



Hospice Grief Outreach - April

Questioning Grief

Undoubtedly the question about grief that I get asked more than any other is, “Why do I still feel this way?” It is not a simple question, and it has many variations: “When will this pain go away?”; “Will it ever get better?”; “Why does it still hurt so much?” Maybe you’ve asked one of these questions (or similar) to yourself, your friends, your family, a counselor, or the universe. After many years helping people to process their grief, I confess I still have no one satisfactory answer. There are, however, many things that may lead us to ask this question, and these considerations may help you to find your own answer(s), at least for the time being.

Say this often, loudly and with conviction to anyone who asks (and even those who don’t): **THERE IS NO TIMEFRAME FOR GRIEVING!** When grief makes us ask something like, “Why do I still feel this way?” we might really be asking, “Shouldn’t I be over this by now?” The answer to this question is always “No”, regardless of how much time passes after someone’s death. Hopefully over time, things get a little easier, bit by painful bit. However, the expectation that we will stop hurting altogether is both unrealistic and a little cruel. How long we grieve is influenced by so many things: our past experience with loss, our level of supports, the way our loved one died, the nature of our relationship with them, and many others. There is no way to predict how long the process will last. Even though it’s hard, the greatest gift you can give yourself in answer to the question, “Why do I still feel this way?” is a reminder that grief is an unavoidable side effect of love and connection; it is **not** a dysfunction or sign of weakness. The poet Thomas Lynch said it best, “If you love, you grieve, and there are no exceptions.”

Sometimes what lies beneath a question like, “Why do I still feel this way?” is a sense of anxiety or hopelessness that we will ever feel better. It can be a cry for help – essentially we might be saying, “**I CAN’T TAKE THIS ANYMORE!**” Part of us knows it’s normal and natural to be upset when someone we love dies, but another voice in our heads might be saying, “But not this upset and not for so long.” The intensity and duration of the pain might bring up fears that our grief isn’t normal – that our pain is a sign that something’s gone wrong. As a culture, we have a tendency to underestimate how long it can take to adjust to something as life-changing and permanent as the death of someone close to us. In dealing with our fears, one strategy can be to take mini “grief-breaks”. Grief can be an all-consuming experience – try to give yourself a vacation every now and then. See a funny movie, go for a drive, listen to a ridiculous song, phone a friend and talk about the weather, your dog, a sports team, anything to get your mind off of your grief for even a minute. It maybe won’t feel quite so scary if we can put it on pause for just a moment.

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When people ask, “Why do I still feel this way?” with regard to their grief, it could also be motivated by messages from other people who might want us to hurry up and get better. Others might be uncomfortable with the length of time it’s taking or the amount of pain we’re experiencing. We can be made to think our emotions are an inconvenience rather than the necessary human experience that they are. For many people, grief counseling is about becoming their own advocate for their right to grieve. In some cases, griever almost need to become teachers and educate other people about what grief is and what it’s all about. Sometimes by standing up for ourselves with others, we are essentially answering that question, “I still feel this way because **I HAVE A RIGHT TO MY GRIEF!**” Alan Wolfelt, founder of The Centre of Loss and Life Transition in Colorado, has developed a Mourner’s Bill of Rights that helps remind us that grieving is important and everyone needs to do it on their own terms...

The Mourner’s Bill of Rights

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I have the right to experience my own unique grief.

I have the right to feel a multitude of emotions.

I have the right to be tolerant of my physical and emotional limits.

I have the right to experience “griefbursts”.

I have the right to make use of ritual.

I have the right to embrace my spirituality.

I have the right to search for meaning.

I have the right to treasure my memories.

I have the right to move toward my grief and heal.

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