

Grief: Help with navigating uncharted waters

The death of a loved one comes with a whole host of expectations about how the grieving process *should* feel. Often, it is believed that grief is experienced in a linear way moving through strictly-defined stages. In reality, the experience of grief is more like sailing a tiny boat in a vast and changing sea than driving a car along a straight road.

One of the most difficult things for people to reconcile when they are grieving is not feeling *bad*, but indeed feeling *good*. Feelings of happiness, relief, hope, eruptions of laughter or excitement can be stifled with guilt and shame. When we feel these positive emotions, we too often tell ourselves “I have no right to feel good when they are gone” or “it’s too soon for me to feel happy, there must be something wrong with me!”

The most important thing to do if you find yourself having any of these thoughts is to get rid of any preconceived notions of how the grieving process *should* feel. In fact, start by taking the word ‘should’ out of your vocabulary altogether. It’s also important to free yourself of any idea of progress when it comes to grief: there’s really no end-point, but rather an endless horizon of ever evolving feelings.

Depending on the circumstances of your loved one’s death, different feelings will likely accompany it. It’s very common to experience relief after an illness that spanned years. The grief that follows a sudden death will naturally look different from that of one that was expected.

Sometimes, feelings of numbness or an overwhelming mantra that “everything’s fine” might be masking some of the more painful feelings. This is normal, and is a part of many healthy grieving processes. While there is no prescription for grief, or roadmap to follow, some of these reminders can serve as a compass to aid you in navigating the uncharted waters in your personal grieving process.

Prioritize self-care. Eat healthy meals, exercise (even if it’s going for a short walk every day), and get a full night’s sleep. Grief is an emotional process that takes a toll on the body, and so supporting the body becomes paramount.

Be where you are. Everyone grieves at his or her own pace. Emotions don’t follow a schedule, so don’t try to force them to.

Seek and accept support. You can’t do this alone. Whether it’s accepting a home-cooked meal from a dear friend, joining a grief support group, or seeing a counsellor, you will need other people to support you at times.

Above all, when you do experience happiness and laughter, allow them to exist, and even be grateful for them! Wherever you are at in the process, whatever you are feeling, the only thing you can be certain of is that it will change again.