



Family and Caregiver Education

BEREAVEMENT

Disloyalty

After much grief work, and with pain and emotional anguish as constant and intractable companions, the bereaved will suddenly experience an unexpected moment without painful thought of the loved one at all, and this can feel shocking and horrifying. Guilt and shame rapidly ensue as the bereaved self-punish with recriminations about the inadequacy of their feelings. “I did not love enough; I am not hurting enough; I am a terrible person” are some of the torturous messages with which the bereaved can flog themselves.

It is as if after the death of a significant loved one, every thought, every moment and every breath must be spent in emotional pain for the loss. It is as if the entire future of the bereaved must be spent in a state of mourning, bereft of any feeling other than sadness.

- “How dare I smile and laugh when my dear one is dead and can experience nothing?”
- “How dare I eat and actually taste my food and enjoy it when my loved one cannot eat or breathe?”
- “How dare I notice the deep blue of the sky, enjoy the warmth of the sun, the sweetness of a rose while my loved one experiences nothing?”
- “How dare I smile at a kitten, laugh at a joke, forget my horrible loss?”

The fear is that we are forgetting. This is compounded by the fear that we have not grieved enough, hurt enough, been in pain enough, mourned enough. What this also means is that we fear that we have not loved enough. The dangerous misconception is that, if we had truly loved enough, if we were adequately honoring the memory of our beloved, we should never, ever, even for a split second, be free of the pain and grief of loss. The misconception further brutalizes with the erroneous idea that the survivor’s life and future must constantly focus on the loss.

That is what individual grief experience teaches during the earlier phases of bereavement, and it is appropriate then. It serves an important emotional purpose. It makes the loss real, emotionally. It has always been real intellectually, but our hearts, our souls, our psyches are very different from our computer-like brains. Brains and computers deal with facts; emotions do not compute. Conversely, our hearts, souls, and psyches do not understand unwanted factual change; they operate on feelings, on emotions. They do not understand computer-brain language.

Eventually the computer-brain and the emotional mind can communicate, but this is eventually. They must catch up with each other, and they must find a common language, which can take a long time.

Bereavement Services

602.530.6970

As we live with grief, day-to-day, week-to-week, month-to-month, the loss becomes more and more real. It is only by living with loss for a very long time, and through many experiences, that it becomes reality on a gut level, emotional plane.

Many different experiences must be experienced without the loved one during this process. An unchanged world must be lived in by the bereaved whose personal world has been irrevocably changed beyond recognition. Only after much anguish can the bereaved come to recognize, on an emotional level, that their loss is forever.

It is then that another entire level of the pain of living in a world without the loved one must be faced. It is then that the issues of smiling, of laughing, of enjoyment must be dealt with. Is it forgetting? Is it disloyal to the loved one? Is it selfish? Is it uncaring? Is it proof that the griever is an inadequate person? No, it is not.

Just as our psyches protect us with shock and with denial, permitting reality into consciousness bit by handleable bit, so as not to overwhelm, so do our psyches protect us later in the course of bereavement.

Grief takes a tremendous amount of energy—probably every bit of energy that an individual possesses. Never underestimate that expenditure of energy or the physical toll that it can take.

After a while the huge amount of energy that is needed just to get out of bed, shower and get dressed, drive the care without crashing it, do the laundry, breathe, function...to live with loss...exhausts.

Once energy disappears, the grievers are in danger of becoming completely overwhelmed and unable to function. With the impending absence of all available energy, they are at great risk for physical and emotional illness.

At this time the psyche will protect our valuable remaining energy, permitting us brief respites from the awesome burden of grief. Our minds permit distraction from our grief, from the memory of our loved one for a brief second, or eventually even for minutes and hours. This is not disloyal; it is necessary. We cannot persevere in life without respite.

Before a loss, each individual is comprised of a great variety of interests and abilities. This is what makes each person unique and interesting. After a loss, it is as if all interest and abilities are devalued and the entire focus is on the loss. This is healthy and appropriate for awhile. After a time, remaining focused only on the loss and continually negating every other aspect of life becomes dangerous, because we humans erroneously assume that it's "wrong" to focus on anything other than our loss.

Our psyches protect us by making us notice autumn leaves, the aroma of coffee and other distractions from grief, allowing us to go on and to safeguard the precious stores of remaining energy. These mini-vacations from grief permit mourners to maintain health.

With time, the mini-vacation will expand to hours, which is needed and normal. It does not mean that you are forgetting or that you are disloyal to your loved one.

Hopefully, you will experience happiness and find interest and meaning again. Because you survived does not mean that your life must be punishment. You have suffered. Your love will never die.

You deserve some happiness, and it is not disloyalty. Because your brain knows this, it forces you to be distracted at times. Now, *you* must accept and allow yourself this respite and stop punishing yourself afterwards.

—By Susan Arlen, M.D., *Bereavement Magazine*, January / February 1995, pp. 32-33. Reprinted with permission from Bereavement Publishing, Inc. (888-604-4673)