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{chapters}

turning the pages through grief



Managing Your Own Grief after Community Tragedy



As soon as news media began reporting the mass shooting at a Connecticut elementary school, thousands of bereaved people felt their own sense of loss intensify. For some, the trauma was too painful a reminder of the violence that caused the death of their loved ones. For others, the visible disbelief and grief of so many young parents and families caused them to feel an expansion of their own feelings of loss.

Some undoubtedly resented the attention. A week or so after 9/11, I heard a mother quietly remark in her support group to the understanding nods of others in the group, "I know those people lost children, but I'm a grieving mother, too." One thing is nearly beyond debate: the deaths of so many and the extensive news coverage it garners complicate the grief of most bereaved people. These reactions and others are normal and expected. How can you grieve with the entire community while managing your own loss? Here are some pointers you might find helpful.

Give yourself permission to experience "conflicted grief." If you find yourself saying, "I really don't know quite how I'm supposed to be feeling right now," you might be experiencing what I have come to call "conflicted grief." When a loved one dies, we intuitively know that it is "appropriate" to experience the emotions, physical manifestations and spiritual challenges of grief. However, when a global, national or community tragedy preempts these personal experiences, bereaved people

often express guilt ("Why should I feel so bad; my mother was 86") or resentment ("My child died in a car crash—but I hurt, too.") While you may sense pity toward others because you have some sense of what their loss is like, you may find it difficult to be truly sympathetic. You may choose to "fast" from news coverage during which you simply do not look at images, read stories or listen to video reports from the scene. These "conflicted feelings" are perfectly normal; you are not being selfish, insensitive or uncaring when you experience them.

Share your "mixed feelings" with an understanding person. Not every person in your circle of family members and friends will understand your focus on your own feelings of loss and your inability to be "moved" by the experiences of others. Having a caring person

Continued...

**January/
Winter 2013**

*"Letting go means
to come to the realization
that some people are a part of your
history, but not a part of your destiny."
~ Steve Maraboli*

{Q&A}

I have received many sympathy cards and condolence flowers and food from people since the death of my mother. Is there a rule as to how soon I should respond? And I am not sure what to say.

It's important to acknowledge sympathy cards and condolence gifts with a courteous reply message. It can be difficult to find the right words, especially if you have numerous acknowledgments to write. If that is the case, it might be helpful to compose a few at a time over the course of several weeks. An immediate response is not necessary or expected. Be brief and, when possible, try to personalize your message, such as, "Mom always enjoyed playing cards with you when you came to visit," etc. or a general message like "During this difficult time your kind words and generosity are appreciated" can suffice. How you sign off would depend upon your relationship with the person, however simply signing your name is also acceptable.



...Community, from front

with whom you can share mixed feelings can be beneficial. The leader of your bereavement support group or a professional counselor will be able to entertain these feelings and may even understand the experience from their own history of losses. You may find a very close friend who can hear you talk about this experience, as well. Start by saying, "I think this [name the public tragedy] is making it harder for me to grieve [your loved one.] I'm not really sure what to do with all of these feelings." If your friend affirms that you are normal for experiencing the conflict and seems willing to listen non-judgmentally, proceed; otherwise, find a different person with whom to share.

Keep a journal. Write down the conflicted feelings you are experiencing with your own growing interpretation of what they mean. As you write, you may gain clarity about

your own losses and what factors in the public tragedy makes your loss even more difficult. You might start by writing your response to these journal starters...



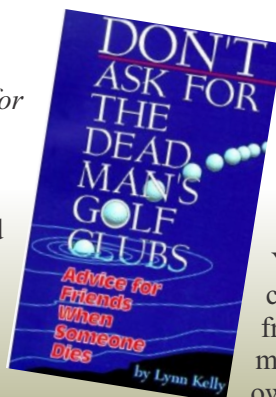
- When I first heard the news, I thought and felt...
- The thing I find most frightening about this is...
- I really feel sad about...
- When I can bring myself to think about others, I think...
- I get most frustrated with my response whenever...

Find a meaningful way to get involved in helping. Even if you do not find yourself feeling the intensity of emotion experienced by others, do something practical to help. Make a memorial contribution. Offer a silent prayer for the victims' families. If the need is not

great in the community where the public tragedy occurred, there are thousands of other worthy organizations who will welcome your generosity, perhaps to help people in your own community.

When tragedy strikes, people want not only to talk about it but to do something. Make sure to give yourself space and permission to reflect on how profoundly this tragedy has affected you in your own personal experience with loss.

Lynn Kelly's little book, *Don't Ask for the Dead Man's Golf Clubs* could have been written by virtually any person in grief. Reflecting on the helpful and not-so-helpful words and activities of friends in the aftermath of her husband's unexpected death when Kelly was only 34, you will find ideas here for supporting your own friends, even while still grieving yourself. Kelly interviewed dozens of other bereaved people and included their advice in this book which is divided into four



helpful sections: What to Do Now, What to Do Later, What Not to Do, and What to Do in Special Losses such as stillbirths and suicides.

You may find yourself laughing—or crying—at some of the silly things friends of the bereaved have done. You might also find words to offer to your own family members and friends in order to re-train them about what is and is not helpful to people in grief.

{bookmarks}

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