

Grieving Well

Bereavement is a universal experience. Grieving is not a fault or a problem; it is a healthy process. Cultures accept it as normal, creating mourning rituals to help people deal with death. Christians, like others, should expect to grieve, just as godly people in biblical times did. For instance, when devout men buried Stephen, they made great lamentation over him (Acts 8:2). D.A. Carson writes, “The Bible assumes that those who are bereaved will grieve and their grief is never belittled.”

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When a fellow believer dies, our grieving experience is different from what non-Christians experience. Paul wrote, “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope” (1 Thess. 4:13). We must expect to grieve when we lose a loved one, but we do it in the context of hope: “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thess. 4:14). To tell ourselves that we should not mourn because our loved ones are in a better place is to miss the point of grieving. We grieve not because the deceased are among the blessed; we grieve for what they’re missing on earth and for our own loss of their companionship and love.

Grief is complex; a death can trigger all kinds of inner conflict and emotions. Much depends on how a survivor has been related to a loved one. Naturally, if the two have been very close, the grieving might be severe. John Stott reminds us: “However firm our Christian faith may be, the loss of a close relative or friend causes a profound emotional shock. To lose a loved one is to lose a part of oneself. It calls for radical and painful adjustments, which may take months.” If one’s relationship with the deceased was not close, the grieving might include regret over the strained relationship. In this case the loss suffered is one of missed opportunities. Adding to the complexity is the effect that gender, age, personality structure, and cultural norms have on how one grieves.

Practical Suggestions for Grieving

Do not deny your feelings. It’s best to admit to yourself and others what you are feeling. We must be careful not to simply say to ourselves: “Don’t be sad; I should rejoice.” Rather, we should recognize our emotions and deal with them appropriately.

I have seen the negative results of denying one’s emotions. June was in her seventies when her husband of fifty years died a lingering death to cancer. She said that she wanted to be strong, and continuously talked about how good God is. At the same time she was not sleeping or eating and started to complain of intense headaches as her blood pressure soared. She said that she was rejoicing so much in the hope of Christ that she could not cry. She was going into a severe depression because she would not let herself grieve.

Be honest with God. Spend quiet, unhurried time in God’s presence. If you are feeling an impasse between you and the Lord, that is okay. Acknowledge it and cry out to God. Read the Psalms, where godly men did not hesitate to cry out to God. Balance these readings with meditating on the goodness of God. Focus on the cross, and ask God to give you a deep experience of his love. Talk with yourself, and remember God’s promises, as did the psalmist: “Why are you downcast, O my soul? ... Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him ...” (Ps. 42:5).

Allow grief to fulfill love. After his wife, Joy, died C.S. Lewis found that for the first time he could love her in truly unselfish ways. That is a very profound thought. This may not happen immediately. In fact shortly after the death of a spouse it is possible to be totally consumed with your own loss. But, eventually, it is possible to move to the unselfish love that Lewis experienced.

Take control of your emotions, thoughts, and actions. Questions that beg for answers may crowd our minds: “Why did this happen now?” “Why didn’t God answer our prayers?” “Why didn’t I spend more time with him?” It’s best not to simply push these questions into the back of our minds. Rather, we should reflect on them, study the Scriptures to search for answers, and talk with others. But we also need to recognize that we may have to learn to live with unanswered questions. The eventual goal is for us to acknowledge the goodness of God in all things. To reach that endpoint may take much time and healing. When your emotions well up, give them sway for a short time; it is okay to sit and bawl. Then take control and force yourself to get up and do something. That will help you rein in those thoughts and emotions. You will need to be careful not to wrongfully act out your emotions by “taking out” your anger on others or yourself. And you must not allow your sadness to cause you to ignore your health.



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Spend time with others. Meet with a few close friends to share your pain and shed tears, but don't feel that you need to open your heart to everyone. Allow yourself to be with others just for fun and laughter. As time goes on and healing progresses, you will find you will spend less time in tears and more in laughter.

Continue to be active. It's normal for a griever to be excused from routine activities for a period of time. But eventually it's best to return to work and social activities. It's important to keep being active even when your heart is not in the activity. Behaving in ways contrary to our emotions helps change how we feel. Some find it helpful to leave familiar surroundings and strike out independently. My wife's father died when she was ten. I was impressed that two summers after his death, Dorothy's mother took her three daughters from their home in St. Louis and spent several months in California. They lived together in a college dormitory while her mother took a course. This gave them time and space to build new experiences together.

Remember that grieving takes time, but it will come to an end. As with most things in life, people do not finish grieving overnight. I have observed that grief for a spouse or child takes a minimum of six months. Even in the context of a lingering death, when we might think we are well prepared and have already been grieving, it still takes a lot of time after the death. But in time the sadness will decrease, the disturbing thoughts will subside, and you will come to the final stage: acceptance. The emptiness your experience will never completely be removed, but it will no longer be your focus or dominate your life.

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