

Why meditate during grief?

When my son, Jacob, graduated from high school, he left home in Flagstaff, Arizona, to attend a university out of state. A feeling grew within me that I needed to slow down and escape the busyness and stress of day-to-day life. I decided to attend a meditation retreat at Spirit Rock, a center located in a beautiful canyon north of the Golden Gate Bridge. During a period of silent meditation early in retreat, the tears came. And came some more. Being there surrounded by love and compassion, I felt embarrassed only briefly. It was slowing down and listening to myself, the love and kindness of the group, and the beauty of the center itself, that allowed the sadness to arise. It was unpleasant but deeply cleansing.

I met the wave of sadness with kind attention and without judgment. The wave of pain eventually crested and slowly dissipated, giving way to calm and a sense of knowing. I recognized that the sadness was grief over the loss of my little boy. He had left home to become a man. And though he visited home many times during his college years, our family was changed, and there was no going back.

Grief is a complex process that is destabilizing at all levels: emotional, psychological, physiological, spiritual, and social. Grief after the death of a loved one can be especially intense and challenging. Grieving is the process of regaining stability and adapting to life after the loss.

Clients often say something like, "I need to keep busy. When I'm doing things, I don't think about them as much." However, it is essential to stop doing and quiet down to take time by yourself and for yourself when you are grieving. Taking time for yourself is a form of self-care. It is a time of listening to yourself. It can be a nurturing time, and it is a recognition that your well-being matters.

Meditation is a powerful tool that can help structure our time with ourselves. When we stop our rushing, doing, and endless thinking, we can regain greater stability and face the pain of grief with affectionate attention. Meeting ourselves in this way is a healing experience.

Meditation helps us listen to ourselves by restoring balance to the sympathetic nervous system, which, when activated, is also known as the fight-or-flight response. Stress is the term used in popular culture. We say, "I'm stressed out!". The stress response is triggered when we perceive a threat. Cortisol is instantly released, which increases blood sugar. The surge of blood sugar provides energy, and the heart pumps more blood into the large muscle groups, all of which prepare us to fight or run away.

A third way we may respond when the stress response is triggered is to freeze. When we freeze in response to a threat, it is as if we are cognitively and/or physically paralyzed. We often struggle to recall things and solve problems, and we may not be aware of our emotions. We may notice that we move between and among the qualities of the stress response: fight, flight,

or freeze. It is usually the case that each of us has a habitual way of responding to stress; that is, we may typically react to a threat with fight rather than flight or freeze. It is best to remember these reactions are automatic. They happen largely outside our awareness.

The death of a loved one triggers a significant stress response and can add to and amplify preexisting stress levels. Chronic stress can significantly undermine physical health and overall well-being.

Meditation practices often involve focusing on the breath. Sustained attention to the natural rhythm of the breath helps activate the parasympathetic nervous system, also known as the rest-and-digest response. Activation of the rest-and-digest response counteracts the fight-flight-or-freeze response. Meditation can help reduce stress by restoring balance and promoting overall well-being.

Make a very tight fist for a few moments. Tight enough that your knuckles start to turn pale. Notice the sensations in the hand. You may notice strain, mild discomfort, or trembling. Now, unclench your fist and turn your hand over, palm up. What sensations do you feel? Maybe tingling. Releasing. Opening. Our mind and body are the same. When stress is present, the mind and body become contracted and strained. Over time, meditation loosens the mind and body, promotes greater stability, and enables us to listen to what is happening within.

Meditation involves stopping the perpetual doing mode. It is an invitation to be quiet and be with yourself. During grief, rushing from one thing to another can be a way of avoiding the pain of grief that often emerges when we slow down and listen to ourselves. It is common for those who are grieving to feel afraid of becoming overwhelmed by the pain of grief if they stop and face it. For this reason, it is essential to approach meditation slowly, allowing time to develop sufficient stability and balance to face difficult emotions.

Practicing meditation in counseling sessions and at home is a tool that helps us slow down and tune in to our natural rhythm. Slowing down in this way promotes stress reduction and increased clarity, allowing us to listen deeply to what is happening inside. How can we appropriately respond to the pain of grief if we do not regularly stop and listen to ourselves? Meditation is a helpful strategy for learning to grieve mindfully. It is often best to have the support of a grief counselor, therapist, or community group when learning to meditate. Please reach out to me if you would like to discuss how meditation might benefit you.