

Grief Intelligence: A Primer

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For the past 25 years, I have worked with thousands of grieverers. I have sat with widows and widowers, the young and the old. I have offered tissues to bereaved parents in their inconsolable grief. I have normalized, educated, listened to and championed those grieverers who, through tremendous pain, still engaged with life.

In the decades since my book *Transcending Loss* was published, the grieving process has not changed. As I interact with grieverers from around the world, I am reminded of the universality of grief. And though each person has their own journey, still they share many common experiences.

Yet, still, I see and hear so much misinformation and confusion around grief. Principally, this comes from the widely-held myths that grief should be easy, that grief should be short, that grief has closure, that people should get on with their lives unchanged and that ongoing connection with the deceased is somehow pathological.

So, in trying to set the record straight, I'm offering seven principles in this primer on grief intelligence.

Most people don't learn these lessons until life thrusts them onto the roller coaster of major loss. However, if we can get the word out, then perhaps a new generation of individuals will feel more supported and understood when it is their time to grieve.

1. Grief is a normal reaction -- Grief is the natural emotional and physical response to the death of a loved one. Although our society desperately wants to avoid the messiness of deep sorrow, there is no way out except through the pain. Typical numbing techniques such as medications, alcohol and food are only temporary distractions to dull the pain.

Letting oneself grieve by going directly into the pain -- in manageable doses over a long period of time -- is healing. Avoiding the pain simply forces it to go deep into the heart where it subtly affects emotional and physical health.

2. Grief is hard work -- Grief isn't easy and it isn't pretty. It involves tears, sleepless nights, pain, sorrow and a heartache that knocks you to your knees. It can be hard to concentrate, hard to think clearly, hard to read and easy to forget all the details of life that everyone else seems to remember. Grieverers frequently feel that they're going crazy and they sometimes wish to die. This doesn't mean that they're actively suicidal, it just means that they're grieving.

3. Grief doesn't offer closure -- Closure is an idea that we like because we want to tie up our emotional messes with a bow and put them in the back of a closet. But grief refuses to play this game. Grief tends towards healing not closure. The funeral can be healing, visiting a gravesite can be healing, performing rituals, writing in journals and making pilgrimages can be personally meaningful and healing. But they will not bring closure. Closure is relevant to business deals but not to the human heart.

4. Grief is lifelong -- Although we all want quick fixes and short-term solutions, grief won't accommodate us. Many people want grief to be over in a few weeks or a few months and

certainly within a year. And yet, many grieverers know that the second year is actually harder than the first. Why? Because the shock has worn off and the reality of the pain has truly sunk in.

I let grieverers know that the impact of grief is lifelong just as the influence of love is also lifelong. No matter how many years go by, there will be occasional days when grief bursts through with a certain rawness. There will be days, even decades later, when sadness crosses over like a storm cloud. And likely, every day going forward will involve some memory, some connection to missing the beloved.

5. Grieverers need to stay connected to the deceased -- While some might find it odd or uncomfortable to keep talking about a loved one after they have passed, or find it disconcerting to see photographs of those who have died, it is healthy to keep the connection alive. My heart goes out to a generation or more of grieverers who were told to cut their ties to their deceased loved ones, to move on, almost as if they had never existed. Such unwitting cruelty! It is important to honor the birthdays and departure days of deceased loved ones. Their physical presence may be gone, but they remain in relationship to the griever in a new way beyond form, a way based in spirit and love.

6. Grieverers are changed forever -- Those who expect grieverers to eventually get back to their old selves, will be quite disappointed. Grief, like all major life experiences, changes a person irrevocably. People don't remain unchanged after getting an education, getting married, having a baby, getting divorced or changing careers. Grief, too, adds to the compost mixture of life, creating rich and fertile soil. It teaches about living and dying, about pain and love and about impermanence. While some people are changed by grief in a way that makes them bitter and shut down, it is also possible to use grief as a springboard for compassion, wisdom, and open-heartedness.

7. Grieverers can choose transcendence -- Transcendence has to do with gaining perspective, seeing in a new way and holding pain in a larger context. Seeing one's grief from a larger perspective allows it to be bearable and gives it meaning. For one, transcendence might mean reaching out to those who suffer. For another, it might mean giving to a cause that will benefit others. Grieverers who choose transcendence recognize that they are not alone, that they share a common human condition, and that they are amongst so many who have experienced love and loss. They use their pain in a way that touches others. The pain is still there, of course, but it is transformed.

So I invite you to reflect on these grief principles, how they might be true for you and how they might be true for someone you know and love. Share and share again so that we might spread grief intelligence far and wide. Perhaps we can effect a change so widespread that grieverers will know what to expect. Hopefully, we all can be comforted, in small ways, by that knowledge.