

How Long Should Grief Last?

Dr. Linda E. Jordan

I ran into an acquaintance recently. In the course of our conversation, this man expressed his deep concern about a phenomenon that he believes is sweeping the country lately. He said he had read that many of those who lost loved ones on Pan Am flight 800 were still meeting two years after the tragedy. He emphasized TWO YEARS, stating that they had merely fixated on their grief instead of “getting over it.” This otherwise intelligent, well-educated man could not grasp why persons whose worlds were suddenly and unalterably changed by this tragedy would still be struggling with loss two years later.

A survivor told me that a month after his wife’s death, a long time friend and colleague invited him to lunch and told him that he should seek some professional help because he was still grieving a month after his wife’s death. This man told me that he returned to his office and shut the door and wept. His friend’s ignorance and insensitivity only served to isolate this survivor’s grief further. Not only was this man not “over” the death of his wife of 38 years, it was not yet real to him.

Another survivor reported that a colleague at work told her she was glad that the survivor was attending a bereavement support group to “help her with her problem.” This survivor, like so many others, tried to be polite and did not respond. When I asked her what she wanted to say, she said, “I am angry that you think of my grief as a problem. Grief is not something I am trying to ‘get over.’ Rather it is something that I am trying to learn to live with.”

These situations are not just isolated incidents; they are sadly representative of what survivors encounter on a daily basis. Grief is not a disease that we must “get over.” Neither is it a timed commodity like a hard-boiled egg or fast food meal. Grief is about significant human beings dying—persons whose lives will always be a part of us.

So how long does grief take? The answer is simpler than we might suppose. Grief lasts A LIFETIME! The pain does get better. Gradually life does take on new meaning. But death forever alters those who survive—their identity and their worldview. We lose not only the person who died, but we lose who we were when they were alive. We lose not only our present, but also our future. We lose the assumptions upon which we built our lives—i.e., parents do not outlive their children.

We dare not expect a survivor to make such radical adjustments in their lives without a great deal of time, energy and support. Permit me to suggest some ways we can normalize grief as a healthy way of taking care of ourselves.

First, we can expect the first year—the first cycle of birthdays, holidays, and other special events to be particularly difficult. Each event will remind loved ones of the reality and permanence of their loss. And we can stop expecting people do not ever “get over” their

grief. A mother whose sixteen-year-old daughter was killed 25 years ago said she wished people realized that she still misses her daughter and continues to struggle through certain days and times of the year.

Second, we can encourage survivors to talk about the deceased. Often when survivors try to remember the deceased, they are met with an air of silence and sometimes hostility, as if to remember is bad. Remembering does not mean that something is wrong with us. In fact, the inability to remember is the disease—amnesia, dementia, Alzheimer's.

Third, we can accept the fact that survivors are different persons. Something irrevocable has happened to them. Rather, we need to make room for the new selves—with all its pain and promise. Grieving requires a great deal of time and energy. Often survivors feel relief only with other survivors because friends and family constantly pressure them to be “their old selves” again.

George Eliot, in her moving novel, *Adam Bede*, wrote:

“Adam Bede had not outlived his sorrow--had not felt it slip from him as a temporary burden, and leave him the same man again. Do any of us? God forbid. It would be a poor result of all our anguish and wrestling, if we won nothing but our old selves at the end of it--if we could return to the same blind loves, the same light thoughts of human suffering, the same frivolous gossip over blighted human lives, the same feeble sense of the Unknown towards which we have sent forth irrepressible cries in our loneliness. Let us rather be thankful that sorrow lives in us as an indestructible force, only changing its form, as forces do, and passing from pain into sympathy--the one poor word which includes all our best insight and our best love.”

Fourth, we need to adopt a one-down position. Be a good listener instead of feeling the need to give advice or fill up the silences and pain with words. Grieving people have incredible stories and insights. We do not need to “take care of them.” We need only to be genuine learners. For we will all stand along side of them sooner or later.

So, rather than judge the survivors who continue to meet two years after the Pan Am flight 800 disaster, let us rather be thankful that they have found partners in their journey and are learning to live with their grief in life-affirming and life-promoting ways. Would that we would all be so courageous.

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