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There Is No Right Way to Grieve

We grieve in a way that is consistent with who we are, and we must each find our own way. There are no set rules or timetables for resuming a social life, visiting the grave, packing up clothes or toys, or changing a room. We can let go of things in stages—we don't have to do it all at once or in an orderly fashion.

We may feel tempted to say no to all of life because part of life has hurt us, and our anger may be strong when we think of what we have lost. From one moment to another we cannot predict what will make us fall apart or what will provoke anger—a song, a memory, an anniversary, someone's kindness; it's impossible to know. We each bring who we are to grief. It's all we can do.

The pain may be intense, and we can find ourselves indulging in excessive behavior to numb the heartbreak: eating too much; drinking too much; burying ourselves in work; denying our feelings in order to appear cheery and positive; indulging in drugs, sex, shopping; or even minimizing (to

ourselves and others) what we are going through. *No, no, I'm really fine. Others have it so much worse.* Facing powerlessness may be surprising in its strength and ability to put us off balance, but no excessive behavior is helpful.

The best wisdom says to move with the heart.

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- * Cry when you need to cry.
 - * Stay emotionally honest.
 - * Take your time.
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The reassurances of others may seem hollow. Let it be. Suffering cannot be transformed by someone else telling us how to do it . . . or telling us that it will pass. We must walk through grief in our own way.

No two people grieve the same way, and the differences in each response to loss need to be respected. Grief teaches us how to compassionately accept each person's uniqueness, including our own. Some of us cry easily and are comforted by the tears. Some grieve by talking about their feelings; others prefer action—doing something—as a way to cope with feelings. Others find it difficult to cry or put feelings into words. Some deny what is happening to them for a long time. They cannot take it in.

Every way of grieving is valid. There is no correct way. Members of the same family grieve differently and at different paces. Husbands and wives grieve in different ways. A great respect for each person's journey is what is called for. We only distract ourselves when we focus on how a partner or family member is grieving. Alison Asher adds, "The window of

opportunity opens almost immediately following the unwanted experience, but for most of us the real storm moves in about three to six months later.” Don’t be surprised by that.

Along with family members and friends who may understand and support us fully, there are others who don’t understand the intensity and power of the pain we are experiencing. In fact, our pain makes them anxious, which is why they want us to return to “normal.” The best we can do is simply understand this dynamic.

What matters is to give ourselves the space and time we need. We don’t have to offer elaborate explanations. “No” is a complete sentence; further clarification is optional. *No, I won’t be joining you for dinner. No, I’m not going to celebrate the holidays this year.*

To accept and honor someone’s pace and manner of grieving is perhaps the greatest love we can express, and it’s vital to include ourselves in this acceptance.

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- * Observe your own way of dealing with pain, and ask for help if you need it.
- * Let your judgments go. Learning to respond honestly to life is of immense value.
- * Try using “No” as a complete sentence.

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Pretending and pleasing people may have been our old way of being, but now we see that it’s too costly and steals the energy that is needed for healing.

2

Grief Is Not Orderly

It would be wonderful to move through grief stage by stage and feel a little better each day. Shock, then anger. When the anger passes, then sadness. Following the sadness, full acceptance. But grief is not that tidy.

Grief is two steps forward and one step back. When one stage of grief seems to have exhausted itself, it surprises us by returning. A temporary peace or a respite from tears is frequently followed by more waves of powerful emotion. This is the normal disorderly pattern of grief. This is its unpredictable rhythm.

What looks like regression—*I was doing so well last week and now I'm a mess again*—is just grief's way. We are making progress, even if it doesn't seem so. As long as the pain is moving, as long as we are expressing our feelings in some way—talking, crying, journaling, actively creating a memorial, purposefully expending emotion by exerting ourselves with physical activity—then the grief work will progress. Pain needs to move from the inside of us to the outside. It needs to find expression.

We may find ourselves telling the story of our loss over and over again. The telling is not to inform anyone. It's a

matter of trying to understand it for ourselves. We are still trying to take in everything, still trying to believe what has happened. All the while we search for the place within us that is greater than the pain.

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- * In grief you cannot assess progress in the usual way.
 - * Every day you are not a little better.
 - * You have better days, and then the grief seems overwhelming again.
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Then one day, without explanation, the darkness lifts for a little while. This is the nature of grief. It moves back and forth. But day by day (even on the bad days) we are slowly integrating the loss.

SORTING AND SIFTING

Grief is a time of considerable sorting and sifting. It's a time to examine some of our long-held (but perhaps unchallenged) beliefs about life and about God. The heartache of loss is unsettling enough, but now some of our images of how life *should be* start to shatter before anything else is there to replace them.

If God didn't act to prevent the accident or heal the illness . . . then why believe? How do I go on? What replaces the way I formerly looked at life?

Will I live with my heart closed because this happened to me?