

The Art of Grieving Gracefully:

Robbie Davis-Floyd's Suggestions for Coping with Loss and Pain

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My daughter Peyton Elizabeth Floyd died as the result of a car accident in September 2000, four days before her 21st birthday. These are some of the things I learned from the experience of coping with this devastating loss. They begin with suggestions for the immediate period after a loved one's death, and move on to the different coping methods I found useful over the long-term. At the end I include suggestions for what to say (and not to say) to those who are bereaved.

Drink LOTS of water. If you get dehydrated, you won't be able to cope with anything.

Even if you can hardly swallow, eat a little bit of healthy food at mealtimes. Junk food and soft drinks will only weaken you and compromise your ability to function.

Cry a LOT. Every tear carries stress hormones out of your body. The more you cry, the more capable you will be of standing up to life in the midst of your grief.

Take every opportunity to laugh that comes your way. Laughter stimulates your immune system, which helps to keep you healthy. And every moment of joy and laughter you experience will remind you for a little while that life can still be worth living.

Read about grief and shock. Learning about the symptoms that others have experienced helps you know you are normal and not going crazy when your grief is so deep and your pain so intense that you can hardly see two feet in front of you because of the fog of agony that surrounds you.

The physical components of grief can be stunning in the first months or year—like a butcher knife in the heart, daggers in your back, a hole blown in your stomach. Know that that level of intensity will pass. You may always feel pain, but it won't be as horrible and over time, amazingly enough, you can learn to live with it. While it lasts, let your friends cocoon you as often as you can. Sometimes, when you are with people who surround you with love, the butcher knife will come out of your heart for a little while. It will go back in, but less and less deeply over time.

Don't hesitate to name the person you lost and talk about him or her when appropriate in conversation. If it makes others uncomfortable, simply state that you need to talk about your loved one in a normal way and that you will deeply appreciate their understanding. They will rise to it, and find that they are relieved as well. Nothing is more awkward than skirting around the issue that is on everyone's mind—best to just put it right out there.

Tell your story as often as you can in appropriate times and places. Narrating a tragic event helps you to get that it happened, to give it form and focus in your mind, and eventually may help you find some meaning in it all. To people who want to “do something for you,” explain that the most loving thing they can do is listen to your story.

When you are telling your story or talking about your tragedy, do so appropriately. Don't take more than your fair share of others' time and attention. I call this "the art of grieving gracefully." If you talk or cry for too long, everyone else gets very uncomfortable. You will feel their tension and you will become uncomfortable too. There is no healing in talking when others don't want to hear it any more—it will just make you feel worse in the end.

Experience and process grief whenever it bubbles up inside you. Grief is hard work that must be done for your own mental health. You can only do the work of grief healthily if you go through it, leaning into the pain. Your grief may accompany you through the rest of your life, causing you enormous pain but also making you far stronger than you could ever imagine. As long as you grieve, you will still be able to experience joy and happiness—they are opposite sides of the same coin, powerful emotions that require you to feel in order to experience them. Refusing to grieve will diminish your ability to feel other emotions and to show up to life.

Metaphorically speaking, grief is like a river—it has to flow. Sometimes it will rise up like a tidal wave and take you down—at those times, just let it—sob all you need to wherever you are—go away from the group if necessary. When you are in a private place or with someone who can support you, sob, scream, yell, pound pillows—just surrender to the grief. It can be terrifying to feel that depth of emotion, but the more you let it flow, the faster the tidal wave will pass through you. You will be amazed at how much better you will feel when it has passed.

At other times, grief is like a waterfall that suddenly and quickly cascades over you. This often happens when you get unexpectedly blindsided by, for example, seeing a person that looks just like your loved one, or coming up out of a subway and finding yourself near the street where they lived, or seeing a book they loved or hearing an expression they often used. If you know such things are coming, you can psychologically prepare for them and avoid the sudden cascade of pain, but often things just happen and suddenly you are overwhelmed. Just go with it and cry for a while—it will pass.

Sometimes the river of grief flows still and deep—you know grief is happening inside you but you are granted space to live your life and get on with your work. Such times are gifts—use them well without any guilt that you are not honoring your loved one enough by staying miserable. And when the tidal wave or the waterfall takes you down again, flow with it and gradually you will come back up and have room to breathe again for a while.

If you try to dam up your grief, please know that it will eventually smash your dam and take you down anyway. If you try to prevent that, you may well end up drinking or taking drugs to dull your pain, and spiral down into a clinical depression. That will be much worse than letting it flow as it will. Depression is not grief—it is the absence of emotion. Grieving, like joy, is stimulating and healthy for your immune system. Depression is terrible for your immune system and your mental stability—in a depression, you lose your ability to feel anything except pain. I call it "the flatlands." The world seems grey and dull and flat, pain is all you feel, and suicide starts to seem logical as a way out of the pain. If you find yourself spiraling down into a depression, get help immediately. Some people can stop the onset of depression through exercise, meditation, activities that nurture them, etc. but many of us need anti-depressants to stabilize our brain chemicals and stop the downward spiral so we can stabilize and regain our ability to feel and thus to grieve in a healthy way.

Don't expect to "heal" your grief and pain or "get over it." You might, and you might not. Just learn to live with it as a part of you. Expecting that by the end of some particular period of time you should be all better just makes you feel worse if you are not. As long as you are willing to let the grief flow, to do the hard work of grieving whenever it bubbles up or cascades over you, then you are where you are "supposed to be" in your grieving process. When you spend years loving someone who dies, at what point do you think it will stop seeming like you just saw them yesterday? There may be no such point, and you may find yourself often re-shocked to have to remember that they died. *The power and duration of your grief will mirror the power and duration of your love.* So if you love deeply, don't expect to "get over it." Just learn to live with it, and honor your ability to love that much.

Make or keep a special place in your house where you can talk in private to the person you lost, and grieve or laugh or remember at times. A room, or an altar. Fill it with special things that belonged to that person, and handle or hug or kiss them when you are the saddest and loneliest. They will bring you the tang of your loved one's presence, like a whiff of salt air that evokes the sea. It's no compensation for the loss of their actual physical presence, but it is better than having nothing at all to hold onto.

Don't keep everything that belonged to your loved one—give everything away that is not especially meaningful to you personally. You may find a lot of pleasure and relief in letting friends of your loved one choose special things that will help them in their own grief. But don't give away anything till you are ready, and be sure you are willing to let it go before you give it. You don't need any more wrenches, so wait till the gift to another is not a wrench but also a gift to you.

Talk, pray, or write letters to the one you lost—perhaps on your laptop or in a journal. Just because they are physically dead does not mean that their spirit cannot hear you. Assume that they are listening, and say to them whatever is in your heart, even angry things. All your feelings are justified and legitimate, and you need to express them. They will hear you, and understand, and they will help you if they can.

If miracles happen, like your loved one coming to you in a vision or dream, or sending you a message, write them down immediately so you won't forget that they happened. Don't expect miracles, but be present and aware and grateful if they occur.

Find a good balance between spending time with others and spending time alone. Sometimes you need company, and sometimes griefwork is best done by yourself. When you receive an invitation or are expected somewhere, listen to yourself and do what will nurture you the most.

Never negate the existence of your child in order to be polite. When new acquaintances ask you if you have children, just speak the truth. I tried a couple of times to say, "Yes, I have a son, Jason," and then I felt as if I had just completely wiped out Peyton's life. So now I say, in a light tone, "Yes, I raised two kids. My daughter Peyton was killed in a car wreck a few years ago, and my son Jason is now 21 and doing great." Then ask the other person a question, so that they won't feel obliged to dwell on your child's death unless they really want to, and the conversation can move on. It doesn't help you or them to make a big deal of it at an initial, casual meeting.

Be very gentle with yourself. If you are not getting as much work done as you think you should, celebrate each thing that you do accomplish. Don't watch tragic movies, turn off the news if it hurts you to hear it, read books that are joyful and fun, spend time in the sunlight, get massages as often as you

can. If stories of others' tragedies hurt you, don't listen to them. If people give you dumb advice or suggestions that hurt your feelings (like "it's time to get over it and move on with your life"), just politely ignore it and change the subject. Or if you have the strength, educate them about what a grieving person really needs. Here are some suggestions from a group in Austin called "For the Love of Christi":

- ◆ Please don't ask me if I am over it yet. I'll never get over it.
- ◆ Please don't tell me she's in a better place—she isn't here with me.
- ◆ Please don't say at least she isn't suffering—I haven't come to terms with why she had to suffer at all, and I am suffering now.
- ◆ Please don't tell me you know how I feel unless you have experienced the same kind of loss.
- ◆ Please don't ask if I feel better—bereavement is not a condition that clears up.
- ◆ Please don't tell me "at least you had her all those years"—what year would you choose for your loved one to die?
- ◆ Please don't tell me God never gives us more than we can bear. I don't believe I can bear this pain.
- ◆ *Please, just say you are sorry. Just say you remember my loved one, if you do. Mention his name. Listen to my story. Or just let me cry.*

From my heart and the depths of my own pain over losing my precious 21-year-old daughter, I ask you to remember that "what you resist, persists." So when you are sure you can't go on for one more day or minute, express your despair to anyone who will listen, insist that you can't as many times as you need to, cry or scream as much as you feel like. When you have fully expressed your resistance, despair, and certainty that you can't go on, then deep down inside yourself where the spirit of your loved one will always dwell, you will find the strength you need.

What to say to parents who lose children, and what not to say

"You'll be with him again in heaven." Very not helpful--we want them right here right now! It does us a great deal more good for you to acknowledge that. If in fact we will meet them again, we will come to that faith in our own time. Don't push it, just let us know that you recognize our pain.

"I can imagine what you are going through"--no, you can't. So don't go there, it makes us want to hit you.

"I can't imagine what you are going through"--better to hear, because it's true and it makes us not resentful of your presumption but grateful that you recognize that indeed you can't imagine--neither could we.

Please, let us talk about our dead children, let us tell stories about them, give us every opportunity you can to mention their names. There is enormous relief for me in just saying "Peyton," and even more relief in telling stories about things she said and did the way others do about their living kids without anybody acting weird. The very greatest gift you can give a grieving parent, especially in the first two years after the child's death, is to ask us to tell our stories of loss. But please, if you do ask, then be prepared to listen.

Choose your timing well. Don't ask for a story when you have no time to hear it. Don't offer condolences when a person is walking to the stage to give a speech! Don't worry about re-opening a wound--this wound never closes--but do it at a time when we can go into it with you and really talk about it, not in passing on the street.

Narrating an event is the most powerful way to give it coherence and meaning. It is devastating to be asked to tell the story of your child's death, to begin (which means re-experiencing it as if were happening right now), and then to be interrupted with questions like "why didn't you do this or that?" or with calls to the waiter or whatever. We know you have limited time and energy--just give us free rein and let us tell you the story as it comes out, without interruption (pertinent questions always welcome). Know as you listen that we are giving you the greatest gift we can by sharing the greatest pain we hold, and you are giving us the greatest gift you have by listening to our stories and acknowledging our pain. You don't have to try to fix anything, just listen!

The other side of that coin is that sometimes the bereaved one is feeling okay in that moment and may not really want to talk about it at all. Let them know you are open to hearing their story, but if it's not up for them to talk about it, respect their need not to go there at that time. As time moves on, I find myself less and less willing to plunge into my pain in front of others, while for the first three years I was desperate for opportunities to do that.

Yet sometimes I still want that kind of attention, and now that it has been over 4 years since Peyton has died, almost nobody wants to talk with me about it any more. And when I bring Peyton up in casual conversation, perhaps sharing childhood stories with friends, they don't follow up my stories about Peyton with further questions, as you would if the child were still alive. That's hard. I want to talk about her in a normal way, want people to ask me what she was like, how she grew up, what she was into. So please, when you talk to a bereaved parent, don't stiffen when the subject of their dead child comes up—just relax and go with the flow. And sometimes, just sometimes, ask us how we really are, how hard has it really been, would we share with you how we have managed to get through? If it's the right time, your questions will be manna to our souls, and our answers can help us to feel proud that we have made it this far.