

# How to handle grief

## OUR FAITH

JACK MILLER

Jack Miller, author of *Healing Our Losses: A Journal for Working Through Your Grief* (1993), doesn't tell people how to grieve—only that they must grieve. "Grief is on a continuum," he says. "You have to move from one end of it to the other, and you can't miss any step along the way."

Miller is a psychologist in private practice who has formed numerous programs in Chicago to help those who are dying or grieving another's death. Through his latest program, the Phoenix Project, Miller conducts a 12-week therapy program, which involves creating an artistic tribute for the person who has died. Miller is now training others to conduct their own Phoenix Projects.

### **How does the American culture deal with grief?**

Some cultures facilitate grief much better than ours does. We don't make time for grief at all—it's nonexistent. It takes two full years to grieve a loss. We get three days off work, if we're lucky. Just as time is made for a birth, time should be made for bereavement. But our society doesn't even recognize that. So people in grief eventually get sick and end up in the hospital—that's how they get off the fast track.

At a hospital where I was working as a chaplain, a study we conducted showed that 60 percent of the patient population had suffered a severe loss within the past nine months. You can see what was happening: the patients' grief was being cut out of their bodies because they were unable to grieve it. They were unable to let it out.

### **Why? Isn't it natural to grieve?**

Our society is uncomfortable with grief. We say, "You'll get over it. You're going to feel better." What does that really mean? In effect, we're telling them, "I'm uncomfortable with your grief, and I wish you'd stop making me uncomfortable." The grieving person ends up holding on to that grief, because nobody gives him or her permission to bring it out. Next time somebody you love dies, watch the people who are your friends. Where are they? How did they really respond to your grief? You'll find out very quickly who gives you permission to be yourself and who doesn't.

### **What's one mistake people often make during their grief?**

If there's one thing I would say, it's don't take medication to help you through the time after somebody dies. Often family members are told they should have some medication to help them get through it. This can be a block, and unresolved grief will come out in different ways.

### **What are some healthy ways to grieve?**

What I recommend is giving a person permission to do whatever he or she needs to do in order to get it out, whether that's loud or quiet, demonstrative or not.

For example, there should be a room in the funeral home where the body can be placed, which is separate from the larger room where the general public gathers. It makes an enormous difference if you have somewhere you can go where you can cry, and then another room to laugh and tell stories and reminisce. We need to facilitate both the public and the private sides of grief. If that's facilitated right from the start, right at the wake and funeral, then you have a better chance of not getting locked up in grief.

### **Your book mentions making a tribute to the person who has died. How does that help in the grief process?**

Think about loss and its opposite: creativity. Those are two ends of a spectrum. What you're doing by making a tribute is healing the loss through the exercise of creativity. By connecting with all of those memories and capturing the person's essence, a shift is able to occur in the depth of your being. A lot of grieving occurs during a tribute-making process, just by sitting down with old photographs, old letters, things that belonged to the person, and out of that creating a tribute of some kind—a collage, a video, a poem, whatever it might be. And keeping that tribute in a place of honor in your home is very important.

### **Can you do that months or years later?**

Sure. What happens with many people is that once their grief gets blocked, they basically live a depressed life. They don't have much energy for life. Once grief is unlocked the person comes back to life, they start to look different, get physically fit, and get involved.

Grief is on a continuum. You have to move from one end of it to the other, and you can't miss any step along the way. If you get distracted at one point, you just stop. And as soon as the distraction leaves, you pick up where you left off and move further along. Each time you're distracted, the process stops where you've left it.

### **What if you have a busy life, you work, you have kids to care for, and you don't have a lot of time for your grief? Is that a danger?**

Sure, but every kid I know sleeps sometimes. Everyone has time off work. If busy people use that time to focus on something that will connect them with their feelings, they're processing their grief.

Or think about the time spent in the car—the car is a wonderful place to grieve, to scream it out, shout it out, cry it out. The car is a big cry room on wheels, and lots of people will cry in the car and feel safe. People play music in the car that will really connect them with their feelings of loss.

### **What about children?**

Some people say they don't want their kids exposed to a funeral. That's the exact opposite of what needs to happen. Many adults were never allowed to go to their parents' or grandparents' funerals when they were children, and they have a hard time getting over that loss. But a child needs permission to be there. Don't force them, but invite them. Death is a part of life.

Children need to be exposed to death, maybe not to the same degree as adults, but they shouldn't be sheltered from it. When children-or adults, for that matter-don't see the body, it's not fully real for them, and they have a much harder time getting over the loss.

### **How can you be a friend to someone who is grieving?**

The best gift you can give is the gift of what I call presence. You find a way to be totally present to this person. If she's mad, receive her anger as a gift, because she's healing herself. If she's sad, receive those tears as a gift. It's a compliment that somebody will cry in your presence. That means he or she feels safe enough to let it out. You don't have to do much at all with grieving friends other than just be with them and let them start to connect with their own feelings. And when somebody is sitting there really sobbing her heart out, it is better not to reach over and say, "It's going to be okay." Because what you've done is separated her from her feelings. That doesn't mean you never embrace somebody, but more often than not, you should just allow your friends to feel their feelings.

### **What have you learned from spending time with people who are dying?**

It's a tremendous gift to befriend someone who is dying. Whenever you bring life and death together, it enhances life. People come more fully alive. The reason is that being with the dying gets you to focus on your end time, and on the time between now and your death. And when you're dying, how you've lived your life makes a tremendous difference in how you grieve for yourself.

If you've done everything you've wanted to do and now you're on your deathbed, you'll die very peacefully. If you've got all this stuff you've wanted to do and you never gave yourself permission to do it, you're going to rant and rave and kick and scream going out into that dark night.

Every dying person I've been with has called me to live my life more fully. The dying give you so much more than you can fathom. Invariably a dying person will say to you, whether they say it out loud or not, "Don't you get to this point in your life without having done exactly what you need and want to do."