

Article for Thought – Emotional Jet Lag

By Russell Friedman & John W. James of The Grief Recovery Institute, USA

Working with grieving people for more than twenty years has given us a wealth of practical experience. Amongst the many observations we have made is the fact that grieving people often seem to be slower to respond to even the simplest of questions, and to be baffled by tasks that are normally routine. Imagine that your brain has been filled up with three quarts of molasses. That is pretty much the effect that a major loss event can have on your capacity to think, feel and participate in life. We offer this truth for the dual purpose of helping griever and for helping those around griever. If you have experienced a major significant emotional loss of any kind, there is a high probability that your ability to concentrate on day to day activities may be severely limited. You may have an idea, walk to the next room to act on it, and when you get there, realise that you have not got the faintest idea what it was you had intended to do. If you hear nothing else, please hear that this is a normally occurring phenomenon. Recognize that your entire being – emotional, physical, and spiritual - is focused on the loss that just occurred. When possible it is a good idea to avoid driving and working with any tools that require concentration and mental co-ordination. An incredibly high percentage of serious and fatal auto accidents befall grieving people.

It is essential that you recognize this naturally occurring inability to concentrate. It is equally important that you not judge yourself harshly for being dazed, confused, and preoccupied. But most important, you must be gentle with yourself. There is absolutely nothing to be gained by hammering yourself for being normal and human.

For those of you who are near and dear to friends who have recently experienced a painful loss of any kind, re-read all of the above. You must recognize that the inability to concentrate is the single most common of all responses to loss. Do not berate. Do not scold. Do not have an opinion or judgement. Remember your friend is on another planet - the planet grief. Their entire being is trying to make sense out of an incredibly painful experience.

By definition, “grief is the normal and natural emotional response to loss of any kind.” Most of us have been falsely socialized to shift the emotional reaction into the intellect. But, the head is not broken – the heart is broken. You must resist the temptation to make intellectual comments to your grieving friend. For example, while it is intellectually accurate that “life goes on,” many griever have a hard time participating in life at all, so life “goes on” without them.

If someone staggered towards you with an arrow sticking out of his or her chest, and blood dripping from the wound, you would probably recognize that the person might be in massive physical pain. It is unlikely that you would say, “Don’t feel bad, at least it wasn’t a poison arrow,” and just keep walking past them. More likely, you would say “My gosh, you must be in terrible pain, let me call an ambulance.”



Yet when someone's heart has been broken by a major loss, most people say "Don't Feel bad, you should feel grateful you had them so long." While it may be intellectually accurate that you have a great deal of gratitude in that relationship, that is usually not the foremost emotional response to the death of a loved one. Perhaps it would be helpful to imagine that there is an emotional arrow sticking out of their chest. It will remind you to respond more helpfully.

Even though death can be separated into two categories, sudden death or long term illness, ultimately all death is sudden. Don't make the mistake of thinking that if someone has tended to a dying loved one for a long time, that they would automatically have less pain than someone who has lost someone to a sudden death. In fact, it is a good idea to make no assumptions at all. The finality of death, along with end of any hopes of a miracle remission or cure, brings a tremendous amount of emotional pain. For many people, drowning in a sea of painful emotions, numbness seems like a constant companion. It may take hours or even days to sort out the feelings and thoughts that have been unearthed by the death of a loved one. The death of a "less than loved one" may produce even more confusing emotions.

We have been talking mainly about reactions to death. The emotional response to divorce, while different, is parallel. Divorce is the "death of a relationship." Quite often, one divorcing partner feels as if there has been a sudden death and one feels like they have been caught in a long-term illness. In either situation, there is liable to be the same inability to concentrate that affects those responding to death. It is also quite probable that those reeling from the affects of a divorce will have some difficulty identifying the feelings they are experiencing. As we pointed out earlier, this reduced ability to concentrate is normal. Don't fight it. Be gentle with yourself.

Friends, be alert to the emotional arrow that you can't see. Your friend has a broken heart. You need to be gentle also.

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