

You Need to Know Why Grief and Mourning Are Very, Very Different

By Lou LaGrand

Do you think grief and mourning are the same experience? Do you use the two terms interchangeably? In reality, most authorities on the grief process point out a very important and major difference between the two.

Grief is commonly defined as the process of experiencing a variety of physical, psychological, social, and behavioral reactions from some type of loss. Loss comes in two categories: psychosocial loss (divorce, death of a loved one, loss of meaning, etc.) and physical loss (wallet, body part, automobile, etc.). Looked at another way, we grieve changes of all types.

On the other hand, mourning is the critical expression of grief to the outside world. It is grief publicly exposed, that has been externalized from within the heart to without. And, that is a highly therapeutic process for everyone to examine.

What can you do with this seemingly insignificant piece of information if you are coping with the death of a loved one or providing support for someone else suffering through a loss? Consider the following implications.

1. It is critical to go public with your grief to the people of your choosing and to mourn according to your timetable. This action will reduce feelings of isolation, provide emotional release, and begin needed movement to actively adapt to the loss. This single factor of sharing grief has long been known and practiced, though it is still not fully taken advantage of by most.
2. Search for alternative methods to find relief for the tension and anxiety that is the normal response to the anxiety of grief. Write it out. Draw it. Paint it out. Walk it out. Play it out (yes, it is entirely normal to periodically break away from the stranglehold of grief). Most important, don't miss an opportunity to cry.
3. Accept the inescapable fact that grief is the ransom you pay for loving well. So tell others of your love and the pain of your loss. Remember that it is normal for those internal feelings to persist and there is nothing wrong with feeling the way you do for weeks, months or longer. Allow the process to naturally unfold and don't try to cut it short.
4. If after a considerable period of time you feel you are "stuck" in your mourning--which is not uncommon--go to someone who understands the grief process or join a grief support group. You will learn much about yourself and the normalcy of what feels incredibly abnormal. Once more, you will find hope in the midst of your dark night.
5. Although mourning is the root to healing, it is only part of the healing equation. The mourner must actively work at adapting to the new conditions of life. In short, he or she will have to change in order to accommodate the loss. This is often the most difficult challenge for the mourner to accept.
6. By going public with your grief, you can find help to accomplish the most demanding part of the process of adaptation: facing the pain head on. Here is where your friends and family can join you in the process of working (crying) through the painful thoughts and feelings of loss and despair, and releasing the deep psychosocial ties to the deceased loved one.
7. Mourning also implies that in facing your pain it is essential to plan specific times when you attempt to recharge your energy levels by temporarily focusing attention away from your great loss. It is perfectly okay to back away from mourning to rest and give yourself a treat.

Each day do something just for yourself that you enjoy. Do not take this suggestion lightly: It is essential for your emotional and physical health. By placing your attention on supporting yourself, you will be loosening the all consuming grip of grief

In summary, there is much to learn about the process of adapting to loss and change, especially because grief and mourning are both demanding and call for the bereaved to do what they dislike doing. Yet, doing the distasteful is inescapable, if the mourner is to reinvest in life and move into the new world without the physical presence of the deceased.