

Getting Back on Your Feet

Recovering your balance

Recovering from a major loss is not like getting over the flu. Grief is not an illness. It doesn't help to take two aspirin, go to bed, and wait for the grief to go away. When you experience a major loss, it is as though the rug of life has been jerked out from under you. Someone or something that gave life meaning and joy for you is gone forever. You don't know which way to turn or what to do. Getting back on your feet is a difficult but important first move toward recovery. It can take much longer than you expect to feel "normal" again.

The Urge to Escape

More people than I like to remember have tried to medicate their way through grief. It never works, but I have to admit it's tempting. It isn't difficult to find a doctor who is willing to prescribe tranquilizers for the first few days or weeks. The problem is that being tranquilized can create a fog around your emotions and block the beginning of grief recovery.

Taking medication is sometimes necessary, but it should always be the last resort. If depression persists for weeks or if anxiety attacks are frequent and severe, it is time to seek professional intervention. The issue is one of intent. Medications that are taken to keep from facing the reality of the loss do more harm than good. To take control of your grief, you

must face your loss directly, with all your senses and your mind working. You can't do that while you are blissfully tranquilized—any more than you can safely drive a car while under the influence of alcohol.

However, it is also true that antidepressants can give you needed strength to make the decisions that will take you to recovery. Hundreds of people with whom I have counseled have used antidepressants in the course of their grief recovery with no apparent negative effects. Getting back on your feet after a major loss is one of the most difficult tasks you will ever face. There is no more shame in using "a crutch" to accomplish this task than using one to recover from a broken leg.

The Challenge of Getting Up Again

After the death of a loved one, the shock of divorce, or the disillusionment of bankruptcy, people often say something like "It knocked me flat." It is not an overstatement but rather an accurate description of

experiencing a major loss. You are affected emotionally, physically, and spiritually. You will feel disoriented, uncertain, and weak in the knees. You may feel so tired that even thinking requires tremendous

effort. Your religious faith may seem as shattered as your life appears to be. Many people have reported how difficult it was to go back to church. Memory losses and forgetfulness are almost universal.

Other family relationships are often affected in dramatic ways.

- A divorce can result in confused loyalties among family members.
- The death of a child produces incredible stress between the parents.
- Parents and siblings of a deceased child often struggle with their feelings about each other.
- The death of a spouse can make it seem as if no family member really matters—or cares.

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No One Response Fits All People

Janet's husband, Dan, left for work at the same time that he always did. It would have been like any other day if she hadn't received a telephone call an hour later from a sheriff's deputy. Dan was only two miles from home when an eighteen-wheel truck turned in front of him. Dan died instantly.

Janet was filled with disbelief and horror. She was sure it was a mistake and Dan would call to say he was okay. But Dan didn't call. Weeks after the funeral, Janet would find herself going to the door and looking for him. Then the anger set in. She filed a lawsuit against the trucking company. I'm convinced that it was the energy of her anger that sustained her over the next two years. It gave her a reason to get up in the morning and a purpose for living. In time, the lawsuit was settled and her life began to take on some sense of normalcy again.

Mary was driving a group of neighborhood children to the ice-cream store. Somewhere along the way, her own toddler choked to death in the backseat. Mary was unaware of any problem until she arrived at their destination.

On the day of the funeral, the family called me to say Mary was hyperventilating. As soon as she could breathe again, she would begin screaming hysterically until her breath was once more gone. Family members had tried everything to get her calmed down, without success. I went to the house and ordered everyone out of the room, except for Mary.

When we were alone, I told her that I was there to be with her, that I understood the immensity of her loss and her sense of guilt. I said, "Mary, you can respond any way you want to this terrible thing. It's okay with me if you hyperventilate, scream, throw-up, wet your pants—anything that will help you get through the funeral this afternoon. I won't let you be harmed, and there are plenty of people who love you who will clean up any messes."

She looked me squarely in the eyes for a long time—I think to see if I really meant what I said. I did not take my eyes off her and tried not to blink any more than I had to. She threw her arms around my neck,

sobbing not in hysteria, but in an anguish that was totally appropriate to the loss of her baby. Later, after the funeral, she could not remember being out of control, only that she felt better after my arrival.

Dan was an engineer who designed computer hardware and programs. His work was brilliant in part because of his skills and in part because he never let his emotions guide his response to any challenge. When his son was murdered, Dan conducted interviews and press conferences without a tear in his eyes. We never sat down in chairs so I could "counsel" with him. We walked, sometimes for miles at a time, while he talked about his son's death—never about his own feelings. His response seemed to break all the rules of good grief recovery process, but it worked for him. This was the way he functioned normally, and he did not vary from it under the stress of grief. He went on to make a full recovery and leads a full life today.

It isn't better to remain calm like Dan, angry like Janet, or hysterical like Mary. There was nothing wrong with the way any of them reacted to their losses. They all responded in ways that helped protect their shattered lives and emotions. Each of them was beginning to recover long before being aware of it.

You will react to a major loss in your life in ways you can't predict ahead of time. It will seem as if the foundations of your very existence have crumbled. Before you can pick up the pieces and get back on your feet, you will need to regain your sense of balance. It's an enormous task that takes time. Think back to some loss in your life.

- Remember how your life seemed to crumble.
- Write down some of the feelings you had at that time. See Appendix B for a list of words that describe feelings.
- With whom did you talk about those feelings?

If you are like most of us, you kept most of your thoughts and feelings to yourself.

Trust Yourself

Loss and grief are subjects we should be talking about frequently—before losses occur. The fact is that we have not been talking about these experiences very much, even after the losses. Because of this conspiracy of silence, the task of grief recovery is made more difficult. We think there is something wrong with a perfectly normal reaction, such as intense crying or bitter anger.

The most frequent statement I hear from people in grief support groups is, "You mean other people do that? I thought I was the only one and that I was going crazy!" Actually, a very small percentage of people experience mental illness after a major loss, but almost everyone does "crazy" things. When a loved one has died (even a pet), you may struggle with issues of security, self-esteem, and depression. You will do and think things that seem strange to you and, perhaps, to others. This is one of those times in life when "weird" means normal.

Forgetfulness

You may find that you have forgotten how to do tasks that had been routine. Sue was

a secretary who regularly typed eighty words per minute with flawless accuracy. A month after her divorce, she complained she could not type her own name without making a mistake. When my grandmother had to give up living alone and moved in with us, she forgot that our coffeepot was electric and put it on the stove burner. By the time the odor of burning plastic reached us, it was destroyed. I had my own introduction to this phenomenon when we moved to a different state after thirty-three years of being in the same area. In the next six months, I locked my keys in the car four times.

Whenever I meet with a group of bereaved persons, we inevitably spend some time laughing at ourselves for our forgetfulness. What's

happening is the emotional equivalent of overloading an electrical circuit. Our minds and emotions can absorb just so much stress, and then they "short-out." That isn't a bad thing. I see it as a protective mechanism, an automatic reflex that functions like a fuse or circuit breaker. It's a necessary step for most of us that enables our emotional resources to gain strength for the difficult task of grief recovery.

Keys and Phone Numbers

It is normal to be forgetful in the first several months after a major loss. "Veterans" who have been dealing with grief for a while tell newly bereaved people to guard against locking themselves out of their cars and houses. They suggest keeping an extra set of car keys in a magnetic box placed discreetly out of sight, or better yet, acquiring a remote entry device. It's always a good idea to have a trusted neighbor keep a spare set of house keys.

Another important idea is to write down needed telephone numbers, including the most familiar ones. Place a copy of the list by the telephone and carry another on your person.

This advice applies to any major loss, not just to the death of a loved one. Forgetfulness hits almost everyone regardless of the source of grief.

You will continue to recover your emotional balance as time goes on and you gain more skills in coping with your loss. The more you understand that what is happening to you is normal, the less forgetfulness and other common occurrences will frighten you. Take hope and comfort in knowing others behave in the same ways.

The following exercise has been well tested by thousands of people. It can help you begin to recover your emotional balance and get back on your feet.

Write each of the following statements on a separate piece of paper in your own handwriting. (Don't type them or use a computer.) Make three copies.

- I will not always feel as I do now.
- I am doing okay. Grief will not destroy me.
- I will make it through this experience just as others have before me.

Post one copy of each on the door of your refrigerator. Put another in your bathroom, either on the mirror you use most frequently or on the lid of your toilet. (You will use these household items regularly, regardless of your grief.) Keep the third copy with you.

You aren't falling apart; you are coming together.

Every time you see these statements, read them aloud. Keep reading them until you know them by heart and the words come automatically in times of special sadness. Being forgetful is only another aspect of your grief experience, just like sadness, fatigue, and anger. It is a sign of your movement along the pathway to recovery. You aren't falling apart; you are coming together.

In spite of your feelings to the contrary, you won't always feel as you do early on in the process. You will recover your balance, get back on your feet, and have a good life.

Tears

On your journey to recovery, you will shed more tears than you thought your body could hold. Four months after her husband's death, one widow said, "Now I understand why they say the human body is mostly water. I've cried enough tears to fill a swimming pool!"

I am a big believer in tears.

I am a big believer in tears. There is a sign near the door to my office that reads, "People and Tears Are Welcome Here." There is always at least one full box of tissues in plain sight and more nearby. When someone comes to talk about a pending divorce, the death of a loved one, or a child who has run away, I want

that person to feel free to cry as much as needed. When our grief support group meets, there are always boxes of tissues around the circle in highly visible locations. The tears of a newcomer or "veteran" are met with a casually passed box of tissues. The clear message is, "Your tears are okay here."

I am among the men who have grown up believing that "big boys don't cry." I don't know who ever taught us that bit of foolishness, but we never should have listened. Women are smarter and healthier, not weaker, because they typically have an easier time crying. The two best things men have going for them these days is (1) being in the delivery room when their children are born; and (2) watching massive football players weep openly when they have lost a game. Being present to the birth process softens them up, and it doesn't take a rocket scientist to conclude that if the *really* big boys can cry, so can I.

Tears can be embarrassing if they flow in public. They most certainly turn your eyes red and make your face look puffy. But those are the only negative aspects of crying. Crying is actually one of the healthiest things anyone can do. Studies have shown that tears of sadness have a different chemical makeup than tears of joy. Tears of sadness release substances that have a calming effect. It is no myth, that you will feel better after a good cry. Some studies indicate they are also washing toxins out of the body—which means not crying is holding these poisons inside.

Add this to your list of notes to be posted around the house: *Tears are a sign that you are on the way to recovery.*

Jack came to see me a few months after his wife died of a heart attack while they were on a skiing trip. He had been absent from church since her death. In the past, the two of them rarely missed a Sunday. He told me he had reached the church door several times but just couldn't come in. He would begin to cry uncontrollably as the memories rushed over him of having Helen beside him and listening to her sing the hymns. Each time he tried to come he would get a step or two inside the door, then turn around and go home to cry alone. He didn't want anyone to see him "acting like a sissy."