

Grief and Mindfulness

Grief

Grief is the natural response to the death of someone with whom we have a relationship. The intensity of grief is usually proportional to the level of attachment. Grief is strong after the death of a spouse, a child, a parent, a sibling, or a best friend because of the strength of the attachment. The intensity of grief is mild after the death of someone we are less connected to, like a distant family member or co-worker we do not know well.

Everyone grieves after losing someone important. However, how a person shows their grief depends on their temperament, history, and cultural background. It is a mistake to conclude that someone who cries little or not at all is not grieving. This person expresses grief in other ways.

Strong grief destabilizes a person on every level: neurobiologically, physiologically, psychologically, emotionally, spiritually, and socially. It is this destabilization that gives rise to the felt experience of grief. Feeling adrift or unmoored is common, so anxiety often accompanies grief along with sadness. Mary Francis O'Connor, the author of *The Grieving Brain*, has studied the neurobiology of grief by scanning the brains of people at different stages of the grief process. She concludes that the brain of a grieving person undergoes a process of rewiring as adaptation progresses following loss.

The primary point is that grief is a complex, multifaceted, and multidimensional process that creates instability and pain. Grieving is the process by which people regain stability, face the pain of grief, and adapt to a new life without the person who has died. There are several types of grief recognized in the field of grief work, including normal grief, sudden grief related to the unexpected death of a loved one, anticipatory grief, disenfranchised grief, delayed grief, and climate grief.

Prolonged grief affects about 10% of people who lose a loved one. It significantly impairs a person's ability to handle daily activities, such as work or relationships with family and friends, over a long period. Prolonged grief is also called complicated grief. People experiencing prolonged grief should reach out to a mental health professional for help.

Carl Jung, the Swiss psychoanalyst and contemporary of Freud, introduced the concept of the collective unconscious. Jung believed that a part of the unconscious mind is inherited. We all carry grief from past generations.

Contemporary Jewish people carry the grief from centuries of persecution. The collective unconscious mind of the American people carries grief because of the extermination of the Indigenous people of our country and the kidnapping, exploitation, and violence perpetrated

against African slaves. The legacy of these atrocities is unconscious collective grief. Unfortunately, the leadership, courage, and resolve necessary to face this hidden pain remain insufficient to heal this pain. The actions of our ancestors in the past continue to influence the experiences of grieving people in the present.

In summary, grief is a complex and natural response.

Grief is an integral part of our core human experience. Biologists believe other mammals like elephants and apes also grieve. One common denominator across humans, elephants, and the great apes is that all three species have young that mature slowly. As a result, mothers or surrogates and their young form strong attachments since the young require care and comfort over many years before becoming independent adults of the species. Remember, a deeper attachment to another being results in more intense grief when they die.

YouTube videos capture the moving interaction of a mother elephant prodding a dead calf, refusing to leave its side, and a mother gorilla holding a dead infant for hours after its death. The videos also show how other members of the elephant herd and gorilla troop provide care and comfort to the grieving mothers. Although we are hard-wired for grief, the good news is that we are also hard-wired for compassion and loving kindness when in the presence of suffering.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness provides a framework and tools that can ease suffering from grief. Mindfulness teachers sometimes say, "Pain is unavoidable. Suffering is optional." Although this phrase may sound oversimplified, it highlights a core principle of mindfulness: suffering comes from resisting pain. In a mindful approach, we meet pain with stability, love, and kindness. This shifts our relationship with grief's pain, leading to less suffering and more healing. Mindfulness helps us tend the heart.

Mindfulness has three primary elements: paying attention, curiosity, and kindness. Healing grief starts with paying attention. How are we to tend the heart if we do not know what is happening inside? The primary mindfulness tool for creating concentrated attention is meditation. Meditation supports getting quiet (as quiet as is possible), so we can pay attention to what is happening in the mind and the body.

The second element of mindfulness is curiosity. Curiosity is part of how we pay attention. When we are curious, we stay present, noticing what is happening in the mind and body. It differs from how a researcher observes, as we are not analyzing. There is nothing to be figured out and there is nothing to be fixed. Curiosity involves seeing the complexity of experience without trying to change anything. Instead, it is about letting our experience be just as it already is.

I am certain you have had the experience when you share your pain with a friend, and they try to fix it by giving advice. This is not what you needed. The wounded heart needs someone to listen with compassion and kindness. As one practices responding to grief mindfully, you become a friend to yourself, a friend who is compassionate, loving, kind, and always available.

The third element of mindfulness is kindness. The mindful perspective assumes love and kindness are our true nature, already present and always accessible. Too often, the qualities of love and kindness can become submerged, especially when we are busy rushing from one thing to another.

When you pour a glass of freshly squeezed apple juice, the pulp swirls, and the juice is dark and semi-opaque. After the juice sits for a few moments, the pulp settles, and the juice is golden and clear. We are the same. Sometimes we need to slow down and stop, so we can see things clearly and remember that loving-kindness is present.

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There is pain, instability, and suffering in grief. Mindfulness provides a framework and tools that allow us to develop a different relationship with the pain of grief, thereby suffering less. Mindful grieving helps us to pay attention to what is going on in our minds and hearts. Mindful grieving allows us to respond rather than react more of the time, and we can discover the healing power of loving-kindness that is already within us.

Grief is difficult. Mindfulness does not provide a magic wand. (If only it did!) However, I have seen over and over that even a small reduction in suffering from learning to grieve mindfully is often enough to make a big difference. Suffering less creates more room for joy, faith, and optimism.

If you want to learn more about healthy grieving or need someone to talk to about the next best step for you, consult a grief counselor or other qualified behavioral health professional.



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