

Dealing With Those Darn Grief Triggers by Harriet Hodgson ☆

Despite all of the grief work I've done grief triggers still take me by surprise. Though my daughter was in her 40s when she died, her death was a shocking blow. My father-in-law's death two days later was even more shocking. Then my brother and former son-in-law died and I walked around in a fog for months.

I think of my daughter hundreds of times a day. "The length of a child's life does not determine the size of the loss," says the American College of Clinical Oncology. After a year passed some friends thought I was done with mourning. I wasn't. Grief triggers set off my grief again.

The 23rd day of the month is a grief trigger because my daughter was born on this day and died on this day. You can understand why I don't like to see 23 on the calendar. Thanksgiving also triggers my grief because my daughter was born on this holiday and I missed turkey dinner with the family.

My husband and I are raising our 16-year-old twin grandchildren. Signing their school permission slips and adding the word "guardian" is another grief trigger. When my grandchildren repeat something their mother said, or stand the way she used to stand, or use the same facial expressions, I feel a sharp twinge of grief. These poignant reminders are hard to handle.

Fixing meals for my grandchildren, meals my daughter used to fix, like Swedish meatballs, also trigger grief. I love cooking for them, but it makes me sad sometimes. Thank goodness time is on my side.

Mayo Clinic, in a website article, "Grief: Coping with Reminders after a Loss," lists some coping steps. The first step is "be assured," Anniversary reactions are common, Mayo Clinic says, and "the pain fades as the years pass. Though my pain has faded considerably, I don't like to be caught off guard by grief triggers. The only way to be ready for grief triggers is to prepare for them.

I prepare by giving myself permission to cry -- again. Crying acts like an emotional pressure valve and I always feel better after crying. The buddy system is another way I prepare. If I think an event will trigger grief I ask my husband to come with me. Friends have also come to my aid.

"Let your friends and other family members know what your emotional or physical needs are," advises Helen Fitzgerald, Emeritus Training Director of the American Hospice Foundation and author of "Helping Yourself Through Grief." I am blessed to have a circle of caring friends that have supported me all through my grief journey.

Grief is exhausting. I need to have enough energy for grief, grandparenting, and daily life. How do I find this energy? I practice emotional self-defense: one television newscast and no more, saying "no" when I'm asked to volunteer, eating balanced meals, getting seven hours of sleep a night, and a few minutes of quiet time each day.

As painful as they are, I think grief triggers serve two purposes. One, they force me to stay in touch with my feelings, a necessary part of grief recovery. Two, each grief trigger is a forward step on the recovery path. While I'm still on that path, I'm close to the end, and see sunlight ahead. I'm ready for those darn grief triggers.

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