

Frontline

This newsletter is dedicated to professional caregivers. It is our hope this newsletter will help you give comfort and strength to those you serve.

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Embracing the Sadness of Grief



By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

"In every heart there is an inner room, where we can hold our greatest treasures and our deepest pain." – Marianne Williamson

Sadness is a hallmark symptom of grief, which in turn is the consequence of losing something we care about. You could say, sadness and love are inextricably linked.

Yes, when you are grieving, it is normal to feel sad. I would even argue it is necessary. But why? Why does sadness have to exist at all? Couldn't we just move from loss to shock to acceptance without all that pain in the middle?

The answer is that sadness plays an essential role. It forces us to regroup. When we are sad, we instinctively turn inward. We withdraw. We slow down. It's as if our soul presses the pause button and says, "Whoa. Time out. I need to acknowledge what's happened and really consider what I want to do next."

This very ability to consider our own existence is what defines us as human beings. Unlike other animals, we are self-aware. And to be self-aware is to feel sadness but also joy and timeless love.

I sometimes call the necessary sadness of grief "sitting in your wound." When you sit in the wound of your grief, you surrender to it. You agree to the instinct to slow down and turn inward. You allow yourself to appropriately wallow in the pain. You shut the world out for a time so that, eventually, you have created space to let it back in.

THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

While grief affects all aspects of your life – your physical, cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual selves – it is fundamentally a spiritual journey. In grief, your understanding of who you are, why you are here and whether or not life is worth living is challenged. A significant loss plunges you into what C.S. Lewis, Eckhart Tolle and various Christian mystics have called "the dark night of the soul."

Life suddenly seems meaningless. Nothing makes sense. Everything you believed and held dear has been turned upside down. The structure of your world collapses.

The dark night of the soul can be a long and black night indeed. It is uncomfortable and scary. The pain of that place can seem intolerable, and yet the only way to emerge into the light of a new morning is to experience the night. As a wise person once observed, "Darkness is the chair upon which light sits."

THE NECESSITY OF STILLNESS

Many of the messages people in grief are given contradict the need for stillness: "Carry on." "Keep busy." "I have someone for you to meet." Yet, the paradox for many griever is that as they try to frantically move forward, they often lose their way.

Times of stillness are not anchored in a psychological need but in a spiritual necessity. A lack of stillness hastens confusion and disorientation and results in a waning of the spirit. If you do not rest in stillness for a time, you cannot and will not find your way out of the wilderness of grief.

Stillness allows for the transition from "soul work" to "spirit work." According to the groundbreaking thinking of psychologist Carl Jung, "soul work" is the downward movement of the psyche. It is the willingness to connect with what is dark, deep and not necessarily pleasant. "Spirit work," on the other hand, involves the upward, ascending movement of the psyche. It is during spirit work that you find renewed meaning and joy in life.

Soul work comes before spirit work. Soul work lays the ground for spirit work. The spirit cannot ascend until the soul

first descends. The withdrawal, slowing down and stillness of sadness create the conditions necessary for soul work.

LIMINAL SPACE

Sadness lives in liminal space. “Limina” is the Latin word for threshold, the space betwixt and between. When you are in liminal space, you are not busily going about your daily life. Neither are you living from a place of assuredness about your relationships and beliefs. Instead, you are unsettled. Both your daily routine and your core beliefs have been shaken, forcing you to reconsider who you are, why you’re here and what life means.

It’s uncomfortable being in liminal space, but that’s where sadness takes you. Without sadness, you wouldn’t go there. But it is only in liminal space that you can reconstruct your shattered world view and re-emerge as the transformed you, ready to live and love fully again.

SADNESS AND EMPATHY

Sadness also alerts others to the thoughts and feelings inside you. We all know what sad people look like. Slumped posture. They move slowly. Their eyes and mouth droop. Being able to read others’ sadness is useful because it gives us a chance to reach out with support. In centuries past, we intentionally made our sadness more evident as a signal for others to support us. We wore black for a year, and we donned black armbands. We literally wore our hearts on our sleeves.

Sadness elicits empathy – which is a close cousin to love. Empathy and love are the glue of human connection. And human connection is what makes life worth living.

Receiving and accepting support from others is an essential need of mourning. If you try to deny or hide your sadness, you are closing a door that leads to healing.

YOUR DIVINE SPARK

Your spiritual self is who you are deep inside – your innermost essence, stripped of all the external trappings of your life. It is who you were before you took on your earthly form, and who you will continue to be after you leave it.

When you are grieving, your divine spark struggles like a candle in the wind. You no longer feel the warm glow of your divine spark inside you. Instead, everything feels dark and cold. The way to relight your spark is to turn inward and give your pain the attention it deserves.

HONOURING YOUR PAIN

From my own experiences with loss and companioning thousands of grieving people over the years, I have learned you cannot go around the pain of your grief. Instead, you must open to the pain. You must acknowledge the inevitability of the pain. You must gently embrace the pain. You must honour the pain.

“What?” you naturally protest. “Honour the pain?” As crazy as it may sound, your pain is the key that opens your heart and ushers you on your way to healing.

Honouring means recognizing the value of and respecting it. It is not instinctive to see grief and the need to openly mourn as something to honour; yet the capacity to love requires the necessity to mourn. To honour your grief is not self-destructive or harmful, it is self-sustaining and life-giving.

Yet, you have probably been taught that pain and sadness are indications something is wrong and that you should find ways to alleviate the pain. In our culture, pain and feelings of loss are experiences most people try to avoid. Why? Because the role of pain and suffering is misunderstood. Normal thoughts and feelings after a loss are often seen as unnecessary and inappropriate.

Unfortunately, our culture has an unwritten rule that says while physical illness is usually beyond your control, emotional distress is your fault. In other words, some people think you should be able to “control” or subdue your feelings of sadness. Nothing could be further from the truth. Your sadness is a symptom of your wound. Just as physical wounds require attention, so do emotional wounds.

Paradoxically, the only way to lessen your pain is to move toward it, not away from it. Moving toward your sadness is not easy to do. Every time you admit to feeling sad, people around you may say things like, “Get a hold of yourself” or “Think about what you have to be thankful for.” Comments like these hinder, not help, your healing.

You will learn over time that the pain of your grief will keep trying to get your attention until you have the courage to gently, and in small doses, open to its presence. The alternative – denying or suppressing your pain – is in fact more painful. I have learned the pain that surrounds the closed heart of grief is the pain of living against yourself, the pain of denying how the loss changes you, the pain of feeling alone and isolated – unable to openly mourn, unable to love and be loved by those around you.

Yes, the sadness, depression and pain of loss are essential experiences in life. Acknowledging this in grief is normal and necessary – even if people around you are telling you that you don’t have to feel depressed. The next step is understanding if your depression may be what is called “clinical depression” and, if so, having the courage and self-compassion to seek help.

About the Author

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is a respected author and educator on the topic of healing in grief. He serves as director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School’s Department of Family Medicine. Dr. Wolfelt has written many compassionate, bestselling books designed to help people mourn well so they can continue to love and live well, including *Understanding Your Grief*, *The Mourner’s Book of Hope*, and *The Depression of Grief*, from which this article was excerpted. Visit www.centerforloss.com to learn more about the natural and necessary process of grief and mourning and to order Dr. Wolfelt’s books.