



Family and Caregiver Education

BEREAVEMENT

No Shortcuts to Mourning

Now that I am a widow, I am often asked whether my training as a psychologist has been of any help. To suffer when tragedy strikes is part of the human condition. As a psychologist, I am not immune. I, too, suffered. But I was aware of the mourning process.

Mourning takes time and it is very painful. At first there was shock, a state of disbelief. Then, pain—terrible pain in the pit of the stomach that refused to go away. Sometimes I felt it less, sometimes more; but it seemed always to be there. At night the suffering seemed unbearable, and the only thing I wanted was not to feel. But I knew that I had to descend into the deepest depths of despair before I could face life alone.

The despair was a nightmare filled with terror. I felt a pull from the grave; an overpowering desire to be reunited with my husband. I felt helpless and I was desperate. I wanted to undo this ruthless separation; this cruel and obscene amputation that left me still feeling the sensations of the missing limb.

I was not suicidal. It seemed quite logical: since my husband could not return, it was I who had to join him. At times I was terrified of going crazy.

To bury a man takes only a short time; to give him up to the past takes much longer. I would not let him die so that I could live. And he continued to live through me. Unconsciously, I transformed myself into the man I had lost. I spoke his language and performed his deeds. I gave up my work and continued his. I wrote in his style and gave his speeches. I even made him co-author of my work. I held on to my dead husband by burying the self that was me.

To minimize my suffering, I refused to remember. I blotted out his face and our life together. I tried to pretend he had never existed. I destroyed the most beautiful part of my life to spare myself pain.

I was going through a temporary emotional sickness that was pursuing its prescribed course. No intervention on my part altered its relentless misery or the flow of tears. It was an illness punctuated by severe mood changes—from the depths of depression to the extremes of elation. Weeping while working, weeping while walking, weeping unexpectedly for all that could and should have been! Love and work interrupted.

Bereavement Services

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A friend of mine, a philosopher, asked me: “Why do you weep? It is irrational. Your weeping won’t bring your husband back to life.”

But that is precisely why I wept. Because I could not bring him back to life.

I needed an audience for my weeping. Crying alone was like a cry in the wilderness.

Like most widows, I was flooded with advice. I was encouraged to keep busy, to work, to meet people, to make a new life, to be strong, courageous and hopeful—and not to cry and feel sad.

I found all advice irritating. I resented it. I did not need anyone to tell me what to do, what to feel or how to behave. What I did not know was how to make myself feel better. Advice talked to my head, not to my pain; it bypassed the suffering I felt.

What was helpful?

Words that touched my heart; that reflected to me the way I felt; that made me feel comforted and understood.

“How lonely and painful it must be for you! What effort it must take just to get up every morning! How bereaved you must be! How difficult it must be for you to go on without this man whom you loved and respected so much! It is not an easy time for you!”

My heart was bleeding, and what I needed most was an emotional bandage.

I was confused. My husband had been my emotional referral point. With the center of my universe gone, without a compass to orient me, I was lost. To whom did I matter now, and who was that important to me?

My children’s love was comforting but it did not diminish my suffering. I found out that it takes two loving adults to live one good life. And children are no substitute.

My husband had been ill a long time. After he died my sexual hunger reawakened. I needed a man to hold me, to suffuse my body with his warmth, to make me part of him. I needed a man to help me crawl out of my bereaved isolation, to make me feel desired and alive again.

But this need carried within it the seed of unhappiness. It was full of contradiction. I wanted more than sex. I wanted to be special for a man; to intrude on his day’s events; to be more than a pleasant interruption in a life I did not share. Yet I had so little to offer—a bereaved woman preoccupied with her feelings for her dead husband.

I had a fantasy that I could replace the man I lost. It was a painful discovery that my love was irreplaceable; that the particular magic that was our life could not be repeated. That there is no shortcut to mourning.

Women who had suffered a loss were the most helpful. They knew that activity and diversion could numb the pain, but not shorten the mourning, nor undo my despondent, desolate and dejected feelings. Only when I was not discouraged from feeling these feelings was I able to complete my mourning process by slowly separating from a husband I no longer had and thus healing the wound that had been so cruelly inflicted on me.

Now that more than two years have passed, I know that there are no happy solutions to unhappy problems, that there was no healthy way to cope with my loss. There was only a tentative holding on to life while the passing of time made the wound less raw, the pain less fierce, the anguish more bearable.

Each day's survival was a triumph; anything that spelled life saved me from dying.

I no longer feel guilty for having survived. I no longer wail that I need my husband, that I cannot live without him. I want him. I miss him. My life is not the same without him. The loneliness is profound. But I know now that I can continue a life without him.

As a psychologist, I can distinguish between a need and a want. A need demands to be fulfilled. It is whatever each one of us feels is essential for her survival. A wish, on the other hand, is like icing on a cake. When fulfilled, it makes life much more exciting, meaningful, worthwhile.

Without my husband, my life is like a black-and-white painting—subdued. It was my intense love for the man I lost that splashed my life with color.

I no longer feel sorry for myself. I feel for my husband. He suffered the greatest loss. He was denied his years.

“How awful it is for them; those who are so beautiful that they are covered and hidden by earth.” By Dr. Alice Ginott, a New York psychologist and the widow of psychologist Haim G. Ginott, author of *Between Parent and Child*, and other books. He died of cancer in 1973 at the age of 51.

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