grief is and how it “should” look is central in facilitating healthy grief. When we use idealized or otherwise unrealistic depictions of grief as a metric for our experience, the tendency is to harshly criticize our own process because it doesn’t match. Because so many are caught beneath an avalanche of self-criticism and shame regarding the way their grief is manifesting—so much so that the criticism and not the expressions of grief becomes the primary energetic drain—normalization and validation through education are powerful interventions. Once we recognize our psycho-spiritual and physical experiences as part of a normal and healthy process, perceptions like, “I’m doing this all alone,” and “What’s wrong with me?” can gradually fall away. The effectiveness of grief education in ameliorating tension and stress is likely a reflection of the degree to which our cultural stories about aging, dying, mourning, and grieving have come to misrepresent our basic human needs as well as reality itself. Grief education can mitigate some of the shame, guilt, and anger by reality-checking our assumptions and normalizing our felt experience. In this context, grief education refers to learning about and directly exploring phenomena such as the signs and symptoms of grief and trauma, waves of shock and sadness, the benefits of ritual and ceremony, evolutionary psychology and the wisdom of emotions, mind-body interconnection, appropriate timelines, meaning-making, the truth and falsehood of grief clichés, as well as internal and external loci of wellbeing.

Peacebuilding: We have been biologically and culturally conditioned to make enemies, not just externally, but internally. We have been taught to see certain emotions as intrinsically “good” or “positive” (e.g. joy, satisfaction, gratitude) and others as intrinsically “bad” or “negative” (e.g. anger,

sadness, anxiety). With few exceptions, we tend to favor clinging to, expressing, and sharing the “good” ones, and avoid acknowledging, feeling into, or communicating the “bad” ones. This psychological dynamic has been the catalyst for and beneficiary of much subtle internal violence. Evolutionary psychology and human needs theory offer a non-dualistic perspective on human emotions (i.e. that every emotion has a valuable protective or motivational function, that each one contains wisdom and medicine). When the lens of a basic human needs framework is adopted, we do not find any enemies in the heart and mind, only well-meaning, if sometimes misguided, friends as well as a flow of cause and effect involving body, heart, and mind. Seeing in this way, we shed layers of internal criticism and simplify our internal process.

Inner Friendship and Self-Compassion: We tend to speak to and about ourselves in ways that we would never speak to a good friend (or even an enemy). One meditation teacher I know points out that if we heard someone speaking to a child the way many of us speak to ourselves we might consider it to be verbal or psychological abuse. We tend to demand things of ourselves or neglect ourselves in our grief in ways that we would never put up with if we saw it happening to someone else. We don’t heal from a serious injury by “walking it off,” “staying busy,” or pretending we aren’t hurt—we heal through rest and care. Grief asks us to be good friends and caregivers to ourselves, kind stewards of this sacred process.

Refuge in the Body: What happens in the body tends to echo in the mind. What happens in the mind tends to echo in the body. One of the most challenging aspects of life generally, and grief in particular, is the tendency of the mind to get caught, involuntarily cycling through painful words and images related to past, future, and/or fantasy. This is especially common in what is often referred to as “bargaining” phases of our grief, when the mind is caught trying to edit past events or navigate around unalterable present difficulties. Getting pulled into these mind-storms can be overwhelming, disorienting, and can keep us from our work of healing here, in this body, in this moment. Learning to see the body as a refuge—a place of safety in which to anchor, orient, and cultivate relaxation—can bring stability and grace back into the process. When appropriate, using contemplative, somatic, and kinetic practices can fill out verbal processing so that the work carries naturally into the behavioral and relational realms.

Meaning-Making: It has been said that humans are “meaning-making machines.” Perhaps this is why research demonstrates that, alongside education and self-compassion, narrative (re-)construction, often through ritual and/or storytelling, is one of the most effective tools for integration and orientation in our grieving. Our minds relate patterns and familiarity with consistency and safety. When our world has been profoundly shaken by a terminal diagnosis or the death of a loved one, it can be valuable to reorient through speaking, writing, or otherwise articulating our stories to a compassionate and understanding ear. Meaning-making through forming a coherent narrative of relationship can ameliorate the anxiety that commonly arises with great change.

Reframing and Reality-Checking: It is important to acknowledge that when we are in deep grief, we are often exhausted, unfocused, and working with strong emotional waves. Sometimes the mind can be so desperate to manufacture a sense of stability that we actually generate toxic meaning (e.g. self-blame, fault-finding). It can be helpful to have someone on the outside who can offer a different perspective on an event or phrase that has been looping in your mind. One of the most useful questions to ask when we are caught in spirals of self-criticism, shaming, or anger is, “Where did that story come from?” Sometimes we are operating on problematic assumptions about how our grief

(or love) should look. Investigating the origins of our assumptions is one mechanism by which we uproot old, unhealthy conditioning. These stories may have been instrumental in our survival at some point, but grief is a time when we are called to reevaluate how we make meaning and jettison outgrown ways of seeing. When we find the origins of our assumptions or stories, we have an opportunity to evaluate: “Is this a true and beneficial story? Is it helping me heal or is it generating unnecessary stress? Was the person who told me this story someone I wish to emulate (in this regard)?” If we are able to reality check our stories effectively and soften some of the internal pressure, we can let go of or reframe those toxic stories into healing ones, and meet our current experience with kindness and patience.

Ritual, Ceremony, and Symbol: One teacher I know says that ritual is about “making the invisible visible.” While it is true that the human mind seeks safety in predictability, and seeks predictability through pattern and rhythm, there is much more than that to the power of ritual. Humans are symbol-oriented creatures who tend to benefit from engaging the tangible and the sensory in order to explore and foster connection with the intangible and extra-sensory. This is especially important as we journey from a relationship with a physical body (our own or that of another) to a relationship with something subtler. Symbols, patterns, and movement speak to layers of the mind and body that words and discursive thought can’t. The body can hold paradoxes and information that are beyond the capacity of the intellect to grasp or of words to categorize. There is great healing power in recognizing our bodies as instruments of and gateways into the sacred.

Relational Transmutation: [*trans* "across, beyond; thoroughly" + *mutare* "to change"] When someone we care for dies (or when a terminal diagnosis represents the death of a previous self), our care does not die with them. However, the connection that remain must now be radically re-envisioned. This is the central work of grieving. For most of us, there is a significant difference between feeling connected to a physical body on this plane, and the type of relationship we have with someone who is no longer physically present. Simply put, “relational transmutation” is the deep integration of a new way of relating to the person we have lost such that we once again find equilibrium and appreciation, bittersweet though it may be, in our connection. One of the most challenging paradoxes to hold in our grief is what I refer to as the finality-everpresence paradox. This death represents finality—and there is no getting around feeling into that truth if we are to heal. We must incline the heart toward honesty about the degree to which death separates us from our person as we have always known them. On the other hand, when we summon the courage to move through that terrifying gateway of accepting things as they are, we will meet another truth: There is nothing we can do for the rest of our lives that won’t have them sewn into it. We must walk through an earth-shattering separateness to arrive in a new togetherness.

We burn out, not because we don’t care, but because we don’t grieve...because we have allowed our hearts to become so filled with loss that we have no room left to care.

–Rachel Naomi Remen, MD