

TIME TO MOURN



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Maybe it's because we Baby Boomers are clicking along through middle age, but more and more of us are losing loved ones. Ray's father. Anastasia's sister-in-law. Jon's colleague. Eric's 7-year-old niece. Jane's friend, next-door neighbor, and colleague.

Company policies spell out how much time an employee may take to attend to death in the family. The corporate cost of time lost to bereavement leave is likely to increase. But the personal price of not giving grief its due is far greater. Each of us makes a personal choice as to how we deal with loss. Often, we give it a just a nod, quickly returning to the business at hand. There's a strong impulse to handle grief expeditiously, to "suck it up."

Barbara recently suffered a miscarriage. "I didn't want the people at the office to know," she says. "So I just put on a happy face."

When Gene's elderly mother died in a distant city, he decided to go the funeral "as if it were a family reunion." Four hours after the service, he took his family on a tour of a nearby candy factory.

A very normal impulse is to blunt the edges of grief, to strive for some sort of "normal" activity by distracting ourselves from painful thoughts. But there's another way to go.

First, let's cut grief down to size. We may run from grief because it seems overwhelming. Webster's dictionary describes grief as "acute mental anguish." But, in fact, that simply means that grief is a way of thinking about a loss.

When we experience a loss, all sorts of thoughts and emotions (our body's response to thoughts) flow through us. Sadness, regret, fear, confusion, guilt, anger, nostalgia, self-preservation, gratitude, and more may show up in any order, at any intensity.

Grief is a problem only when our thoughts get stuck - when we dwell on memories. At such times, instead of being a functioning person with thoughts about loss, we become someone whose energy is absorbed in a kind of mental petrification.

Consider, for example, Queen Victoria, who set the social norms for 19th Century England. After her husband, Prince Albert, died in 1861, "the widow of Windsor"

remained in quasi-seclusion until her own death some four decades later. She dressed in black, favored jewelry made from the hair of loved ones. In short, she made her life revolve around grief.

Contrast that with the widow of George VI, the current queen's mother. She, too, adored her husband and mourned his early death. But she returned to a full schedule of public appearances - in jaunty hats and flowery dresses - for the next 50 years. Whatever her memories, the "Queen Mum's" grief became just one tributary of the thoughts that flowed throughout her long life.

This approach to loss acknowledges that no matter how many painful thoughts we have, no matter how strong they are, we can let them come and go. We're not talking about denial. We are simply recognizing that grief is made up of thoughts. And we are the thinkers of those thoughts.

What matters is not what we are thinking - sad thoughts, happy thoughts, confused thoughts, productive thoughts. Rather, it is the attention we pay, moment-to-moment, to our thoughts.

So there's really nothing to fear about grief. Hope springs eternal because all of us have resources of wisdom, common sense, insight, intuition, creativity. Our ability to do good work is directly related to the strength of our connection to these innate assets. And our ability to access those resources requires that we not fall prey to distractions. In other words, we truly must be present to win. Being present can transform the experience of grief. Shelley's family recently rallied around terminally ill Linda, the ex-wife of Shelley's fiancé. "This became a time of incredibly beautiful sharing," Shelley observes. Painful thoughts were balanced by gratitude.

The lesson came home to Betsy a couple of months ago. While on a trip, she called her former employer, only to learn that a colleague had died that morning. He was just 46; had been diagnosed with a brain tumor only two weeks before. On Sunday, he told his three teenaged children he was going in for treatment; on Wednesday, he was dead.

"I was shaken by the news; but I hung up the phone, mentally washed my hands, and started to go on about my plans. 'Wait a minute,'" I thought. "'This is avoidance, a way of distracting myself from what I'm feeling in this moment.' Instead, I re-arranged my schedule, went out for a walk, allowed about an hour for reflection.

"Later that day, I kept an appointment that turned out to be one of the best sales calls I'd ever made. I walked back to my hotel - or rather floated a couple of feet in the air. As soon as I got to my room, I flipped on the TV. 'Whoops,' I realized. 'This is just another way of distracting myself - this time from joy rather than sadness.' So I turned off the TV and sat quietly on the edge of the bed, allowing myself simply to be present. A half-hour later, I left for a dinner meeting, feeling strong and confident, grounded."

Loss is part of the richness of life. None of us gets out of here untouched. We all experience some suffering, some pain, some grief. Trying to shield ourselves is an innocent reaction.

And the strategy of distraction is ultimately futile. Recovering alcoholics can tell you that. They may have drunk themselves unconscious, numbed themselves against unpleasant thoughts and feelings for years. But distraction didn't solve their problems. Indeed, the farther they strayed from presence, the more problems they encountered - and the less able they were to deal with those problems.

Distraction ultimately makes us weaker and less effective - even if it takes a more benign form than drugs or alcohol. From reading trashy novels or TV channel surfing, to shopping or snacking, to computer games or nonstop checking of e-mails and voice mail - we can choose from an infinite number of distractions.

At the office as in the rest of our lives, we can choose between distraction and presence. The more present we are, the more powerful and productive we become. Here are a few suggestions you can practice at work on a daily basis, adapted from Full Catastrophe Living, by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D.:

- From time to time, pay attention to your bodily sensations. Is there tension in your shoulders, face, hands, or back? How are you sitting or standing? What is your body language saying?
- When walking around, don't rush unless you have to. If so, do it with awareness that you are rushing.
- Notice your breathing as you stop for one minute every hour.
- Focus on your breathing as you go outside for 3 minutes.
Or shut your office door and sit quietly for 3-5 minutes.
- Do neck and shoulder rolls at your desk.
- Spend lunchtime with people with whom you feel comfortable.
- Or eat one or two lunches per week in silence, just being aware of the moment.

Grief is as powerful as joy. Both whack us out of our routines, out of complacency, out of taking things for granted. Both open the door to deep feelings: Compassion. Forgiveness. Acceptance. Even gratitude.

And those feelings strengthen our connection to the most powerful resource that we have: our channel to deeper intelligence.

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