

Part One

How to Grieve: Following the Flow of your Five Core Emotions to Peace

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS GRIEF AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Grieving is a natural process of feeling our feelings that helps us move through the pain of loss. Grief is a reaction to loss of all kinds, ranging from the loss of someone we love, to the loss of a cherished dream. Some of the more common losses include death, divorce, friendship loss, pet loss, infertility, miscarriage, dealing with the lessening capacities of aging and losing a job or business. This article will help you identify and move through the emotions of loss of all kinds to help you find greater peace and acceptance.

We all know about the necessity of digesting the food we eat. Yet the importance of digesting, or processing emotions that arise from difficult, or disappointing life experiences is less commonly understood. When we do not process or digest our emotions, they often build up in the body and manifest as physical ailments and symptoms such as back and shoulder aches and pains, stomach problems and headaches. Unprocessed grief dulls our sense of aliveness and often contributes to depression. Yet it is common to tune out our uncomfortable, “negative” feelings, as if we could ‘wish them away’.

Part One of this article will introduce you to the **Emotional Healing Cycle™**, a kind of map which will help you find your way through your grief more effectively. Part I will also touch on Worden’s Four Tasks of Grieving to provide a context for the crucial task of processing your grief, the focus of this article. Part Two provides guidance on how to use the Emotion Healing Cycle.

To begin, I discuss the Myth that holds us back from processing sorrow and other emotions of loss.

THE MYTH ABOUT GRIEF THAT HOLDS US BACK

The basic **myth** about grief, which is prevalent in our culture, is that tears and emotional pain are a sign of weakness. In essence the message is that “It’s not ok to be sad or low.” Examples of this anti-feeling message include: “Smile, be happy.” “Tough up, be a man!” “Big girls don’t cry!” “You’re fine (although you are telling me you’re not).” “It’s not that bad...” “Arn’t you over it by now?” “It’s time to move on.” Some of us believe our feelings of grief and sadness automatically mean that we are feeling self-pity, with its unproductive message of “poor me”.

In reality, accepting our feelings and allowing the expression of painful feelings is the body’s natural way of healing pain.

Three Key Strategies we use to Avoid and Repress our Feelings are:

- **Denial and Minimization** - Telling ourselves and others “I’m fine;” minimizing our pain with statements like, “It’s not that bad. Others have it much worse.”
- **Numbing** - Using alcohol, drugs, food, sugar, sex, TV, video games, and other addictive behaviors to numb pain.
- **Avoidance and distraction** - Similar to numbing, we engage in activities that distract us from focusing on feeling the loss. Common distractions include excessive busyness, burying oneself in work, distraction with media, or rushing into a new relationship.

While each of these strategies can be useful when the pain is too much to handle or the timing isn’t right to feel the feelings, it becomes problematic when these strategies become our primary way of coping with strong emotions.

HOW TO GRIEVE

In reality, our painful feelings are a strong signal, like a loud knock at the door, communicating their desire to be let in. When we decide *not* to avoid or repress our feelings, and instead open ourselves to expressing our emotions, we begin the process of healing. As we name and express our emotions, they will naturally lead back to peace in the same way in which water naturally moves from a stream, into a river, and eventually into the ocean.

Specifically, our feelings of loss and grief naturally move through a sequence of five “touchstone” emotion groups - Mad, Sad, Scared, Sorry or Regret, and Longing to their resolution in peace and acceptance. Together, these emotion groups, or “clusters”, comprise what I call the Emotional Healing Cycle.

If you are currently suffering with grief, the invitation is that you practice naming and expressing your feelings and observe them as they naturally move through the five emotion groups to acceptance and peace.

This will not only help you grieve, but will ...

- help reduce the anxiety around wondering “Will I ever find relief?” as you observe and track your emotions shift as they move through the cycle.

Context: The Four Tasks of Grieving

J. William Worden (2008), psychologist, researcher and author, has identified Four Tasks of Bereavement which can provide a larger context to the process of grieving. These Four Tasks may be applicable to other type of losses as well. They are as follows:

Task One - Acknowledging the reality of the death or loss. This means facing that the loss actually occurred versus staying in the shock of denial.

Task Two - Processing the pain of the loss, or expressing the pain - the focus of this article.

Task Three - Adjusting to a world without the deceased. This means taking small, consistent steps to reprioritize and cultivate new relationships, and create a satisfying life.

Task Four - Finding an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life. Examples include talking to the deceased, sharing memories or capturing memories about the

deceased on a video, visiting the gravesite, and other rituals that provide comfort and connection to the person who has been lost.

The Emotional Healing Cycle: Following our Five Core Emotions to Peace*

When we allow, accept and express our feelings as opposed to blocking them, grieving is occurring. Or said more simply, "What we can feel, we can heal."

As stated above, the five basic feeling groups which comprise the Emotion Healing Cycle are **mad, sad, scared, sorry** and **longing** with the many variations to these emotions including the following:

- **mad** anger/frustration/irritation/rage
- **sad** hurt/disappointment/wounding
- **scared** fear/worry/anxiety
- **sorry** regret/guilt
- **longing** wanting/wishing/yearning/missing/needing/not wanting

with their resolution in...

- **peace** love/acceptance/understanding/compassion/appreciation/happiness/forgiveness/joy

Sarah's Story, an example:

Sarah, 38, was a happily married architect with an 8 year old daughter and a toddler, when her husband, Kevin, was killed in a car accident by a drunk teenage driver on his way home from work. Over the first several weeks after her husband's death, Sarah was in shock and didn't feel much of anything, describing the funeral as "surreal". Her focus was on giving both of her children the attention they needed, taking care of logistics related to her husband's death, and keeping up with her job - which had been temporarily reduced to half-time.

Over time, Sarah began to allow herself to face the reality of her husband's death, and feel her feelings.

Below is a sample of some of the feeling statements Sarah made over many months, following the healing cycle. Sarah was guided to speak out loud, to help the feelings release through the breath ...

Mad/Angry/Frustrated

I'm mad you're not here. You let me down. You abandoned me!
I'm angry at life and g-d for betraying me.

Sad/Hurt/Disappointed

It hurts so much that you are not here. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts...
It hurts that I have lost the dream of growing old with you.
I'm disappointed that you will not be with me when our children grow up, get married, have children.
I'm sad that we are not going to take the trip together that we were planning.

Scared/Afraid/Worried

I'm afraid of being alone.
 I'm worried I'll never feel the love I had with you, again.
 I'm afraid I won't remember what you looked like, or how you felt to me.
 I'm worried about how I am going to manage everything as a single, working parent with two children.
 I'm afraid I'll forget what you look like and your unique mannerisms.

Sorry/Guilt/Regret

I'm sorry I didn't spend more time with you.
 I regret that I didn't tell you 'I love you' more.
 I'm sorry I never apologized for...
 I'm sorry we never talked about...
 I'm sorry I couldn't save you.

Longing/Wanting/Wishing/Missing/Not Wanting/Needing

I miss your company.
 I wish you would come back.
 I don't want you to leave me.
 I want to see you, feel you, touch you.
 I miss hearing your voice.
 I need your help with the children and everything.

And eventually the resolution phrases of

Peace/Love/Acceptance/Understanding

I love you so much! I delighted in you. You gave so much to me!
 I loved your smile, how we laughed together, how we held hands when we took a walk...
 I love all the wonderful experiences we shared together. (Name them, and then name them again!)
 I love what I felt with you.
 I can accept that you are not here with me any more, and that you will always be with me in my heart.
 I understand that this was out of my control.
 I can accept that I may never understand why you had to leave.

A note about Denial/Rejection/Disbelief

You may initially have the reaction of *denial* and *disbelief* when a loss is sudden and unexpected.

Denial and *rejection* look like this:

No! This is not happening. This is not possible. I can't believe this!

The reaction of "No!" serves as a wall that comes up inside of us to protect us from overwhelming feelings. As we adjust to the shock of the loss and the wall begins to soften, the other core emotions will begin to emerge.

The Sequence of the Feelings

Your core emotions may arise in an order similar to the sequence listed above, or you may find the feelings shifting back and forth between the five clusters, to some degree. In general, *anger*

and *hurt* tend to be the first feelings that arise when grieving a loss, after feelings of denial and disbelief. The feelings of *wanting* and *missing* often signal that feelings of *acceptance* and *understanding* will be coming soon. So the order of the feelings is not a precise “map” to be followed. *Rather, expressing the feelings that are present in the moment, and being open to fresh ones as they arise, is always the task of feeling your feelings.*

I invite you to familiar yourself with the Healing Cycle and continue to Part II of this article which discusses how to use the Emotional Healing Cycle.

Part Two

How to Grieve: Following the Flow of your Five Core Emotions to Peace

HOW TO USE THE EMOTIONAL HEALING CYCLE TO RELEASE PAIN AND OTHER FEELINGS OF LOSS

Part one of this article discussed what grief is, how we hold ourselves back from grieving, and introduced the basic sequence of the five “touchstone” emotions that naturally lead us back to peace. Below the reader is offered guidance on how to use the “touchstone” emotions, or Emotional Healing Cycle to work through grief.

It is helpful to first familiarize yourself with the touchstone emotions of the Healing Cycle so you can recognize them as they surface. Then follow the six steps below to effectively, and with kindness, help you grieve.

1. **Choose - Decide if you are ready to begin the process of grieving and letting go of the loved person.** This may seem obvious, but accepting and making peace with a loss is a choice. When we understand that *choosing to come to acceptance does not mean forgetting the person or letting go of our love for them*, this choice is easier to make. We will always carry our love for the one we lost. And, as was mentioned in Worden’s grieving Task Four above, it is important to have ways to keep the memory of the loved one alive.
2. **Clarify - What is it, specifically, that you want to accept?** This will give you a focus for what you are grieving and letting go of. It can be helpful to talk through this question of “What is it really, that I really want to accept?” with a friend. Over time you will discover various facets of loss amidst the central loss of the person, like the facets of a precious ruby which each need to be reconciled in some way, beyond the specific loss of the stone.

For example, when I broke up with my fiance many years ago, I not only had to accept the loss of the relationship with my presumed “soul mate”, but I had to accept the loss of the dream of marriage - at least for the time being, as well as the loss of the dream of a traveling companion, and other losses. By naming the different losses, I was able to watch my feelings move through the grieving cycle for each one, which gave me a sense of “progress”, movement and clarity through the grief. One day about a year after this break up, I found myself in tears when my garage door broke and I had to face the reality that I no longer had the “fix it” person that I had come to rely on to help me with home repairs. This was a smaller loss obviously, but it still hurt to accept that I was ‘alone’ in this way.

3. **Check for compassion -** Ask yourself the question: “How do I feel towards this sad, grieving part of myself?” You might hear yourself respond with beliefs like: “I am weak for feeling so sad and dysfunctional,” or, “It is wrong for me to be angry with this loved one who just died.” Responding with judgment will hinder your ability to grieve.

her grief might emotionally damage her fetus. In cases of complicated grief, the bereaved may benefit from the help of a mental health provider.

So when you find yourself having to cope with grief, loss, or the necessity to accept some difficult reality, I invite you to: 1) Review the Five Core Emotion Groups of the Emotional Healing Cycle, and their accompanying examples in this article; 2) follow the Six Steps for Using the Healing Cycle; and 3) begin the journey of naming and expressing feelings in response to the difficult reality you want to make peace with. And know that healing and acceptance is underway.

Grief and loss are a fundamental part of life, and coping with loss is among life's greatest challenges. Please take heart with the knowledge that over time the pain and suffering will lessen, and that this experience will also bring meaningful gifts of compassion and learning.

Note

I was first introduced to this cycle when I attended a personal growth workshop co-led by psychologists and authors John Gray and Barbara DeAngelis in 1982. The emotion "longing" was not included in the version they taught, which I subsequently added. As I began to apply the model in my own life, I realized that at its root, the cycle is an acceptance process that can be applied in many circumstances including grieving loss, resolving guilt and forgiveness, and increasing self-love and self-worth. Meanwhile I have documented a large number of anecdotal accounts about how this approach has helped many clients in my counseling practice. Additionally, I began teaching this acceptance and healing process in seminars to therapists and the public around the Cincinnati area.

In 2015, I was introduced to the book *Wired for Joy* by Laurel Melon (2010), in which she shares the same basic cycle (again, without the "longing" emotion). Melon's work focuses on "Emotional Brain Training" whose purpose is to help people find the "...precise pathway through the brain back to a state of joy...(and) to rewire the fundamental way we process daily life..." This book was an exciting discovery for me because of the extensive research findings supporting Melon's Emotional Brain Training, with findings documenting reduced stress, depression, and many other human ailments both emotional and physical. This has therefore continued to strengthen the validity of the Emotional Healing Cycle process.

References

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