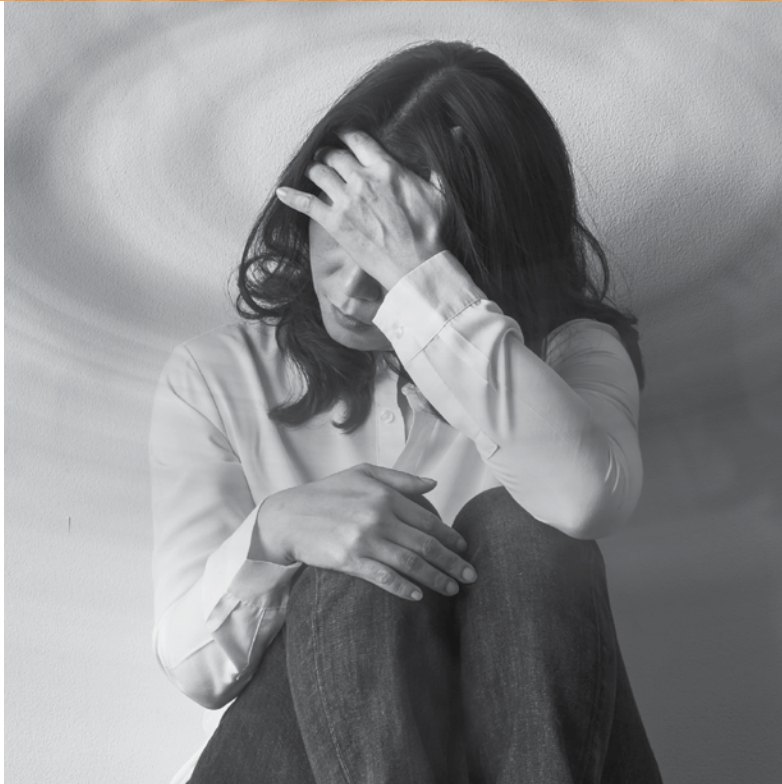


LIVING AND GRIEVING TOGETHER

PART 3 OF 6



Acknowledging the Illusion of Control

Supporting families through the crazy early hours, days and weeks following the death of a loved one.

BY ALAN D. WOLFELT, PH.D.

Death naturally throws a person's thoughts, feelings and behaviors into disarray. To the families you serve, nothing may feel "normal" right now. Their routines and schedules are naturally chaotic. They may find themselves surprised at things they think, say or do. Small things they used to take in stride might now throw them offtrack. Everything may feel strange and off-kilter.

They're not crazy, though. They're grieving. Remember, early grief is a naturally out-of-

control time, and it is this loss of control that often makes people feel like they're going crazy.

It doesn't feel good to be out of control, though. That is because change and unpredictability stress our minds, bodies and emotions. Any time we encounter something substantially different, we have to assess potential new dangers and figure out new responses. It is difficult being in new situations, especially those we don't wish to be in. But the

The reality is that grief twists and turns like a mountain trail with a million loops and switchbacks.

more we acknowledge that control is an illusion, the more comfortable we can become with the constant change and unpredictability of life.

This article is about helping grievers be compassionate with themselves as they

go through this naturally out-of-control time. It's also about beginning to acknowledge that we as human beings are not really in control of many essential aspects of our lives. If over time grievors work to cultivate more awareness that control is an illusion, they can start living with more ease and joy.

Saying Hello to the Crazy

People typically wish they could take shortcuts around grief. Almost immediately after a death, there's talk of "saying goodbye," "closure" and "moving on." The trouble is that's not at all how it works. We actually have to say hello to all the new experiences of grief before we can even begin to think about "saying goodbye." People in early grief are in this hello phase.

One big thing they have to say hello to is feeling out of control because in early grief, being out of control is normal and necessary, and recognizing and acknowledging this is key. When grievors are feeling the craziness of being out of control or "not themselves," they're actually doing what they need to be doing. "This is crazy," they might think on any given day. Or "I feel like I'm going crazy." But you can help them understand that the crazy is normal in grief and that they're in the process of getting acquainted with it.

Acknowledging Helplessness

Individual human beings are largely helpless when it comes to matters of life and death. This is perhaps the most devastating reality of being human.

We like to pretend otherwise. Many people have been taught the concept of "rugged individualism." It goes something like this: I control my own destiny. I can be and do whatever I want. When things don't go my way, it's my fault because I didn't try hard enough. I can fix everything through effort and will.

As the novocaine of shock and numbness wears off and deeper understanding of the loss grows, the pain often intensifies for a time.

Yes, of course individual effort in life does make a difference, but circumstances beyond our control are always an influence. For the most part, we can't control who gets sick. We can't control accidents. We can't control natural disasters. We can't control many financial upheavals. And we can't control what other people do.

Often, grievors are powerless to prevent the death of the person they love and now they are helpless in the midst of their early grief. Their thoughts, feelings and behaviors may seem wildly different from what they normally are and they feel helpless to control them. That's okay. Again, you can help them understand that their grief is doing what it needs to do.

The Experience of Denial

In early grief, denial can follow shock and numbness. It takes a while for the mind to understand and process the reality of what has happened. In the

meantime, grievors are living in that bubble of shock and numbness. This is normal. As the weeks pass, though, they might find themselves moving out of shock and into denial. Denial is a more conscious, active blocking of reality than shock and numbness are.

Denial is a form of attempted control. If you can deny that something has happened, you're controlling your perceived reality. You're not actually changing the reality, however. So, while intermittent denial in the first weeks and months can be normal, remaining in denial over the long term will inhibit healing and ongoing living.

As grievors move through their early grief, you can help them take baby steps one day at a time out of any denial they may be experiencing and into reality. When you talk openly with them about the death, inviting them to share stories of their loss and relationship with the person who died and participate in a meaningful ceremony, you are helping them soften their denial.

Out-of-Control Experiences of Early Grief

People in early grief often feel themselves behaving in what can feel like out-of-control ways. Here are several of the most common.

CRYING/SOBBING/ SCREAMING

Tears in grief are normal, of course, and gentle tears are considered socially acceptable. We expect grieving people to cry and in return we offer condolences and comfort – up to a point. But when crying seems

“out of control,” we frequently don’t know what to do. We often judge loud, messy crying as “hysterical” behavior.

In Eastern cultures, sobbing and wailing (sometimes called keening) are encouraged and understood as a normal part of grief and mourning. In our culture more broadly, however, sobbing and wailing are often seen as evidence of mental instability, i.e., craziness.

But when people are in early grief, of course they’re appropriately unstable – that’s the entire point! They are naturally shattered and thus out of control. It is this very loss of control that allows them to authentically express their strong, primal feelings.

And what about the griev-ers who aren’t crying? This is common as well. Sometimes people ask me, “Why am I not crying? What is wrong with me?” The lack of tears often makes these people think they’re crazy, but of course they are not.

Grievers who aren’t crying might still be experiencing shock and numbness. Or they may not be crying because they’re avoiding things that remind them of the significance of their loss. Some people have also taught me they fear that if they start crying, they may never stop. All these responses are normal in early grief.

Finally, some people are just not criers. It is possible to hurt

deeply without crying. I encourage these griev-ers to explore whether they’re truly not criers or if they’ve been socially conditioned not to express emotion because tears are seen as vulnerability and weakness.

Help griev-ers understand that pain has a purpose in grief. Pain in the body signals that something is wrong and that care and rest are needed.


If it’s the latter, this is something they can work on.

MOODINESS


When someone loved dies, griev-ers may feel like they’re surviving fairly well one minute and are crazy with emotion the next. Sudden mood changes can be a difficult yet normal part of their grief journeys. These shifts can be small or dramatic and be caused by anything – a familiar place, a song, an insensitive comment, a change in the weather or simply nothing at all.

Mood changes can make griev-ers feel like they’re going crazy because their inappropriate self-expectation may be that they should be constantly progressing from chaos to stability. They might think they should follow a pattern of continuous “improvement” in grief. In other words, they may expect themselves to keep feeling better and better as time passes, or for one predominant feeling to be “over” when they move on to the next.

The reality, though, is that grief twists and turns like a



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mountain trail with a million loops and switchbacks. One minute they might be feeling great and the next minute horrible. One day they might

be feeling sad and the next wildly angry, only to feel deeply sad again the following day.

And in general, grief usually gets worse before it gets better. As the novocaine of shock and numbness starts to wear off and deeper understanding of the loss grows, the pain often intensifies for a time.

If you are supporting grievers experiencing normal ups and downs and wild swings, encourage them not to be hard

on themselves. Instead, invite them to practice patience and self-compassion. They should allow their moods to come and go without self-judgment.

PAIN

Early grief hurts so much, especially when the shock and numbness start to wear off. The hurt is usually in proportion to the level of attachment griever has to the person who died. Though many other factors also come into play, in general, the stronger the love and the closer the day-to-day relationship, the more painful the grief.

For many people in early grief, the pain feels out of control. It is more powerful than they are. It is like an earthquake, tornado or tsunami – gigantic, terrible and crushing.

When appropriate, you can help grievers understand that in grief, pain has a purpose, just like bodily pain. Pain in the body signals that something is wrong and that care and rest are needed. If your inflamed appendix didn't use pain to alert you to the prob-

The pain of early grief can be more powerful than the griever is. Like an earthquake or tornado, it is gigantic, crushing.

lem, your appendix would burst and you might well die.

Loss is a wound, and wounds hurt. Grievers' pain announces their loss. It says, "Acknowledge me! Pay attention to me! Care for me!"

Grief pain forces people to slow down. It causes them to turn inward and really ponder

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their love for and relationship with the person who died. It makes them think about the meaning of life and death, who they are, what and whom they care about and what they want to do with the remainder of their days. Their pain is also directing them to take good care of themselves and to accept the care of others.

While we're at it, let's look at the alternative. What if loss didn't hurt? Imagine if we could fiercely love someone

who was living, yet when they died, we experienced no pain. Instead, we just shrugged and moved on. Could that really be love? I don't think so.

The capacity to give and receive love – our greatest gift – is here and now. When the object of our love is gone, there is an “after.” In the after, our love continues but needs to find new ways of being. Adjusting to the after is what hurts.

Grief pain is an alarm bell signaling that there is work

to be done. It's grief work. It's mourning. The adjusting and healing in the after don't just happen. They take attention, time, effort and devotion. Just like the love did.

The pain of early grief may feel crazy, but actually, it is good and true. The more grievers learn to befriend it, the more they will see that it is there to help them adapt to the new reality and find ways to continue to live and love well in the future. ☰

Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D., is recognized as one of North America's leading death educators and grief counselors. His books on grief for both caregivers and grieving people – including You're Not Crazy – You're Grieving, from which this article series is adapted – have sold more than a million copies worldwide and are translated into many languages. Wolfelt is founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and a longtime consultant to funeral service. 970-217-7069; drwolfelt@centerforloss.com; centerforloss.com

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