



Fifth Sunday of Lent April 2, 2017 A

“Jesus wept.”

Dealing with the Loss of a Loved One

In John 11, the Gospel for the Fifth Sunday of Lent (Cycle A), we find Jesus, Mary and Martha grieving the loss of Lazarus. Dealing with the loss of a loved one is one of the most challenging and painful experiences we may ever have.

This column is the result of facilitating grief groups and doing a lot of reading around the grief process. While it mainly deals with the loss of a spouse through death, I believe much of what is written here is applicable to other losses.

In this column, we will look at:

- ◆ Common feelings experienced after the loss of a spouse
- ◆ 14 challenges to be faced
- ◆ 12 things to remember about the grieving process
- ◆ 5 helps in the grieving process
- ◆ 5 signs that healing is occurring

Common feelings experienced when a spouse dies

When someone close to us dies, we may be very surprised or even scared by the thoughts, feelings and reactions we experience. Hence, it may be helpful to know what thoughts, feelings and reactions are *normal* and frequently experienced by people who have lost a loved one, especially a spouse.

During a time of loss, we can experience a wide range of emotions with varying degrees of intensity. In a time of important personal loss, it is as if a part of us has died. Many people who lose a spouse or best friend feel that they have lost their soulmate, the one with whom they felt emotionally safe. There is an unbelievable sense of emptiness: empty house, empty arms, empty heart. There may be feelings of anger at God for taking our loved one, anger at church, doctors, family, friends, boss and co-workers. We may even be angry at our loved one for abandoning us. We may be angry at ourselves for crying in public—we think we should be stronger. We may be jealous of others when we see that they possess what we

have lost. We may feel a loss of meaning. Why get up and go on? We may even hope for death and may have passing thoughts about ending our life.

We may feel disoriented, off-balance, confused, forgetful, unable to focus on anything. We may think we are going crazy because we thought we heard the voice of our deceased loved one or sensed that he/she was in the room with us. We may have a yearning to speak to the person even months after the death or to prepare his/her favorite food, etc. We may be unable to sleep and, hence, feel continuously exhausted, with little or no energy to do anything. Going to church, to the store and to social functions without “our other self” may be very difficult. We may feel very alone and like a “fifth wheel” at social gatherings. We may be hurt by well-intentioned but insensitive remarks that people make. We may experience a degree of moodiness and snap at people for no reason. If we live alone, we will most likely feel a terrible emptiness in our home. The silence may be awful and the evenings very lonely. We may experience long sleepless nights. The loneliness may be unbearable. We may feel sorry for ourselves and ask over and over, “Why me?” “Why did I lose out? Why did God take my loved one when so many terrible people are still alive?” None of the above thoughts or feelings are comfortable. In fact, all of them are quite painful but we need to remember that they are also a normal part of the grieving process for people who have experienced the death of a loved one, especially the death of a spouse.

Reflection question: Which of the above named feelings do you often experience?

Negotiating 14 challenges

As we struggle to face and deal with the death of a loved one, it may be helpful to name some of the challenges or tasks that grieving people have to face and negotiate.

1. Dealing daily with the roller coaster of feelings: sadness, loneliness, anger, guilt, jealousy, depression, tiredness, confusion, endless crying, emptiness

2. Tackling the stacks of paperwork, paying the bills, redoing the Will
3. Coping socially—hating it when one more person asks: “How are you?” but feeling angry if they don’t ask; going to church and social functions alone
4. Caring for our emotional and physical health
5. Celebrating anniversaries, birthdays, holidays and other special occasions
6. Disposing of our loved one’s clothes and belongings
7. Visiting the cemetery or Memorial Garden
8. Deciding whether or not to wear our wedding ring
9. Adjusting to financial changes. This is especially stressful when the death of a loved one means a serious loss of income.
10. Relating to others. The death of a loved one can seriously affect the way parents, siblings, children and friends relate to each other.
11. Learning to take charge of all the “stuff” our loved one used to handle
12. Living daily with what seems to be an unbearable, emotional pain; facing the grief without denying it or shelving it
13. Being open to meeting new friends and making a life for ourselves without our lost loved one
14. Re-negotiating our relationship with God.

Perhaps you can add other challenges and tasks to the above list which I would appreciate your sharing with us.

Reflection question: Which of the abovenamed challenges especially apply to you in your grief process?

12 important things to remember about the grieving process

1. Grief work, though very painful, is good and holy. Jesus tells us: “*Blessed are those who mourn, they shall be comforted*” (Matt 5:5). Grief is the way God intended for us to deal with loss. It is nature’s way of healing a broken heart. The world’s way is denial, telling us to “move on” even before we have started to grieve. Grief work (and it is work!) is the *only* thing that will heal our loss or at least help us to live with it. *Jesus wept* when he heard about Lazarus’ death. His tears and ours are holy and sacred and not something to be embarrassed about. In his book *Life after Loss*, Bob Deits says that grief “*is the last act of love*” that we give to a deceased loved one.

Deits encourages people to “*wear their grief with pride*” rather than deny it. Pain is, at least at first, the only thing that is left after our beloved is gone. We tend to want to hold on to it.

2. Each person’s grief process is *unique* and *different* for at least two reasons. *First*, we are each different from everyone else. We bring to our grieving a unique history. For example, we may or may not find it easy to *name* and *express* our feelings. We may or may not have grieved previous losses. We may have a history of facing or avoiding difficult issues. *Second*, each grieving process is unique and different because of the *nature of the relationship* we had with the person we have lost. Each relationship has its own texture and history, all of which will play out in the grief process. For example, a wife may be very angry that her husband kept her in the dark about their finances or never let her drive their car. Another survivor may have shared everything with his/her spouse and they may have gone everywhere together. Such a survivor will most likely miss his/her spouse everywhere. So, while grieving people have lots of similar experiences, each grieving experience is *unique* because of who we are and because of the *nature* of the *relationship* we had with the person we lost.

3. The vast majority of people know little or nothing about the grief process. That is why people say insensitive things like: “It’s been a month—it’s time to move on” or “You need to quit all this crying and get hold of yourself.” Non-grievers want you to be over with your grief much sooner than you are ready. When they ask you how you are doing, they usually want you to say, “Fine.” Most people are uncomfortable with grief.

4. There is no correct timetable to grief work. Each person must be allowed to grieve at his/her own pace. People who move through a loss rather quickly are not necessarily superior or less caring. Likewise, those who take more time are not necessarily inferior or more caring.

5. *Time alone* does not heal a loss. Time gives us distance from a loss, but not healing. Grief work is work. The normal grieving process takes time, effort, tears, prayer and the support of others. When we feel bad about feeling bad, we must remember that if we had a broken leg, we would not feel guilty about taking the time necessary to heal. Why should it be different with a broken heart? Our broken heart also deserves its healing period—even if it takes several years. Certain physical injuries take some time to heal.

6. Grief work is messy and uncomfortable. We may take two steps forward and three back. Our grief will rise up within us at the most unexpected and inopportune times and places.

7. Grief counselor Bob Deits writes: “*The way out of grief is through it*” and “*This is the most important thing we need to learn about the grief process.*” There are no “quick fixes,” no shortcuts. Because grief work is so demanding, we will constantly be attempting to deny it and seek quick ways around it. We must keep ourselves motivated to stay in the process.

8. We need other people. Very few, if any, of us can do effective grief work alone. We do ourselves a favor when we let others in on our grief. And we need to be able to tell others that what we need most from them is not advice but a *compassionate listening ear*.

9. We need to remember that forgiveness is usually a very important part of the grieving process. This may include—with the grace of God—forgiving God, church, family members, doctors, friends, neighbors, coworkers, ourselves, and even the deceased for dying. We may need to deal with and forgive unresolved past hurts and issues with the deceased loved one. (If forgiveness is an issue, consider getting a copy of my book *How to Forgive Yourself and Others*.)

10. Religious faith may help or hurt our grieving process. Some people’s religious faith tells them that weakness in the face of loss shows a lack of faith. Such a religious belief will be a big obstacle to grieving because it will consciously or unconsciously push us to deny and repress our pain. We may be constantly trying to show how strong and faith-filled we are. On the other hand, a religious faith that truly believes that God brings good things out of bad events may be very helpful. For many people of faith, a part of the grieving process is renegotiating their relationship with God. Like Jacob, we may have to do some wrestling with God (Gen 32:23-32).

11. As we interact with other grieving people, we may judge that our loss is much more severe than other people’s loss. We may find it hard to sympathize with folks whose loss is not nearly as bad as ours. If we find ourselves thinking this way, we need to remember that most people tend to believe that *their* loss is the worst there is. The important thing is that we honor our own and others’ experience of grief and loss. We can say to ourselves: “I am experiencing grief and I need to honor it so that I can heal.”

12. It often gets worse before it gets better. Many grieving persons are distressed that, three months into their grief, they are feeling more, rather than less, pain. The reason for this is that in the first months (especially in the case of a sudden death), we are in shock. Our body is numb and we cannot *feel our loss*. This is the body’s way of protecting us from feelings that we cannot cope with during the first months of our loss. As time moves on, we begin to thaw out and *experience* all the tough feelings connected with loss. Also during the first months, we may deliberately keep ourselves very busy with paperwork and other activities and rarely take time to be present to our pain.

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 or in a group—I find myself constantly reminding them of one or more of the above characteristics of the grief process.

Reflection question: Which of the abovenamed challenges especially apply to you in your grief process?

Five helps in the grieving process

Before offering any concrete suggestions that might be helpful during a grieving process, I need to *strongly 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, very difficult, and normally 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.

1. *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 cannot. 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

2. 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.

3. 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 steps we discover to be beneficial.

4. 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. It is good to be aware that early on in the grief process, many people are unable to focus on reading much. So we should read when we are ready and perhaps start with an article or a short book.

5. Pray.

Many people find it difficult to pray during a grief process. Some cannot focus or pray in the way that they were used to praying. Others find God distant. Still

others may be angry with God ("I'm a good person, I love God. I'm 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.

Many grieving people find that some of the Psalms are 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" (Heb 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.

Reflection questions: Have you used any of the above suggestions? If so, have you found them helpful? What else have you found helpful during the grieving process?

Five signs that healing and recovery are occurring

- 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 we experience is not as intense. Our feelings do not 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 did not do or could not do while our spouse was alive.
- 3.** We are coming to a realization 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 did not know we had or had neglected, e.g., managing our finances, spirituality, ability to reach out and help others, travel, etc. Our social life has expanded in new directions. We have made some wonderful, new friendships.

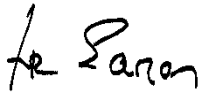
I conclude with these encouraging and consoling words from *To Heal Again* by Rusty Barkus.

*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.*

If you think this article may be helpful to others, please share with them.

Articles on other difficult feelings like anger, guilt, and fear can be found on www.ascensioncatholic.net (on homepage, click on Fr. Tobin's Writings and scroll down to Miscellaneous Articles).

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr Sarah". The "Fr" is written in a cursive style, and "Sarah" is written in a simple, slightly cursive script.