



How We Grieve

It begins so early. As tiny children, when we're forced apart from our mothers. Then there are the rejections on the playground, the losses of jobs, the collapse of marriages. By the time we are adults, most of us are experts on experiencing grief.

"Grief is just mixed into the stuff of life," says Jack Hileman, a licensed marriage and family therapist and a retired pastor in North Carolina. Even smaller events like a child who says, "I never want to talk to you again" or reaching the end of an exceptional book can be painful and cause us distress. "It's really about separation and having to let go of a certain time in your life or a connection and having to move on."

But our lived experience of grief often seems inadequate when we lose a person we love. The suffering we feel at such an irreversible separation can send us into a dark cocoon of our own spinning. Or send us spiraling outward into social media to see our feelings reflected back to us as comments and likes.

When we experience grief, it often feels like an affliction—and an unfair one at that. But Hileman says grief is also the beginning of potential growth toward something positive: meaningful connections that can enrich our lives.

Avoidance and Isolation

Grief can affect our minds and bodies in very real ways—from body aches, fatigue, and upset stomachs to lethargy, crying, loss of libido, and a lack of interest in participating in our usual activities. Its mental toll is undeniable. Hileman describes grief as "an internal psychological process we go



through in a time of loss; a keen mental suffering.”

It is a common myth that we can avoid loss or avoid feeling the emotional, mental, and physical effects of it, according to Hileman. But almost as pervasive is the myth that we can isolate ourselves within that loss from other people.

“Avoidance and isolation. Those two myths are functionally predominant,” Hileman says. “Often the biggest psychological driver in all human activity is the avoidance of loss. And so that takes over. How do I not feel this? Or how do I make myself feel this when I don’t want to? They are flip sides to the same coin.”

Hileman remembers one client whose father had passed away after expressing a wish that his ashes be spread in a favorite vacation spot out west. The man wanted to take his dad’s ashes to his final resting place all alone, without other family members. A few relatives had divided up the man’s ashes so each could carry out his or her own ritual. They were literally isolating themselves to engage in private grieving experiences.

Instead of grieving alone, Hileman says we need to start mourning. “Mourning is the sharing of grief in a communal setting—or with those whom we trust or with whom we want to attach or connect,” says Hileman. “Mourning is actually the healing of the separateness that we feel at the time of loss.”

Coping Means Connecting

We simply cannot avoid loss and the grief that sometimes follows. But Hileman says the key to healing from it is connecting.

He’s seen the deep-seated urge to do so within his own family. At a reunion a few years ago, Hileman looked around to notice a bunch of people had suddenly disappeared. Hileman’s grandmother and her four living children had retreated to a corner and drawn close together to share the story surrounding the sudden death of a fifth sibling who had passed away in 1961. They still felt that need to connect and share his memory even after so many years had passed.

Hileman encourages his patients to engage in something similar. In all of his grief therapy, he helps the individual or family take an action that feels like a connection to the person they’ve lost.

For the man who was planning his solo trip west to scatter his father’s ashes, for example, Hileman suggested he include more people in planning and taking the journey. By responding as a connected, loving group of people, Hileman believed they each would find more solace and be able to move forward.

Take an Action

Hileman believes connecting with people who care about us is the most crucial element to overcoming grief. And although it can be an extremely challenging first step, we cannot just feel



something; we need to do something.

“That’s where some people get sidelined into complex grief—it’s that they’re so focused on the feeling that’s pulling them down,” Hileman says. “They stop doing on purpose to assuage the feeling. And the opposite is really the appropriate response. The less you feel like doing, the more you need to do something.”

Hileman remembers one woman struggling with grief after the passing of her mother, a gentle and nurturing person. He encouraged the woman to write down her memories of her mother, and then move on by doing something with another person who would benefit from feeling the kind of love she was missing. The woman began journaling about her mom and started volunteering in a soup kitchen with people who had not felt the same gentleness and provision she’d felt from her mother. “It became kind of an integration of all that she felt into what she did in a positive way, and connected her with other people,” Hileman says.

Grief Can Be Collective

For better or for worse, we are not often alone with any emotion these days, including grief. In today’s world of digital connections, we find unending opportunities to engage, involve, commiserate, and remember in very public ways.

Sharing grief on social media “creates instant access to a support network and a virtual memory that is never more than a click away,” wrote Harriet Allner in a 2014 article following the highly public death of Robin Williams. “Sharing allows us to enter into a community of loss, to search and find solace, to show solidarity, or provide it for those closer to the epicenter of grief,” she wrote.

The evolution of our experience from personal into public has been a dramatic shift, Hileman says. “Even Pinterest is a place for people to post, memorialize, and grieve,” he points out. “That kind of thing would have been unheard of even 10 years ago.”

But that kind of sharing can sometimes come at a cost, Hileman cautions. We risk having negative online interactions with those whose experience of grieving has been quite different, those who cannot understand what we’re going through, or those whose proffered comforts come up woefully short.

So Hileman advises people dealing with grief turn to a surprising source for advice on coping: themselves. “I would encourage people to reflect on the kinds of things they’ve heard and felt in funerals or in situations of loss that have really touched them and helped them think differently about what just happened.” What calmed your stomach down? What helped you relax? Focus on things or thoughts that previously helped you stop obsessing about a loss.



Then, find someone else who's felt the same way, and reach out. "Respect your own feelings about what you need, and then look around with new eyes about who acts that way, who talks that way, who have I seen doing that?" Hileman suggests. "Tell people who've dealt with grief that they've inspired you, and you'd like to learn and connect." It's likely they want to share and connect, too.