

Healing A Broken Heart

Befriending the Mourning Process

by *Elizabeth White*

Despite our efforts to create a rich and orderly life, we may at some point be confronted with an unexpected loss or a shocking event that changes our life. The life of someone we love may be cut short, leaving us to mourn their loss and find our way to a new equilibrium without their physical presence. Like many other situations of crisis, this experience holds in it the potential for finding in ourselves new dimensions of courage and resourcefulness and in the world around us new appreciation for the loving people whose support may sustain us.

When our eldest son died of lung cancer our family faced its first shock to our life expectations. As we look back, it was our greatest anguish and our most moving and deepening life experience. Defenseless and pained, our hearts were open to be filled with loving support.

As a therapist working often with bereavement, I believe that wellbeing can accompany the mourner. This involves paying attention to their inner knowing, asking for what they need and making choices that support the grieving process in a healthy way.

Befriend the Turbulence

The journey of bereavement has a mistaken belief that there is one way to expe-

rience it and a predictable path through its “phases” and even a timeline toward “closure.” On the contrary, each loss has its own resonance and each mourner is a different person dealing with it. We are anxious in the face of what feels like chaos as we struggle to get a grip on a world upside down, without the person we are missing. The real challenge of this period is to live with the turbulence and uncertainty that accompany it: To learn to trust the process.

What is truly common is how demanding this period is, indelibly affecting our minds, hearts, bodies and spirits. It is exhausting, requiring new reservoirs of creativity and new roles in daily living. By profoundly upsetting our life, death or

sudden loss brings to the surface feelings that have been unacknowledged. Our first task is to recognize that our world will be different. Like any crisis, it is an opportunity to find a deeper wellbeing that can include loss and renewal.

Nurture the Body as a Container

Our first responsibility is to take care of our bodies, which must contain all the upheaval of mind, heart and spirit. It is too easy to miss meals, yet nourishing food, prepared as a gift to our bodies and eaten mindfully can fortify us. After David's death, my nutritionist recommended supplements to support my adrenal and spleen energy, which was depleted.

In rising to all the demands of the new circumstances, it is easy to ignore our need for lots of rest. This includes rest for the body – good night sleeps, naps, baths, occupying a favourite chair, listening to pleasing music. It includes rest from having to interact with people when we are overextended, to find the quiet we need to integrate this new experience.

Our body needs also to move. This may involve walking in whatever landscape nurtures us and feeling the response of our senses to the world around us.

One way to relieve the tension that we carry is to receive regular massage, which will tap into and release the feelings that lie below the surface.

Make Room for the Full Spectrum of Emotions:

We need the strength to acknowledge the full range of feelings that this loss has evoked. Today's loss may take us into incomplete processes of grief for past losses. We may find it easier to settle into one feeling, usually one that is most familiar but then we find ourselves stuck. Becoming aware of unfamiliar feelings may be unsettling and we may turn to eating or drinking to dull the emotional energy.

Acknowledge Unfinished Business

Our relationship with the person we have lost and the circumstances surrounding their death will significantly affect our management of this time of mourning. Ideally we would have time as their life was drawing to a close to sort out estrangement, to express regrets, to honour and be honoured and to be ready for the separation. Unfortunately circumstances may deny us this important end of life work and we are left with much to sort out. The survivors may be

lost in blame or in guilt, focused on what they did or didn't do. Too many of us get stuck here, our bodies feeling battered as we continually blame ourselves. We can't see our way out of this whirlpool.

Choose Wise Companions

It is our task as mourners to get help to become unstuck. We can work one-to-one or in groups to find peace with the relationship through writing, expressive arts, or, as in my practice, with psychodrama. *Bereaved Families of Ontario* offers group support with people who are mourning similar losses. *The Bereavement Ontario Network* offers a registry of bereavement counselors ready to help us navigate the external expectations and the internal messages that exhaust us.

We can choose someone wise who values mourning and creates the safety to explore the beliefs that have imprisoned us and the emotions that seem unbearable to experience. We can learn to mourn deeply and richly by listening to our own wisdom. As we have support to recognize our feelings and to let go of unhelpful self-talk that gets in our own way, we learn to trust our heart. We can choose the companions who can move through this with us; those who can talk about it when it helps us, and distract us when we need a break, those who can do practical things like make some soups for our freezer or suggest good outings. We learn how to risk impoliteness. When someone begins with "It's time you" or "Haven't you" or "I have a date for you, it's been six months," we need to learn to stop them in their tracks as respectfully as we can. Each thread from the past that binds us must carefully be loosened and rewoven into a new internal relationship with the person we have lost.

Gently Does It

We can be gentle with ourselves in a process that may never fully end. We will do what we have heart to do, find stillness, choose what is life-giving, and let all the rest go. These are surely gifts of wellbeing that will serve us well in the life that we will lead in a new way. ■



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