

Reflection Questions: Which of the above challenges are most difficult for you? Did I omit any challenge?

Since most of us enter the grief process with little or no sense of what it entails, it will be helpful to occasionally reread the above characteristics of grief. In working with people, individually and in a group, I find myself constantly reminding them of one or more of the above characteristics of the grief process. At this time, take a moment to check which of the above characteristics of grief you tend to forget. Are there other things about the grief process that I have not named here? If so, please share.

Helpful measures in the grieving process

Before I offer any concrete suggestions that might be helpful during a grieving process, I need to emphasize that no one can offer us any easy or orderly steps that will move us quickly through our grief. Grief, by its very nature, is messy and very difficult and, as I said before, getting over grief takes lots of time, patience, effort, tears, prayer and the support of other people. Often we may feel that we go two steps forward and three back. Having offered the above caveat, we can say that over the past few decades, as more and more counselors and clergy work with individuals and groups in the grieving process, most, if not all of them, will agree that the following suggestions are helpful.

- Share your grief

It nearly always helps to share our pain with others, especially with someone who will listen with a compassionate ear. It is important to share our story many times. We will learn early in the grieving process that there are people with whom we can share our loss and others with whom we can't. We will find that people, including good friends, do not want to continue to hear about our loss. Others may use the occasion to burden us with their problems. Thus, we may need to decide who are the people who are willing to listen to us talk over and over about our pain. It may be a good friend, an acquaintance, someone who has had a similar loss, a counselor, a clergy, or a grief support group. From personal experience in my parish, I can say without hesitation that a well-facilitated support group can be of enormous help during a grieving process.

- Keep a journal

In her book, *Widow, Rebuilding Your Life*, Genevieve Ginsburg, M.S., writes: "Unless writing is an unbearable chore, every recent widow (and widower, we might add) should try to start a journal of her thoughts and experiences. Your early journal entries may be no more than the outpourings of your wandering subconscious and your tears on paper – even, perhaps, pages of aimless and pointless discourse. You'll feel better though, for having expressed yourself in quite a different way than you do with your friends." In and through the use of a journal, we give a name and expression to our grief. If we give journaling a chance, we may be pleasantly surprised how helpful it is. Many people, including myself, have found journaling to be an excellent form of self-therapy. In journaling we can also write letters to our loved one, to others and to God.

- Be attentive to what hinders and helps your grief process.

If we want to reach a particular goal, it will be good for us to know the obstacles and helpful measures along the way. In the grief process, one obstacle might be our tendency to ignore our grief with busy work and to show everyone how well we are doing by keeping a “stiff upper lip.” Helpful measures might include any of the suggestions mentioned herein or other things we discover to be beneficial.

- Read about the grief process

Reading about the grief process will help us to better understand what we are going through. We may discover some helpful suggestions. The stories of how others survived their grief process may inspire us and give us hope. I realize that early on in the grief process, most people are unable to focus on reading anything. So we should read when we are ready and perhaps start with an article or a short book.

- Prayer

Many people find it difficult to pray during a grief process. But some can't focus or pray in the way that they were used to praying. Others find God distant. Still others may be angry with God. (“I am a good person, I love God. I am faithful to him and now he has let me down. What is going on?”)

Don't panic! Every relationship, including our relationship with God, has its ups and downs. Sometimes we feel a strong connection to a loved one. Other times we feel distant. As with any friendship, we have to learn to hang in there with God in the good times and the bad. There is no easy way to do this. During our tough times, we need to be very honest with God about our thoughts and feelings especially if until now our relationship with God has been peaceful and “nice.” For example, it is not easy to express anger in a relationship that always has been peaceful. However, if our relationship is going to remain real, we must learn to tell God exactly how we feel. He can handle it. He has big shoulders. Write him a letter. Speak to him from your heart.

In time of grief, we may find reading the psalms very helpful. Taking time to imagine Jesus actually weeping with Mary and Martha may help to bring God close to us. Picture Jesus struggling in Gethsemane, crying out to God with “tears and loud cries” (Hebrews 5:7-10). See him comforting the women of Jerusalem on his way to the hill of Calvary. In other words, look for images of God and Jesus that comfort us and give us hope.

Signs that healing is occurring

The following are some signs that healing and recovery are happening:

1. We can talk about our loved one and share memories in a more comfortable manner. While our sense of loss is frequently with us, it is not as intense as it used to be. We are not crying as much. Whatever sadness, anger or guilt, etc., we experience is not as intense; neither do our feelings fluctuate as rapidly.

2. We are beginning to create a new life without our spouse. For example, we are forming new friendships, doing some new things we didn't do (or couldn't do) while our spouse was alive.
3. We are coming to a place of realizing that, although life is not the same, it can be good again. We can let ourselves laugh and enjoy life. There are longer periods of time when we do not think about or focus on our loss.
4. We are building a life outside our grief. Our grief is not so engrossing.
5. We are beginning to see some good things emerging from our loss. We are discovering and developing inner resources that we didn't know we had or had neglected; e.g., managing finances, spirituality, our ability to reach out and help others, travel, etc. Our social life has expanded in new directions. We have made some wonderful, new friendships.

I conclude with encouraging and consoling words from To Heal Again by Rusty Barkus:

This winter of yours will pass
As all seasons do.
There is no right way to grieve.
There is just your way.
It will take as long as it takes.

Please share this article with people who are grieving the loss of a loved one. I'd also love to hear from you if you have suggestions for additions to the article. What are other obstacles and helpful measures to the grief process? What are other signs that healing is happening?

Fr. Eamon Tobin

tobin2@live.com