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Along The Way

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I've Fallen ... But I CAN Get Up!

By Dr. Bill Webster

Lossing someone we care about is always a blow. But it is important to know that even when we are knocked down, we don't have to be knocked out.

One of the most neglected areas of grief support is in developing what I call the "bounce-back" factor, also known as "resiliency."

Resilience is the process of adapting well to life situations where we face adversity, trauma, tragedy or threats. It is the ability to bounce back from threats or significant sources of stress, such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, workplace and financial stressors, bereavement and life-threatening situations. In simple terms, resiliency means "bouncing back" from difficult life experiences.

Life is like taking a canoe trip down a river. There are peaceful slow stretches of water we manage easily. But then we encounter rapids, turns, rocks and hazards, and that is trickier. Resiliency refers to developing the skills that enable us to navigate the rougher situations of life. Perseverance and trust in your ability to work your way around the boulders and other obstacles are important. We gain courage and insight by successfully navigating through white water. Trusted companions with you on the journey can be especially helpful when dealing with rapids, upstream currents and other difficult stretches of the river. The

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changes we experience on life's river affect people differently along the way.

Resilience is a normal human trait, not an extraordinary one. People commonly demonstrate resilience, such as in the face of disasters, terrorist attacks, and personal or national disasters. Being resilient does not mean the person doesn't experience difficulty or distress. Emotional pain and sadness are common in people who have suffered major adversity or trauma in their lives, and in fact, the road to resilience is likely to involve considerable emotional distress. Resilience is not a trait that people either have



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or do not have. Rather, it involves behaviours, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed.

Developing resilience is a personal journey. People do not react to traumatic or stressful life events in exactly the same way. An approach to building resilience that works for one person might not work for another. People use varying strategies. But let me suggest 10 strategies to develop resiliency:

Make connections. Good relationships with close family members, friends or others are important. Accepting help and support from those who care about you and will listen to you strengthens resilience. Some people find being active in support programs, faith-based organizations or other local groups can provide social support and help with reclaiming hope. Assisting others in their time of need can benefit the helper as much as the recipient.

Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems. You can't change the fact that highly stressful events happen, but you can change how you interpret and respond to these events. Try looking beyond the present to how future circumstances could be a little better. Note subtle ways in which you might already feel somewhat better as you deal with difficult situations.

Accept that change is a part of living. Certain goals may no longer be attainable as a result of adverse situations. Accepting circumstances that cannot be changed can help you focus on circumstances that you can change.

Move toward your goals. Develop some realistic goals. Do something – anything – regularly that enables you to move toward your goals, even if it seems like a small accomplishment. Instead of focusing on tasks that seem unachievable, ask yourself, “What’s one thing I know I can accomplish today that helps me move in the direction I want to go?”

Take decisive actions. Act on adverse situations as much as you can. Take decisive actions, rather than detaching completely from problems and stresses and wishing they would just go away.

Look for opportunities for self-discovery. People often learn something about themselves and may find they have grown in some respect as a result of their struggle with loss. Many people who have experienced tragedies and hardship have reported better relationships, greater sense of strength even while feeling vulnerable, increased sense of self-worth and a heightened appreciation for life.

Nurture a positive view of yourself. Resilience grows when we develop confidence in our ability to solve problems and trust our own instincts.

Keep things in perspective. Even when facing very painful events, try to consider the stressful situation in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective. This event, however difficult, is only one life event among many others that are more positive.

Maintain a hopeful outlook. An optimistic outlook enables you to expect that good things will happen in your life. Try visualizing what you want, rather than worrying about what you fear.

Take care of yourself. Pay attention to your own needs and feelings. Engage in activities you enjoy and find relaxing. Exercise regularly. Taking care of yourself helps to keep your mind and body primed to deal with situations that require resilience.

I am not saying “Let’s all look on the bright side” of tragedy. No trauma is good. Every trauma involves suffering. There’s nothing inherently positive or beneficial about violence, disasters, death or illness. But it’s important to understand resilience is possible. The biggest lesson may be that it’s possible to stare into the face of tragedy and somehow emerge fundamentally changed, with an ability to affect the world in previously unimaginable ways.

Oh yes, on life’s journey, you can climb out along the way to rest alongside the river, but to get to the desired destination at the end of your journey, you need to get back in the canoe and carry on.



Simple Facts About Grief and Grieving

By Dr. Bill Webster

It is never easy to experience a loss. There are no words to describe the overwhelming sense of pain you feel when a significant person in your life dies. It can be one of the most difficult experiences of life.

Our society has unrealistic attitudes about grief and loss, and often responds inappropriately. Most people do not understand what is normal in grief, expressing their unrealistic expectations in ways that can seem to be less than sensitive to the grieving person. Often others feel uncomfortable with grief and so, shortly after the funeral is over, the person or the loss is not mentioned. There sometimes seems to be a conspiracy of silence. People are afraid to say or do the wrong thing, so they say and do nothing ... which is possibly the worst thing.

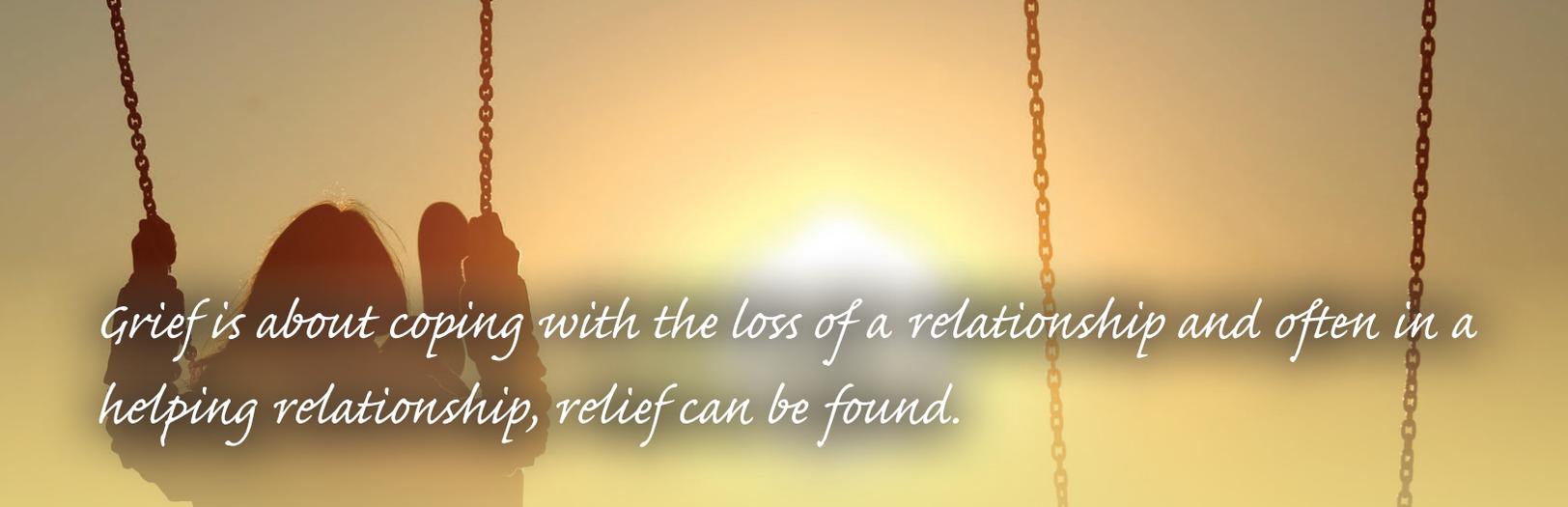
So here are a few simple facts about grief and grieving:

- Grief is a normal reaction to what is always an unwelcome event. You are not “going crazy” or “losing your mind” (although sometimes it may feel like you are). Grief is not abnormal, or a mental health disorder. It is a natural response to any loss – a protest against something you do not like and sadly cannot change.

Practical suggestion: Give yourself permission to grieve because that will help you come to terms with what has happened.

- Every life loss leads to a grief reaction. There is no one, neat, orderly way to go through grief. The meaning of a death or any loss is personal and unique to specific individuals, based on the relationship that has been lost as a result of the loss. Everyone has their own unique cluster of emotions and reactions as they go through their grief journey. Often people try to suggest that we should “not be emotional” or tell us “you mustn’t cry; you have to be strong; life must go on” and other pull-it-together statements. They might even suggest “it’s been three months; you ought to be over it by now.” But in fact, grief does not work like that. We are all unique individuals who have lost a unique relationship, and the way in which we cope and the time frame we need to come to terms with our loss is going to be different for everyone.

Practical suggestion: Be patient with yourself because grief often takes much longer than people who haven’t been through it seem to think.



Grief is about coping with the loss of a relationship and often in a helping relationship, relief can be found.

- The worst kind of loss is yours. A loss is a very personal matter. It seems like the worst possible thing that could have happened to you. People may try to comfort you with statements like, “It could have been worse.” But that rarely makes us feel better. When you lose a significant person from your life, whatever the relationship, it hurts and nothing takes away your right to feel the loss and to grieve the absence of that person from your life.

Practical suggestion: You have a right to be grieving and to feel emotional because your life has changed. So where can you find people who can identify with the depth of your sense of loss? Friends and family? A support group? A website?

- The whole world is suddenly different. When we experience any significant loss, it is not simply a matter of dealing with the death, or the emotions relating to it. Any model of the grief process should integrate how a person’s world is forever transformed by their loss, rather than suggesting a return to some pre-existing, established behavioural or emotional state following their “recovery” from the loss. It is not just a simple matter of “getting over it and moving on.” The whole world has changed so there is a struggle to come to terms with an unwanted situation.

Practical suggestion: In what ways does your world seem to have changed, and in what ways is it still the same? Write out how you feel about that.

- Grieving is something we do, not something that is done to us. We should be encouraged to be active in facing life challenges rather than simply being passive reactors to them; in other words, we should be proactive rather than reactive. “Who we are” must

not simply be defined by our experiences, but rather by our reaction and responses to those experiences.

Practical suggestion: What can I do today to get some help or to make the changes I need to make so I can begin to move forward?

- Effective grief work is not done alone. Many people mistakenly believe grief is so personal we want to keep it to ourselves. But grieving people need to talk. However, not everyone will be willing or even able to respond to you. Accept that and try to find a support group or a counsellor who can help. Or talk to someone who has been through a similar experience. I believe in the power of shared experiences, and often others who have been through the deep places can be a real help. Grief is about coping with the loss of a relationship and often in a helping relationship, relief can be found.

Practical suggestion: Is there a grief support group in your community that could offer some encouragement or help? Ask your doctor, clergy or funeral director for information on what resources are available.

- The greatest gift we can give ourselves is simply validating the significance of our loss, acknowledging that our world has changed, and holding on to hope that life can have meaning again, even though it has changed.

For more information on grief and the grieving process, visit Dr. Bill Webster’s website, www.griefjourney.com, and join some of the interactive forums there.

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