

Why We Grieve

Grieving has a number of stages. Theorists' descriptions vary in the fine detail, but most agree with Elizabeth Kubler-Ross that sufferers go through denial, anger, despair and withdrawal, before moving into a period of adjustment and re-engagement in their changed world.

Grief experiences can seem very bizarre, not least to the bereaved. People may hear voices, have visual hallucinations, suffer intense anxiety, anger and depression, and be restless and unable to settle. They often fear they are going mad. Psychotherapists recognise that, while painful, grief is normal and appropriate. Respectful listening is generally the best help one can give.

John Bowlby thought that grief was the undoing of the attachment behaviour seen in young children and animals in relation to their parents. People who are grieving often seek the person they have lost and cling to material effects. They experience yearning and may call out the person's name.

It used to be said that grief lasts for a year and a day. We now know that while the stages of grieving are fairly predictable, the same cannot be said for the duration. In some sense the experience of loss never leaves us although the acuteness of the pain normally lessens with time.

Occasionally people seem to get stuck in their grieving. This is usually because there are aspects of the relationship they have lost which they do not feel able to speak about. Some degree of idealising the dead person is normal, but people who get stuck in their grief often sound as if they have lost a saint rather than a normal person. In these circumstances I listen for the story which counterbalances this presentation of inhuman perfection; the story which isn't being told. Often the story is of a relationship which was marred by an unresolved pain or conflict. This is a harder grief to manage: the grief not for what was and is no more, but for what one hoped for and never was.

Even in these instances though, the resilience of the human spirit shines through. If the griever can bring themselves to tell the truth, however painful, they enable themselves to move through and beyond their pain.

© ADAM MAY, MA (Hons), ADHP (NC), MNRHP, UKCP Reg, 2 Fron Heulog, Llanddaniel
Fab, Gaerwen, Sir Fôn, LL60 6EP.

Phone. 01248 421015. e mail: adam@adammay.co.uk

Responses to this article are warmly welcomed.

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