It's OK not to be OK: a CAPS psychologist on the importance of making space for grief

Counseling and Psych Services
October 2023

As a psychologist and griever, I am often immersed in the painful emotional responses that come with loss. At work, I talk about the things we can do for ourselves as we are grieving. Accepting our emotional and physical responses to loss with gentleness and compassion can be crucial. Finding someone with whom we can share our grief can reduce the sting. Remembering to take care of ourselves with quality sleep, physical activity, good hygiene and avoiding substance abuse can be both difficult and important. Setting a routine, getting outside and engaging in enjoyable activities are all useful tips. Therapy can be a restorative space to allow grief emotions to move and metabolize.

Mental health care providers exist in part to help support people during the most painful times. Still, to me, it is a sad reality how an experience as universal as grief is so often hidden away in the private spaces of a therapy room or not expressed at all.

Somehow, grief can be excruciatingly painful while eminently human. When people in our communities die, grievers experience a broad range of emotional and physiological responses. These responses include, but are not limited to, sadness, depression, anxiety, anger, rage, confusion, numbness, sleeplessness, agitation, yearning, loneliness and isolation, low energy, physical pain and even immunosuppression. We all grieve at points in our lives to varying degrees and in variable manners. The manifestation of our grief is determined by our histories, genetics, cultures, the nature of the loss, and our relationships with the deceased. In one sense, as a griever, it can be comforting and connecting to know that everyone has had or will have an experience of loss. Still, it can be intensely difficult to grieve outwardly.

In our Western society, the messages we receive can lead to a felt need or expectation for grief to be suppressed. We often prioritize getting back to "normal" (whatever that means). Employers want us back at work, doctors prescribe treatments to help us feel "better," our families and friends want us back as we were, and many around us keep communicating something to the effect of, "You'll be over it soon."

Life certainly goes on. As it does, a message that the griever can receive is that their grief, if it continues to exist, is a problem not only for them, but for everyone else too.

For some, getting back to the grind as soon as possible can be a helpful way to manage grief response. This type of coping is not inherently problematic. However, grievers can feel isolated when their grief feels intolerable to those around them. They are often left feeling like they are SUPPOSED to be OK when they are not, which causes additional suffering. Those of us in mental health fields know that an inability, even if perceived, to express grief-related emotions can cause complications in the grieving process. A griever might silently wonder, "Is it ok for me to NOT be OK?" Too often, the answer to that question can feel like a hard "no." As a result, the griever feels left alone to hold their pain in hiding or attempt to push it away.

Further complicating things, grief is often misunderstood as a linear process. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, the creator of what has likely become the most renowned stage model of grief, did not intend to imply that there was linearity across the stages. She believed that any of the stages could, and likely would, come, go and be reexperienced through grief.

However, her message was generally misunderstood to imply linearity. The resulting impact of misunderstandings like this on grief in the Western world has been clear: If you are to grieve, you are SUPPOSED to chronologically progress through denial, anger, bargaining, depression and, finally, acceptance.

Certainly, many grief journeys involve some, or all, of these experiences, but many grief experiences also look very different. More still do not come neatly packaged as linear, predictable processes. However, when assumed it SHOULD should be linear process, it can feel impermissible to grieve in the variable ways we do that do not neatly match a linear stage model that has shaped societal expectations.

Simply put, the pain in grief can be alleviated when it is permissible to grieve.

In the past year, we have shared a loss as a community after Tom Meixner, professor and head of the Department of Hydrology and Atmospheric Sciences, was fatally shot on our campus. As we remember him and the events of Oct. 5, 2022, may we be reminded to allow each other the permission to: grieve as needed, to check in on each other with curiosity instead of expectation, to hold space for grief in ourselves and each other, and to share the burden of grief as a community.

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A remembrance event for Tom Meixner will be held Oct. 5 from 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m. at the St. Thomas More Catholic Newman Center at 1615 E. Second St. There will be various means available for attendees to honor Meixner, including a nondenominational service at noon. The service will be livestreamed. Counselors will on-site for employees, and Counseling and Psych Services will have representatives available to connect students to mental health resources.

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