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"We bereaved are not alone. We belong to the largest company in all the world - the company of those who have known suffering." - Helen Keller.

This newsletter is one that we can certainly all relate to. Grief and loss are one of the most certain, ubiquitous, shared human experiences. For that reason, please be mindful that reading this newsletter could be triggering for you, and could stir up some emotions. We hope that it is also meaningful, educational, and supportive toward your healing. We encourage you to be gentle and compassionate with yourself. Find a cozy spot to sit, grab a cup of tea, breathe deeply, and have a read.

Loss and the Grieving Process

Loss and grief are difficult things to talk about. Firstly, these issues are often accompanied by a great deal of emotional pain. That makes it difficult. Secondly, there are aspects of loss and grief that are part of our shared humanity, and other aspects of loss and grief that are particular to each of us. That also makes it difficult. Loss is a universal human experience. Whether it is the death of a loved one, the end of a relationship, a change to an aspect of identity, or the loss of a cherished possession – we all experience loss. The specifics of every loss are unique to each person and circumstance.

Grief is the mental and emotional process that follows loss. Although there are some aspects of grief that can be regarded as common among diverse groups of people, grief is also an extremely individual experience, with no two people grieving in exactly the same way. The differences in how we grieve can also be influenced by the culture in which we live.

In terms of commonalities, many people experience shock at first learning of the loss, especially regarding the death of a loved one or the end of an important relationship. The loss can be so impactful that the mind simply cannot make sense of what happened. Other common emotional experiences include sadness, anger, fear and guilt. Oftentimes there is no rational explanation for why these feelings are present, but they are. Although these experiences are common, not everyone dealing with loss feels all or even any of them.

Given all the differences in how loss and grief can be experienced, it helps to keep in mind that there is no "right" or "wrong" when it comes to how we feel after loss, and there is no one right way to move through grief. Unfortunately, some – often well-meaning people - might suggest that you "shouldn't" feel this or you "should" be doing that, or that the whole thing is taking longer than it "should." It's a good idea to watch out for those "shoulds" that you may feel tempted to put on yourself, or others may put on you.

There are some general ideas that many people find helpful when healing from a loss.

- It is beneficial to feel and express your emotions, even painful ones. This allows the emotions to move as they need to and promote healing and recovery. In contrast, actively suppressing emotions, for instance with drugs or alcohol, or with work and staying busy, can prevent emotions from being released and can impede the grieving process.
- Remember that grief is a process and it moves at its own pace. And, this pace is often longer than we, or others around us, expect. This can be very hard due to the emotional pain involved. Practicing patience and self-compassion is extremely valuable as we grieve.

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- Remember that loss is a universal human experience. Many others have walked a similar path before us. This “normalizing” can help us trust in our innate ability to heal.
- Lastly, connecting with supportive people, including loved ones, counsellors and other helping professionals is beneficial. Simply talking, being heard, gaining helpful perspectives and feeling cared for makes a big difference. Loss and grief can be very lonely, but they do not need to be.

If you would like support working through grief, please know that Upper Island Counselling is here to help.

Grief is not a disorder, a disease or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical and spiritual necessity, the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve. - Earl Grollman

A Personal and Professional Walk Through Suicide Bereavement

I remember it as if it were yesterday, even though it was almost 33 years ago – a moment indelibly etched in my mind. I'd just finished a shift at my after-school job, and I was waiting for my dad to pick me up. He was late. Had I known why he was late I may have wished that he never come, that I could live in that moment forever – that last moment when my mother was still alive. But in my ignorance I remember staring out the window and wishing he would just get there already, in that self-centered way of experiencing the world so normal for a 14 year old girl. He finally pulled up, and I got in the car, immediately recognizing something very heavy in his silence. Looking back I can say that there have been very few moments in my life that have completely and irreversibly changed its trajectory, but hearing the words “Your mother has killed herself” that night, in that car, was the first.

Each year in Canada 4500 people die by suicide; that's more than 12 per day. Globally the number is a staggering 800,000 per year. It's estimated that for every loss at least 7 to 10 “survivors” are significantly affected. I was one of those survivors. It's easy to get lost in a sea of numbers and statistics, but I feel they are important for context and for perspective. This is not a rare or infrequent event, and if you have been one of those 7 to 10 people, you know too well that you are more than just a number. Losing a loved one is profoundly difficult and precipitates an individual experience with grief; losing a loved one to suicide can be even more complicated, adding layers of emotions and questions that may not arise with a more natural death. For me, a 14 year old girl struggling to form my identity and establish my self-worth, the loss of my mother was crippling.

Some of the common questions that come up among survivors of suicide are: “Why?” “Could it have been prevented?” “Whose fault was it?” “Why wasn't I enough?” While some of these same questions surface when grappling with any loss, it is the self-blame that really defines and delineates suicide bereavement from other grief. For me, self-blame was voracious, devouring my self-worth throughout my teens and well into my 20s. Preteen girls are known to be disagreeable with their mothers – this is a normal stage of differentiation as we grow up. But I was also confused and angry at my mom for those years leading up to her death. I didn't understand why she was so depressed and I wanted a “normal” mom who could participate fully in my life. These were normal feelings of course, although I didn't understand that then, nor would I for another decade. And as a result of these feelings, floundering through pre-adolescence, I was mean to my mom, difficult and unforgiving. Once she was gone I was sure that it was my fault, at least partially, and I agonized that I would never have the chance to say “I'm sorry”. What I know now is that this is pretty typical when you lose someone to suicide. Would knowing it then have ameliorated the pain and diverted me from complicated grief? Probably not. It wasn't until I became a mother myself, and felt the unconditional and all-consuming love I had for my child, that I realized my mother forgave me; she had forgiven me without me even asking.

When we look closely at grief it appears that people tend to have similar experiences characterized by

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similar emotions within a wide range of normal. As it happens, some research has been done into what makes suicide bereavement different from bereavement from other losses. Here is what they've found:

- **Survivors have a greater need to seek an explanation and make sense of it.**
This makes sense of course, given that suicide is such an unnatural, and typically unexpected way to lose a loved one. It is also often perceived as a choice, one that is hard for most mentally well people to fathom. Most people have a very strong survival instinct, and the act of suicide goes against this ubiquitous instinct. The process of “trying to make sense of it” can create a profound angst and a complicated layer of grief.
- **Survivors experience greater guilt and felt responsibility.**
While all losses can result in some experience of guilt and regret, these feelings are magnified for survivors of suicide. It is extremely common to self-blame, and fruitlessly search for what you could have done differently to save them. Without answers - processing the loss and coming to a felt resolution or acceptance is incredibly difficult.
- **Survivors experience greater stigmatization and shame.**
Although we've come a long way around mental health awareness, stigma and shame associated with suicide are still a reality. Often when someone takes their own life it overshadows all of the other notable qualities and accomplishments of that person and re-defines their story. Survivors tend to omit the cause of death when sharing about the loss, and might have less opportunity to talk about their loved one, as family may be reluctant to engage in remembering due to increased discomfort, stigma, or shame.
- **Survivor exposure to suicide increases risk of suicidal ideation and behaviour**
It may seem counterintuitive, as the survivor has a front row seat to the pain and confusion that suicide bereavement can propagate, but research shows that those bereaved by suicide are significantly more likely to become suicidal themselves.

You may be familiar with the “stages of grief” introduced by Elisabeth Kubler Ross in 1969 – Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. A couple of years ago her colleague David Kessler proposed a 6th stage: Finding Meaning. This is a transformative experience that allows an individual to move from pain based grief into a more hopeful and peaceful relationship with the loss.

For me, in my healing journey, this stage was critical. I found a way to use the pain and struggle I had endured for good. In doing so, my relationship to the loss shifted out of the adversarial havoc where it had been stuck for so long, and into restorative healing. Suddenly I could make amends with a loss that felt so senseless and unfair, that I had internalized as being my fault. A loss that had, in many ways, robbed me of my youth. I decided to dedicate my life to helping others who struggle with mental health and perhaps be the person that my mother never found who could offer hope and strength. And so began my journey towards becoming a therapist.

If you or someone you know has been bereaved by suicide, know that there is hope. While many of the questions may ultimately remain unanswered, know that you are not alone. And if you are stuck, know that we are here to help.

“The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not ‘get over’ the loss of a loved one; you’ll learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same nor would you want to.”

- Elizabeth Kubler Ross and David Kessler

RESOURCES



Books

For Adults:

It's OK That You're Not OK by Megan Devine

Bearing the Unbearable
by Joanne Cacciatori

For Teens:

When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving & Healing by Marilyn E. Gootman

For Children:

The Invisible String by Patricia Karst

The Memory Tree by Britta Teckentrup

Lifetimes : The beautiful way to explain death to children by Bryan Mellonie



Online Resources

<https://www.mygrief.ca/>

<https://grief.com/the-five-stages-of-grief/>

<https://www.crhospice.ca/grief>



Grief May Happen When You Least Expect It

We sometimes meet clients who are struggling to understand the emotional experience that comes with a life transition, such as a job or career change, a divorce, the end of a friendship, relocating, etc. They will feel a wide range of emotions including sadness, guilt, anxiety, relief, hope and even joy. Sometimes they'll oscillate quickly between feelings; admonishing themselves for some feelings while highlighting those more preferred.

For example,

"I'm feeling sad about starting my new job, I'll miss my co-workers and my work was very meaningful. I shouldn't complain because it's a great new opportunity and this is what I wanted"

"I'm feeling anxious and guilty about ending this friendship. It isn't a healthy relationship for me. But, I shouldn't care, it's really no big deal..."

"Immediately after my divorce I felt relieved and even joyful. Now I'm feeling lonely and angry."

When we as counsellors note that perhaps grief and loss is part of their experience, we're sometimes met with a moment of clarity, or a look of surprise, "but it's not like someone died". In those 'ah-ha' moments, the concept of grief resonates and the client will often relate their current emotional experience to past losses, sometimes including the death of a loved one. For those who struggle to connect grief to anything outside of death, it's an opportunity to discuss grief in a larger context.

"Grief is the container that holds all of the emotions felt as a result of loss". - speakinggrief.org

Many life transitions begin with a series of losses: the loss of a relationship, role, place, or identity. These transitions force us to face the uncertainty of the future and to relinquish the familiar. In this space, we experience the range of emotions that are felt as a result of loss: the process of grief.

One of the most powerful tools in managing the often confusing and conflicting emotions that come with grief during life transitions, is to simply drop the "It could be worse" struggle. Rather, to validate your experience, try "it's ok to think and feel this way". Recognize the loss involved, and that grieving the loss is part of a healthy and normal human experience. On the other side of those many life transitions, after losses and grief, there are new beginnings to look forward to.

<https://speakinggrief.org/get-better-at-grief/understanding-grief/grief-emotion>

