

Strategy 2: Real Life—The Mourning Process

Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak
knits up the o-er wrought heart and bids it break.⁸

—William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act III, Scene III

Mourning is about reality. At the very beginning, your body tries to save you, to keep you from taking the full thrust of your grief. You find that you use phrases to help you take that loss in small increments so that you can stand the pain, bit by bit. You may hear yourself say that your loved one is lost, or gone, or that he isn't with you anymore. However, you must be brutally honest with yourself here by saying that your loved one is dead. You must be authentic and clear . . . you must be real. Only by “looking death in the eye” can you strengthen and redeem your wounding. For “only the wounded healer can heal.”

In ancient Judaism, there is a story about the covering of your heart being torn at the time of death. In fact, there is even such a ritual, in which a piece of your jacket lapel is torn at the cemetery edge during a funeral. This rending of your heart, which is symbolized by the tearing of your clothing, reminds you that your wounding opens you to the opportunity of redemption—for as the defenses that socialize you and keep you intact are torn away, you become your undefended self, the real you. From this place of openness and vulnerability, you can connect, in an undefended way, to both your intuition and essential self, allowing you to communicate and interact consciously with others.

For, in this earliest stage of grieving, you feel detached, losing the ability to focus and concentrate. This distraction is a way to deal with pain. Yet if you face the pain, if you are honest with yourself, if your language expresses your true feelings, then out of the pain can come healing, and out of that pain you can reconstruct a new way of living. It is not about recovery—don't use up your energy in that way—it is about being authentic and clear with your feelings and letting yourself have them.

This is the first time that anger pokes its ugly head up, out of the wound in your heart. You feel like an amputee. A part of you has died, and yet, like an amputee, you still feel the phantom pain of the loss of your loved one.

The loss of a loved one is like the loss of a part of one's Self; an arm or a leg. At first, the pain is so physical that it is hard to ignore. The trauma is so intense that the mind finds it hard to cope with the loss. With time

the pain eases, the body recovers and the brain figures out new ways to go on.⁹

—Federico Chini, *The Sea of Forgotten Memories*

People who have historically handled their feelings by repressing them will reach for that pattern once again. Instead, allow your anger to come up, and even though it is painful, express it outwardly. Otherwise, your anger will find a place to reside, and the only place left to you is inside. This internalization of your anger is how you get sick. This is how you get crazy. This is the stage in which you have to think about the simplest realities of life and take care of your basic needs, such as eating, sleeping, physical requirements, and health. You have to treat yourself gently, as if you were your own child.

The first stage was courage and choice. These are the things that you must choose to do for yourself, and have the courage with which to follow through. Unfortunately, we all wish that we could rely on others—mates look to one another, children look to parents, and parents look to outside friends and family. On some level, each of these connections has its place. On the other hand, since everyone in your immediate family has suffered the death of a loved one, there is little capacity within the nuclear unit to help one another. There is only your own resource, and you must reach for it, as “the only way out is through.” Now, when you have lost your equilibrium, it is important to find a stable and balanced way to approach the day-to-day of living. For example, there will be times, even in the darkest hours of your grief, where something will strike you as funny and make you laugh—that is a good thing. On the other hand, if you go overboard and find ways to make yourself feel better by using food, alcohol, sex, or drugs to an extreme, then you will be out of balance. The key is to stay conscious—to pay attention to yourself and to deliberately avoid using self-destructive means to suppress your pain.

It is very easy to see the allure of alcohol to dull the pain and the temptation to punish myself for something that is not my fault. But the sobering truth is that if I step onto the path of self-destruction, I know I will never come back.¹⁰

—Bill Jenkins, *What to Do When the Police Leave:
A Guide to the First Days of Traumatic Loss*

You have to be cautious here not to enshrine your loved one’s room, or his personality. It is a disservice to his memory to make him into a g-d. Where

there is life, there is hope, and if you face the death of those you love realistically, your feelings will have a safe place in which to reside and your wounds will not fester, but heal. People who grieve can live again by simply being with themselves in a calm, quiet atmosphere. This allows tears and joy equal time to surface and mourn. Therefore, crying is central to this stage. In fact, it is believed that toxins are released from the body through tears. And, there is nothing more toxic to your body than repressed grief.

To weep is to make less the depth of grief.¹¹

—William Shakespeare, *Henry VI*, Part II, Act II

Hedonism is an extreme overreaction. However, things that you can find to do that will ease your pain and are creative, expressive, and joyful—such as art, journaling, dance, and music—should be instituted right here, at the beginning. And even though you might not want to go out to dinner, or do simple things like go to a movie, your behavior modification model invites you into action.

It takes a tremendous amount of energy to repress your feelings. Thus, if you discount and hold down your feelings, or follow the grieving style of others, and if you are ashamed to cry or afraid to laugh, you will develop a pattern of negativity that can become your future lifestyle. The idea is to catch a glimpse of the pattern driving and compelling your behavior and to redeem it. By taking back your projected material, you can free up all of the energy that you are using to suppress your authentic feelings. This is your creative energy, and when you recapture it, you can use it to heal and transform.

So, back to the conscious choices of this stage of reality: it is important to pay attention to your physical and emotional needs—to take care of yourself, to be gentle and nurture yourself, and especially rest. Furthermore, you are still alive and have to pay attention to the practicalities of living, such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of your work and social calendar. As a result, you have to create a routine for yourself that you can follow as a discipline. This will be difficult at first—even getting up out of bed at this beginning period of grief is a huge endeavor. But little by little, the consistency of every day repatterning will create a new way of living—a habit, if you will—that will help you reenter the world.

Men and women handle this stage differently, which is another reason why they have such a hard time helping each other grieve. In this earliest period, a man feels that he has forfeited his role as protector and problem solver as he is no longer able to protect and has come up against a problem

he can never solve. Something terrible has happened, and it is completely out of his control. Suddenly, thrust into an emotional crisis, he is made impotent. Because he has to go back to work and support his family, he has to find a way to cope. This can lead him to both compartmentalize and distract himself from his feelings. His wife, on the other hand, is living her feelings and looking to connect for solace.

Women typically are all about relationships, responding to a primitive need for other women to help them with birth, child care, and survival. Men, on the other hand, compartmentalize in an effort to protect and provide for their mate and progeny. Here is the point of tension, reflecting the two most significant differences in the way in which men and women grieve. Thus you can see why this stage requires compassionate, candid, and open communication. When pain is overpowering and you find yourself back in the day-to-day of life, it is important to pay attention to the little things that you can do, for both yourself and your mate, recognizing that it is only your mate who can understand the depth of your sorrow.

People who grieve can live again. The key is to give yourself permission to grieve. Such feelings are so powerful that if you do not experience and express them, they remain inside, causing illness and even death. Take inner time for yourself through journaling, meditation, prayer, and any creative activity that allows you to express actively what is difficult to express verbally. Painting, arts and crafts, and music are all ideal, connecting you back to the simple language of your Soul. If possible, find a grief counselor to guide you and your family through this process, so that at a certain time, on a specific date, you will confront your grief in a safe and contained environment. Also, when necessary, your counselor may consider the multidisciplinary approach of counseling, medication, and behavior modification.

Right now, think about those things that will help to complete this strategy:

1. Take care of yourself. Nurture yourself and get plenty of rest.
2. Create a routine that helps you pay attention to the practicalities of life, including your work and social calendar. Getting back into a routine will give you a sense of control and help return you to a pattern of balance and stability.
3. Recognize that men and women grieve differently, and use my empathic process to reestablish a connection with your mate and other family members.
4. Create new routines and new rituals to help you through the grieving process. Rituals allow you to begin anew, reconnecting you to your

inner core and thus guiding you up out of the descent. Such rituals can include meditation, yoga, and journaling (including gratitude journals). Practice as a discipline whatever rituals you start on your own . . . daily.

5. List three things you'd like to let go of in your life (things, people, and feelings) and do it.

Strategy 3: Guilt in Search of a Transgression

Guilt is perhaps the most painful companion to death.¹²

—Elizabeth Kubler-Ross

Each person, in his own way, feels a sense of guilt when confronting loss and death. You feel responsible. You feel that you have control and are omnipotent. And then there's always that nagging thought, in the back of your mind, that if only you had done something more, things might have ended differently. Consequently, accidents of every sort, and suicide in particular, leave parents with an even heavier load of guilt as they ruminate over all the ways they failed their child. Parents that are held accountable for the loss or death of a loved one and are punished by the authorities, or by those close to them, often feel the relief of some of their guilt. Ironically, in these cases, guilt can find redemption. According to Webster, guilt "is the actor's state of having done a wrong or committed an offense." Therefore, as long as you feel the need to punish yourself, you cannot get on with the business of living.

All of us are victims of irrational thinking—the notion that we have control over something that is beyond our control. But in reality, you have no control. In an effort to punish yourself, you may even return to the last time that you were together with your loved one, ruminating over that moment, trying to make amends for a lack of communication, a fight, or a forgotten goodbye.

In the face of a death, feelings of guilt take on a radical, even brutal significance: no further discussion can clear the air, one can no longer make amends. All theoretical efforts to make amends founder on the fact that the deceased is no longer there.¹³

—Verena Kast, *A Time to Mourn*

For example, the comedian Billy Crystal has carried with him since adolescence a fight that he had with his father, right before his father died of a