

Seasons of Sadness

I've never really been a summer person but since 1994, the dog days of summer have really become my season of sadness. My first husband, Max, died on August 19 of that year. Ever since, the weeks surrounding that date have been difficult for me.

Most people mark their year with anniversaries – the celebration of birthdays, holidays, and days significant to us for one reason or another. After a loss, those anniversaries can be quite painful. I, personally, have found the days and weeks leading up to each anniversary date to be harder than the day itself. I call this anticipatory grieving.

The dictionary defines grief as, "keen mental suffering, distress over affliction or loss, and sharp sadness." We often associate grieving with the death of a loved one but we can grieve any time we suffer a loss. We can grieve over the loss of a job, a relationship, or our health. We can grieve when we move from a home, have financial difficulties, or do not realize a dream. We can grieve alone, as a family or community.

While we share the experience of grieving with every other person on this planet, the way we grieve is unique to each of us. Some describe the act of grieving in different stages. Yet grieving is not a linear experience but a process that weaves through the fabric of our life. While the intensity of our grief can ebb and flow, there are no time boundaries to our grief. Even if our loss occurred years ago, we can experience grief at any time. Sometimes our grief surprises us as if it is saying, "Hey, I'm not done with you yet!"

I've had a love/hate relationship with my grief. Grief is good; it just hurts so badly. Because I had experienced many losses prior to Max's death, I was familiar with grieving and healthy ways to do it. In the days, weeks, and months after Max's death I even welcomed those times of intense sadness and pain because in some way they made me feel closer to him. But, when my heart began aching, my natural inclination was to run away from the feelings rather than let them wash over me. I have to constantly remind myself to just "be" in my grief.

I have found the following strategies helpful during my seasons of sadness. I hope you will find them helpful in yours.

Embrace Your Grief

We all have built defense mechanisms to help us deal with pain. This is not the time to use them though. As a wave of grief begins to pass over you, let it flow. Acknowledge that you have good reason to feel this way and the more you let yourself experience grief, the less it will stick around. While the wave may last for minutes, hours, or even days it will eventually play itself out and you will feel peace again. My dad's favorite expression was "this too shall pass." He used it throughout his life but especially during the pain at the end of it. Your grief too shall pass. Embrace it until it does.

Experience Your Uniqueness

Each of us experiences grief in our own way. Don't compare yourself to others. Don't let others tell you how to grieve. Our loved ones don't like to see us suffer. In order to avoid this, they often encourage us, in not so subtle ways, to hide our feelings. Or they may be quite up front about telling us to get over it. Accept your own uniqueness. Grieve in the way that is right for you.

Be Kind to Yourself

During times of grieving we should be especially good to ourselves. That means we should take care of ourselves by getting enough sleep, eating well, drinking plenty of water, and doing some kind of physical exercise frequently to alleviate our stress. Don't push yourself to do things you don't want to do but be careful of the stress caused by avoiding doing those things. Being kind to yourself also means not anesthetizing yourself from your grief. Be careful not to use alcohol, drugs, or even food to avoid feeling your pain. If you feel overwhelmed, seek counsel from the leader of your faith community, your health care provider, or a therapist.

Express Yourself

The expression of grief can be in words, actions, or tears. Crying can be quite a relief yet many of us are afraid to cry during times of intense sadness because it feels as if we start we will never be able to stop. Don't worry, you will eventually stop but in the meantime you will reap the benefits of a good cry. If you are like me, and do your best crying in private, be sure to find the alone time to let the tears flow. You may also gain comfort in writing what you feel. If you feel awkward in doing this, try writing your feelings in the form of a letter to a trusted friend. You don't necessarily have to mail the letter but the writing can be the cathartic experience you need.

Surround Yourself with Love

While you may be a very private person and prefer to experience your grief alone, this is not the time to isolate yourself. Reach out to friends and family. They may need you more than you need them. When you're with other people you will have more opportunities to laugh (a wonderful grief reliever), gain perspective, and share your pain. Share rituals with others, too. You may want to commemorate the anniversaries of loss with a time to reminisce or even a celebration of hope.

We need to honor our losses by letting ourselves grieve them. Life has many seasons of sadness. Just like spring follows winter, our sorrow is eventually followed by joy. We need both to truly make our life work.