



Myths of Grief

By Buffy Peters

Grief is one of those experiences that we don't understand until we are the ones going through it. Grief is a universal experience, yet is one that still seems taboo in our grief-illiterate society. Inspired by our friends over at What's Your Grief with their "64 Myths of Grief", we wanted to share some of our thoughts on some common myths with you.

MYTH: That there are 5 stages of grief and it's the same for everyone.

THE REALITY: To be fair I have a personal vendetta against this one. As a type A, check-the-things-off-the-list kind of person, this one had me feeling like I was doing this "whole grief thing" wrong. My grief was not "behaving" in this nice, neat, orderly kind of way. I was feeling so much more than what those stages said I "should" and everyone was telling me I should be over my loss by now (said one month after the death). It reinforces that there is an end point, and you can read more in the next section about my thoughts on that. And the whole idea of an "Acceptance" stage implies coming to a place of being okay that your loved one is gone and never coming back. The head and the heart can know something, understand it in different ways and never come to a place of mutual understanding. Two things certainly can be true at the same time. My person can be dead and my brain can intellectually understand that. AND I can also never be okay with that fact and my heart can still yearn for them to come back (even though I know intellectually that isn't possible).

And a final side note, this theory was never meant to be used for people grieving the death of a loved one. These stages were descriptions of what Elisabeth Kübler-Ross observed with people who were dying coming to terms with their impending death. Now if the fact that there is a stage dedicated to anger gives you permission to feel angry, great! I always tell people take what is helpful for you and leave the rest.

MYTH: There is an endpoint and when it is done you and your life will be back to "normal".

THE REALITY: When someone significant in your life dies it changes you. Just as having them in your life changed you. Grief in very general terms has three intervals: Early grief (lasting a few hours to a few days); Acute grief (lasting a few months to a few years); and Subsiding Grief (lasting indefinitely). For many, grief can become a lifelong companion that changes and evolves over time. That doesn't mean that the pain will be this sharp forever, it means that the grief will ebb and flow and sometimes feel sharp and at other times be a low hum buzzing in the background.

Please remember that there are factors that play into how grief impacts you and adds different layers to the grief; like the kind of relationship you had with the deceased, the circumstances of their death, your support system...to name a few. Some layers are really complicated and take more time as you work through some of those emotions that are harder to sit with; like guilt, shame, anger...to name just a few.

MYTH: Time heals ALL wounds.

THE REALITY: *Exasperated sigh* This flippant, dismissive cliché is especially hurtful when the "wound" it is referring to is the death of someone significant in your life. And I won't get on my soap box about the word "heal" in the context of grief (again implying an ending). Now time does do something to grief (if we sit with the grief and are active in it...keep reading for more on this). Time does help us to see that we can withstand this kind of loss, that we do have what it takes to endure and cope, to survive in the midst of a new life we never anticipated.

MYTH: There is a right and wrong way to *grieve*.

THE REALITY: The truth is this grief you are experiencing is your natural and normal response to that loss and it is different for everyone. Certainly there are behaviors and coping mechanisms that can be helpful or harmful depending how you are using them, but your grief is your grief. And for some people, there are certain societal expectations of their grief (like for men for instance) that does not match the actual experience. Sometimes we might even feel that our person who died would be upset with us for grieving a certain way or upset that we are struggling with something following their death. However you are grieving, whatever is coming up for you, remember that is your natural and normal response to this loss.

MYTH: There are right and wrong feelings to *feel*.

THE REALITY: There is plenty of judgment to go around, we needn't make grieving more difficult by judging the thoughts, feelings or responses we have in our grief too. Feeling like you "shouldn't" feel something or feeling badly about one of the thoughts or feelings coming up (like feeling relieved that your person died because of something they were struggling with prior) that adds difficulty to an already difficult experience. It often causes us to shut down that feeling, push it away, and does not allow for processing and sorting through that thought or feeling.

MYTH: Some losses are better or worse than other losses.

THE REALITY: It's not that one is "better" or "worse", they are just *different* and have different stuff that comes with them. Megan Devine, with *Refuge in Grief*, shared this idea that is important to remember - all grief is *valid*, even though not all grief is the *same*. It gives us permission to not compare our losses to be able to offer compassion to one another. This doesn't have to be the pain Olympics, there is enough room for everyone's grief here.

MYTH: The *only* way to process grief is joining a support group and talking about your feelings.

THE REALITY: There is no 'one-size-fits-all' in coping with grief. Some people find support groups really helpful, while others do not. Some find writing a good way to sort through their thoughts and feelings, while others cannot stand it. Some would rather do something with their grief, channeling it in making something and for others that's not helpful. It's about trying different coping mechanisms and different ways of processing (meaning allowing ourselves to sit with the feeling or thought and finding a way to get that out of ourselves) and find what works for you. It's different for everyone and for each loss you experience. For more ideas to try, see our *Grief: The "Five Letter Word"?* Booklet.

MYTH: You grieve less when your loved one had a terminal illness or they lived a long life.

THE REALITY: Nope, not how that works. Just because you knew they were going to die does not mean you are ever ready for them to die. This goes back to the 'some losses are better or worse', when really they are just different and have different layers to them. Sure, with an expected death you have time to think about things and have conversations, but you are also having to watch your loved one deteriorate. What is "better" about watching them slowly die compared to sudden and unexpected death? Again, it just has different layers to it.

When someone dies after a "long life" or of old age, just because that is expected at some point doesn't mean that nullifies your right to grieve the loss of someone who has been there **your entire life**. That is just nonsense.

MYTH: If you avoid your grief it will eventually go away.

You might hear this positioned as "just keep yourself busy". THE REALITY: While it is helpful to take breaks from grief, all out avoiding grief and stuffing and pushing it down does not end well. Grief waits and not typically patiently. Avoiding grief only intensifies it's need to be witnessed and acknowledged. The unfortunate byproduct of avoiding grief is we can become fearful of even talking about our loved one because it might bring on the grief (that has not lessened in intensity either). When we cut off the grief we cut off the love and the memories. If you want to hear more about this (and grief in general), we recommend listening to "All There Is by Anderson Cooper" podcast.