

## Grief Therapy Part 2

### Death: The Big Taboo

Why is talking about death so difficult for us as a culture and why do we avoid talking about it at the most important times of our life? It is a natural part of the life experience and all of us go through it. So, why are we so uncomfortable talking about it? Researchers in psychology have found that dying people often have a propensity to feel isolated and alone due to societal fears and discomfort associated with death. Due to the fact that our society feels inclined to not openly talk about death and tends to be discouraged from addressing it to avoid discomfort, we as a society have made it taboo to talk about even with the people who are going through it. Often, we feel like we are protecting people by not talking about difficult topics such as this. With both sides – the living and the dying – trying to protect the other, we miss out on the opportunity of having rich and meaningful conversations with one another during this period of our lives. Sadly, research has highlighted that even hospital staff, influenced by such apprehensions, notably spent significantly less time with patients believed to be in the dying process, contributing to their isolation. Family members and friends, reluctant to address the impending death, also played a role in creating isolation for the dying person. While I am sure this was not their intentions, my sense is that a lot of them believe that they were being helpful and of service to the other person when it likely made the experience even more traumatic for everyone involved.

For instance, a scenario might involve a woman expressing her awareness of her imminent death to her son, only to have the son deflect the conversation with unrelated topics like selecting wallpaper for the bathroom. It is not uncommon for individuals to shift away from discussing the impending death, ostensibly to shield the dying person from the reality of their situation. Unfortunately, this avoidance further isolates the individual, preventing them from openly addressing what truly matters to them during this significant period. From my perspective, I can see how this would make the mother's experience feel minimized while also trying to protect the daughter by not pressing the subject. However, in this example, both parties are missing the opportunity to connect on a deeper, more authentic level.

Why do you think it is that our culture is so opposed to the topic and discussion of death? Oftentimes, death is a very unpleasant experience where people suffer for long periods of time to stay alive just a bit longer even though the quality of their life is probably at an all-time low. Our culture and the medical field tend to focus more on quantity instead of quality of life in certain ways. We even have laws that say that it is illegal for people to get out of suffering through assisted suicide. How is it that we are willing to put animals that we

love out of their misery, but unwilling to do so for a suffering family member? When animals are put to sleep, we tell our children that it is what was best for the animal and that it was done out of love. So, why wouldn't it be the same with human beings? It's confusing and unethical in my opinion that the law, culture, and medical fields keep people alive and suffering when they would rather just find peace and death. I personally believe that much of this has to do with our own discomfort in denial of other people dying and our eventual death.

Human beings are likely the only animals on this planet that really understand when death is coming as well as what it means on a personal level. People are often unsure about whether or not there is life after death. One perspective contends that there isn't, and if this is the case, there is no suffering. Another perspective is that there is life after death, and we go into another experience of consciousness that is better than what is in this dimension. The third is that Consciousness still exists, and it is much worse than what we have experienced on Earth. I prefer to believe in one of the first two scenarios and can't understand how a loving God would allow for the Third. Given this perspective for most people finding release from their pain and suffering is a real gift. Subscribing to either of the first two beliefs, I find comfort in knowing that all of my loved ones who have passed are at least at peace.

As a therapist, I'm not sure how to help people who subscribe to the third belief system. However, with people who are open to the possibility of the first two, I've learned ways of helping to reduce their grief as well as ways of increasing a sense of connection and positive thoughts naturally occurring about the loved one.

Unfortunately, the prevailing approach to treating grief generally advocates for the importance of feeling and expressing it deeply and thoroughly with other people feeling emotional pain along with you. Therapists working with grieving individuals often believe that undergoing the grieving process is a crucial step towards recovery. Our culture also suggests that if you don't feel deep pain, you either didn't love the person or that there must be something wrong with you. Consequently, counselors tend to engage in therapies that promote a deep and expressive encounter with emotional pain. Due to this, understandably, many people avoid going to therapy out of fear of having to feel even worse than they do to eventually feel better. For others, the idea of eliminating suffering in the context of grief is met with resistance, particularly by those who perceive grief as a legitimate experience and process. For proponents of the belief that grieving is a fundamental right, any method aimed at eradicating the pain might be seen as an attempt to suppress it, pushing the individual to resume functioning rather than facilitating effective healing.

Simply put, grief is a disruption of a person's ability to feel a sense of connection with the person. When I ask people about the times that they have felt more connected or the person's presence, they say that the grief was either absent or significantly less. This is one of the reasons I focus more on fostering and strengthening connection so that the grief is more easily and naturally is alleviated.

Grief has many negative side effects from filling our bodies with stress hormones and hijacking out thoughts to getting us to escape through drugs and alcohol. Moreover, during the grieving period, the experienced pain is likely to interfere with productivity and the ability to interact with others effectively. External pressures from employers, spouses, or others may encourage the grieving person to return to normal functioning. To shield individuals from such pressures, compassionate individuals argue that the pain of grief is a right and an essential element for one's well-being. Those dedicated to preserving the right to grieve may take offense at anything that seeks to abbreviate or eliminate the grieving process, asserting, "They have a right to it; don't take it away from them."

Sometimes, when I have presented these alternative views on grief and how to heal it, the greatest resistance and opposition I have encountered have been in a suggestion that grief is not only unnecessary but that it may not have any productive value at all. It's important to clarify that I'm not suggesting people don't have a right to experience suffering. Rather, I propose that viewing suffering as something to be eliminated might be a more constructive perspective.

[Click here for Part 3 of the Grief Series: How to be Okay with Being Okay](#)

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