

Moving Forward With Grief

Susan David: A friend contacted me a few days ago to say that she had lost her business. This was a business that she had built over 20 years through pain and hardship and sacrifice, and now, through no fault of her own, nothing that she could control or see coming, she's had to close her doors. She described a yearning for a time that she will never have, a retirement that she imagined that is hers no longer, the want and need to provide for her children in specific ways that is not an option anymore. And this is not a transient experience that she's having. It is a yearning and an irrevocable sense that she had something and that something is now no longer in her grasp. And this was not just sadness. It was grief. Another sense of heartbreaking grief I had this week was when I heard about a colleague whose father had died and this person described how they had been able to text their father to say goodbye, but not hold his hand. Today we'll discuss strategies for managing grief, even as each day's news tests our emotional bandwidth. This is Checking In with Susan David.

Life's beauty is inseparable from its fragility. We are young until we are not, needed until redundant, healthy until a diagnosis brings us to our knees. No one makes it through life without experiencing grief. It is the heart-wrenching flipside of all that makes life worth living. Love. Love is, of course, a source of joy and meaning, a universal binding of humanity. But living with an open heart also means loss. Psychologists often distinguish normal grief from normal sadness. Sadness is a more temporary emotional reaction to a disappointment or loss. It tends to pass in a couple of days. But grief is, in so many people's experience—mine included—less an emotional reaction to something, to a loss, a passing sad emotion in a sea of life experience, than an actual embodiment of loss. Grief is the experience of being changed by loss. Grief draws a line in our lives. It says to us, there was a before this happened and an after this happened, before this loss and after this loss, before my grief and after my grief. I will move forward but I will never be the same. And in the midst of the coronavirus, it can feel as if grief is hanging heavy in the air. Whether it's grief for someone who died from the disease, anticipatory grief for vulnerable loved ones, or the grief of broken plans or the shattered illusion of safety, we can often recognize that we are grieving when we have an embodied sense of loss. We don't feel the grief, we are the grief. We encompass all that that grief is. Grief often brings with it a sense of longing and loss, crying, denial, dreams of a loved one or something that feels forgotten and gone. There is often a physical experience of grief as well. A want to isolate oneself and draw oneself down into oneself, a sense of meaninglessness, and often a sense of avoidance and numbness, sadness and yearning. These difficult emotions, difficult experiences, all in one. Grief, at its core, is not an experience that we have. It's an experience that we become. We have it both physically in ourselves: that waking up in the morning and knowing that your life will never be the same, that sense of distress and yearning, and all of the emotions that come with it (complex and varied as they are), that anger, the yearning, the sadness, the distress, the loss, the want. Cognitively, there's also often a sense of disorganization, being unable

to focus, thinking of the person or thing that is now no longer, dreaming of it and wanting it more. And so it's the experience of intertwined cognitions, emotions and bodily sensations, that all in all together say, "I need, I want, I am lost."

Grief is often thought of as having different stages that are passed through, one by one: denial, then anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance and meaning. But there is no linear progression through grief. We may experience all of these at one time or in one day; you might find yourself experiencing grief right now in relation to an actual loss or an anticipated loss. But you may also be finding that you are re-grieving something that you thought that you had moved on from many years ago. Why is it? How is it that you might still be grieving something, or remembering something that you haven't thought about for many, many years? What psychologists know is that our thoughts and memories do not occur in isolation. When we are feeling happy, for instance, you might remember all the times that you've been happy, we have a bias towards remembering things that are congruent with the current mood state that we are in. This is why, for instance, when you've had a fight with your spouse or your partner, you can remember all the 363 things that that person did wrong in technicolor detail. Our memories are biased to recalling congruent memories that are aligned with how we are currently feeling. And this is why in the current situation—where there's sadness and unpredictability, where worldview that we once had of things being normal, things being predictable and routinized, is no longer—we are in a state of disarray. And we're in a process of starting to remember a whole lot of things from our past that come up congruent with this mood-congruent bias that we have. Grief fundamentally has no predictability or cycle. There is no stage of anything that can be foretold or anticipated. Grief is simply raw and real and ever-changing, just as we are ever-changed by it. Grief is the ultimate teacher. It tells us what it wants from us and demands only that we cannot have what we want. The love, the job, the life that was stolen from us. Grief demands the learning of patience, compassion, and gentle acceptance. Quite simply, if you are experiencing grief right now (whatever that grief is in response to) and you have the idea that you should be meeting some external benchmark of what the grief should be or when you should experience it, this is both unrealistic and counterproductive. Our job with grief is quite simply this: to show up to it and to acknowledge that we don't feel okay. That it's okay not to feel okay. These are lessons that I learned through personal experience. I described these in my TED Talk on emotional courage:

My father died on a Friday. He was 42 years old and I was 15. My mother whispered to me to go and say goodbye to my father before I went to school. So I put my backpack down and walked the passage that ran through to where, the heart of our home, my father lay dying of cancer. His eyes were closed, but he knew I was there. In his presence I had always felt seen. I told him I loved him, said goodbye, and headed off for my day. At school I drifted from science to mathematics to history to biology as my father slipped from the world. From May to July to September to November, I went about with my usual smile. I didn't drop a single grade. When asked how I was doing, I would shrug and say, "Okay." I was praised for being strong. I was the master of being okay. But back home, we struggled. My father hadn't been able to keep his small business going during his illness, and my mother, alone, was grieving the love of her life, trying to raise three children. And the creditors were knocking. We felt, as a family, financially and emotionally ravaged. I began to spiral

down, isolated, fast. I started to use food to numb my pain, bingeing and purging, refusing to accept the full weight of my grief. No one knew—and in a culture that values relentless positivity, I thought that no one wanted to know. But one person did not buy into my story of triumph over grief. My eighth grade English teacher fixed me with burning blue eyes as she handed out blank notebooks. She said, “Write what you’re feeling. Tell the truth. Write like nobody’s reading.” And just like that, I was invited to show up authentically to my grief and pain. It was a simple act, but nothing short of a revolution for me.

When I started to write about my grief experience, I recognized that there was a real change that came about me and I held that change for many years, until I became a psychologist and I started researching what it was that might have actually been helpful in that writing process. There’s now a large body of research that looks at how we can successfully process our grief or other difficult emotions. One of those bodies of research, for instance, done by James Pennebaker, a professor at the University of Texas, examines this: what if we just ignore our difficult experiences, or what if we write about them? What he finds is that when people delve into their difficult experiences, just putting them down on paper, that there’s often a positive effect that comes out of this. No longer are we avoiding or getting stuck in. Rather, what we’re doing is we are putting our experiences into language, and this has an organizing effect. It allows us to see, not only the difficult parts of the experience, but also, what we might have learned or gained, or some insights that we might have had from it. This doesn’t mean that we’ve chosen the experience. But it does mean that we are able to process it, to move forward with that experience. And this becomes critical. Because of course, one of the most healthy ways that we can be in the world is when we move forward with our story, as opposed to having this story or this experience that is difficult being separate from us. We become integrated, we become whole, and we are able to move forward in healthy ways. Of course, if you aren’t someone who likes to write, we know that talking to a therapist or even talking with a wise friend who helps you to get a sense of perspective and to process what’s going on for you can be key. But for now, given that so many of us are at home, alone, and we have this opportunity, I invite you perhaps to take part in one of these writing exercises. This is different from the values affirmation exercise that we did in the first episode, where we just spend five minutes thinking about who we want to be, and what values we want to bring to the current situation. Instead, what it’s doing is it’s asking you to think about something difficult. It might be an experience that you’ve had in the past, a grief, or grief that you are processing right now. It might even be a grief upon a grief, a grief that has been re-awakened for you in the current context. And all we’re doing is we’re sitting down without a focus on grammar, punctuation, or anything else that needs to be perfect, and just writing.

Set a timer for about 20 minutes. Open up your notebook or create a new document on your computer. When the timer starts, just begin writing about your emotional experiences. It might be from your grief of the past week, month, or year. Don’t worry about punctuation, sloppiness, or coherence. Simply go where your mind takes you, curiously and without judgment. Write for yourself, not for some eventual reader. Do this for a few days, and then throw the paper away or stick it in a bottle, cast it out to sea, or close the document without saving it. It really doesn’t matter. The point is that those thoughts are now out of you and on the page. You’ve begun the

process of organizing your grief in language, the power to gain perspective and to move the process of moving forward. I know that when I say things like, “show up to grief through writing or talking,” that’s really hard. We, as a society and as individuals, do not metabolize grief easily. But see if you can just show up to it without resistance. I know, it’s hard. But the only way through grief is ultimately through it. There is simply no “getting over” grief. There is no moving on from it. There is only moving forward with it, carrying your grief with you and the love of what that person and thing meant—carrying that with you, too. You will again learn how to be. You will not have moved on from your grief. You will have learned to move forward with it—without resistance, without fighting. When I’m feeling sad and grieving, as still happens many, many decades later, I’m often reminded of the beautiful T.S. Eliot words:

[excerpt from Wait Without Hope
by T.S. Eliot]

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.

When we are in grief, we feel like so much has been taken away from us. Grief of a person, in its essence, is about love: love looking for its home. And while it feels like so much has been stolen from us, grief brings with it a promise that unfolds when it does. Here is the promise of grief: if you’re here with me, you will one day forget me. You will turn the corner and see a light, an upturned smile, a flash of something that sends you the promise that joy is possible once again. But for now, be here.

As we all move into the next week, we’ll no doubt have a range of experiences, emotions, loneliness, confusion, and yes, even grief. My invitation to you is simply this. See if you can anchor yourself. Breathe into the space and remind yourself, “I am me. And I am here. I am here now.”

That’s all from me, Susan David. Be well, stay safe, and let’s check in next week.