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Dealing with Special Days and Holidays

by Dr. Bill Webster

Many people don't realize that grief comes and goes. Some might say, it never goes, and there may be an element of truth in that. I believe the grief does ease off, but there are times when we are reminded of the situation again, even years after the event.

As I write this, I am aware that tomorrow will be the 32nd anniversary of my wife's death. Certainly I am not as emotional as I was all those years ago, but I am aware of the occasion, and have feelings as I remember those difficult days. Some might say that I should be "over it" by now, but I am not sure they understand. You get "through" it, but you never forget.

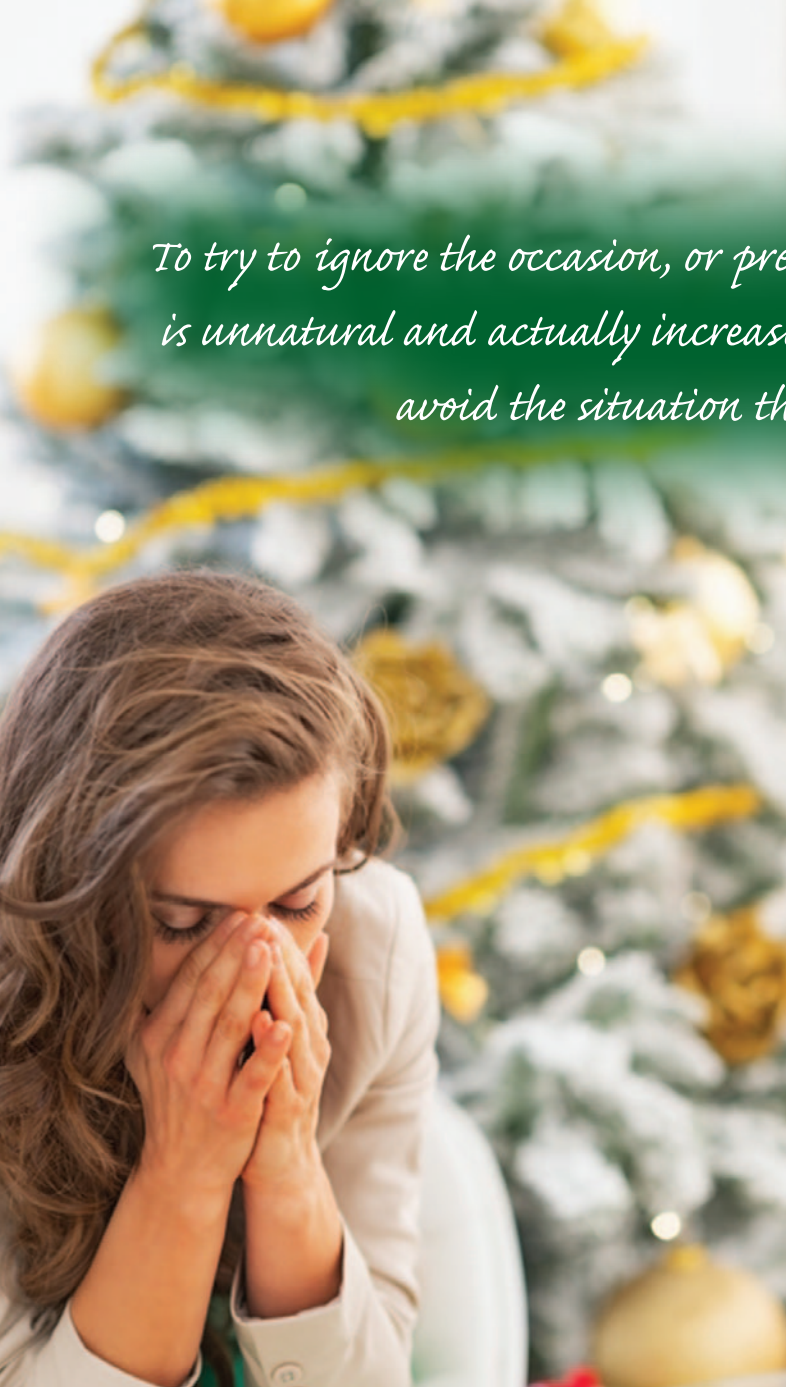
People often think of grief in a "linear" fashion. They see it in the context of a "time frame" with a beginning and an ending. If you get a sore throat, it is painful for a few days; then the discomfort diminishes till it gradually disappears. However, grief does not work in a similar way, though people seem to think it will.

When someone dies, people expect your "pain level" will be very high. But often at first we feel quite numb. People confuse that numbness with strength. They expect the pain will ease and diminish in a few weeks or months.

Not so! Sometimes shortly after the event, the pain is even more intense. When the numbness wears off, we often feel worse rather than better.

Grief is similar to being on a roller-coaster. One day we are up, the next down. We feel better for a while, and then find ourselves back in the depths of despair. Just when we think we are getting over it, we are hit by another wave of grief, and we suffer what seems a devastating setback.

This can be discouraging to those who do not understand the process. But grief comes and goes. These experiences are called "grief attacks" or "TUGs," for they are "temporary upsurges in grief."



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Be proactive, not reactive. In other words, do something to take charge of the day. See it as another opportunity to grieve, to miss the person, to peel back another layer of sorrow. Do something to remember and to grieve.

But it doesn't have to be all sorrowful. Your loved one died, it is true. But they also lived! Make that day, that birthday or whatever, a celebration of their life. What could you do to honour their life on that occasion? Be thankful for what you had, as well as grieving what you have lost. Take time to remember and be thankful for the person, even though I am sure their absence will be keenly felt.

Tomorrow, I will remember Carolyn's 32nd anniversary. But I will remember with thankfulness, not for her death, but for her life. Try to balance the sorrow over the death with a celebration of the life, and that will make those difficult days more meaningful.

Be proactive, not reactive. In other words, do something to take charge of the day. See it as another opportunity to grieve, to miss the person, to peel back another layer of sorrow. Do something to remember and to grieve.

Grief attacks are triggered by things that remind us of the person and our loss, like special days and holidays. Certain days are more significant than others. Sundays often represent family days; birthdays; anniversaries; holidays such as Christmas and others when the person's absence is felt; Valentine's Day; Mother's Day; Father's Day; vacation times; family reunions; weddings and other social occasions. You will probably identify many occasions on which you miss your loved one, for the list is long.

It can also be everyday things: being in a familiar restaurant you frequented with your loved one; the scent of an aftershave or perfume; hearing a song on the radio that was special. So many things that remind us of the person who has died; and each one has the potential to suddenly make us miss them again.

You only have one choice. Do you let the day control you, or do you control the day?



Ten Key Facts about Grief and Grieving

by Dr. Bill Webster

1. Grief is normal

Grief is a normal, human response to a significant loss. People may encourage you to “be strong” or “not to cry.” But how sad it would be if someone you cared about died and you didn’t cry or carried on as if nothing had happened. I’d like to think that someone will miss me enough to shed a tear after I’m gone. Wouldn’t you? Your grief is saying that you miss the person and that you are struggling to adjust to a life without that special relationship. Admittedly, saying that grief is normal does not minimize its difficulty. It is one of the most challenging experiences of life. But you are not mentally disordered, weak or “not handling things.” You are experiencing grief and after any significant loss that is a normal response.

2. The worst kind of grief is yours

A loss is a very personal matter. Sometimes people ask if it is more difficult to lose a spouse than to lose a child. Others question if it is worse to lose someone suddenly or after a long illness. But that is not important to you. Your loss seems like the worst thing, at the worst time, in the worst way that could have happened. When you lose a significant person from your life, it hurts and nothing takes away feelings of loss and grief.

3. The way out of grief is through it

Grief is painful. There is no easy way around it. You may try to avoid the pain. You may attempt to get “over it” as

quickly as possible. But most often it simply does not work that way. Helen Keller said: “The only way to get to the other side is to go through the door.” You need to find the courage to go “through” this experience of grief. Learning this is a major key to recovery.

4. Your grief is intimately connected to the relationship

To fully explain your unique grief response, you need to understand what the relationship brought to your life and what has been lost from your life. You grieve the loss of a parent differently from the loss of a friend. Each made a different contribution to your life. What you have lost is not the same and so you grieve differently. Two individuals, both experiencing the loss of a spouse, may grieve quite differently because of the differing circumstances of the relationship.

5. Grief is unpredictable

You may experience a wide variety of feelings and reactions like sadness, crying, depression, anxiety, guilt, anger and many others. Some of your responses may seem quite uncharacteristic. “This isn’t like me” you may think. Grief is unpredictable. We cannot present it in a neat predictable package. Just when you think you have it figured out something comes along to surprise you. In an unexpected moment, suddenly, without warning you find yourself missing the person again.

6. Grief is hard work

A grief response is often referred to as "grief-work." It requires more physical and emotional energy than most people expect. This is why people often feel so fatigued after a loss or why they may feel very apathetic towards people or events. The problem is often compounded by people's expectations of grievers to "be strong" or "pull yourself together" or to "get on with life."

7. Your grief will take longer than most people think

How long will grief last? It is finished when it is finished. The first few months may be particularly intense. The first year is difficult: especially the first Christmas or Hanukkah, the first birthday, anniversary, Mother's Day, Valentine's Day, "a year ago today day" and many other times that remind you of your loss. All are difficult days and you need to anticipate them, know they are normal and be compassionate with yourself. Grief always takes longer than people expect.

8. There may be "secondary losses" to deal with

The death of any individual may also precipitate many other changes in life. For some it may mean the loss of financial security, a home or even their independence. For some it may mean the loss of a role, like being part of a couple or a parent; for others it may be the loss of the hopes and dreams of "living happily ever after." There can be many losses because of the death and each one needs to be mourned.

9. Grief comes and goes

We have said that grief is not a disease. If you have a sore throat, it is painful for a few days, but the pain eases off and gradually disappears. Grief does not work that way, however. Sometimes, at first, you do not feel the pain of grief because you are in shock and numb. Often the pain seems more intense some months after the event. Grief is not unlike a roller-coaster; one day you feel pretty good, the next in the depths of despair. Just when you think you are getting over it you may experience another devastating setback. This is often the way grief works itself out and you must trust that the process, as difficult as it is, is helping you work through your grief.

10. Effective grief work is not done alone

Society has unrealistic expectations about mourning and often responds inappropriately. People mean well, but they are afraid to say or do the wrong thing. So they more often say and do nothing which is possibly the worst thing. Grieving people need to talk. 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.

Dr. Bill Webster is a grief counsellor, author, TV host and increasingly well-known international speaker. He brings a unique blend of personal experience, academic education and many years of practical application to his work. Visit his innovative website at www.GriefJourney.com.

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