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Chapters

turning the pages through grief



How Normalization and Validation Help in Grief

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What's Your Grief
whatsyourgrief.com

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Do complicated hardships require equally big and complex ways to cope?

Not always, especially not with something like grief. Grief is not a problem to be solved but an experience that becomes an ongoing part of one's life. Dealing with grief as it ebbs and flows over time requires ongoing coping that takes many shapes and forms. Some of the approaches you choose may seem significant, while others will feel like subtle shifts in understanding and responding.

Personally, I've found that many of the most helpful resources and supports seem small in the grand scheme of things. Simple acts of coping, baby steps, moments of comfort and support -- though these things may seem tiny compared to the darkness the grieving person faces, the reality is that sometimes even the smallest light can help your eyes adjust and see.

Case in point, it seems almost too simple when we tell people that, for many, the most helpful thing at the outset of grief is having their experiences normalized and their feelings validated. But over the years, time and

again, we've found that experiencing this kind of acceptance for one's grief can go a long way when adjusting to life after loss.

What are Normalization and Validation?

Normalization:

Because the experiences a person goes through after loss can be highly distressing and extremely out of the ordinary for their lives, it's common for a person to worry they're abnormal, permanently broken, or doing grief wrong. Before experiencing grief, a person may have a picture of what they think grief looks like, and any deviations from their expectations may feel like a sign that something is wrong.

For this reason, one of the most important first steps in understanding one's grief is expanding one's definition of "normal."

Validation:

Too often, in grief, we see people disenfranchising their own grief experiences or the experiences of others. Judgments about what one should or should not think,

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An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior.

—Viktor Frankl



...continued from front

feel, and do are common. As are ideas about who is and is not entitled to grief. Validation in grief simply means recognizing and acknowledging a person's thoughts and feelings, that they have a right to those thoughts and feelings, and that these things matter.

How do Normalization and Validation Help in Grief?

Our Expectations About Grief are Often Wrong: Though the narrative is gradually changing in our society, the most common piece of pop psychology people know about grief is the Five Stages of Grief. Unfortunately, these stages are also not an accurate depiction of grief, which means the one thing most people think they know about grief is a myth.

It is common to enter grief with a set of assumptions about what it will be like. However, as you may have already realized, grief rarely aligns with these expectations.

When grief diverges from our expectations most people will oscillate between sometimes accepting their experiences and sometimes worrying they're abnormal or wrong.

Flexibility, adaptability, and ongoing acceptance of our grief responses can be beneficial albeit challenging. It helps to understand there are far more versions of "normal" grief than we could have ever imagined and to know our emotions are valid, regardless of what they are. They are neither good nor bad, right or wrong.

It Helps to Know We're Not Alone

When someone feels their experiences are abnormal, wrong, shameful, or invalid, they may also end up feeling different, alone, or disenfranchised. Of course we believe all pain deserves compassion and support. However, we know that when people feel these ways, they may resist, avoid, or hide their experiences, ultimately preventing them from receiving needed support or interpersonal connections.

We've found that it helps people to know they are not the only ones to experience a particular grief-related thought or emotion. Take the experience of relief in grief, for example. Relief is a typical grief response, but many people feel their relief is shameful and wrong. They may think it's a sign they're relieved someone died when, in reality, it probably only means they are relieved that pain and suffering of some sort is over. But because the person feels guilty, they keep it secret, potentially never opening themselves up to (1) learning that others are having the same experience or (2) coming to understand what their relief actually represents in their grief.

All humans experience suffering in some shape or form, so no one is alone in their pain. You may not be able to relate exactly to someone else's pain or grief, but you can understand how devastating these things can be because you have been there. And so, in a way, pain connects us. We are not alone.

The Lessons of Grief

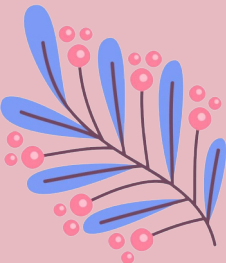
"As someone that lost my boyfriend tragically due to a car crash, death rips apart everything you knew and you have to find a way to fill the hole. Over time, you sew it shut but it's never the same straight line with many jagged pieces. You find a new normal. You take one second at a time until you can take 1 minute, then 5 minutes, etc. Sometimes you have to start over many times.

—Irene A.

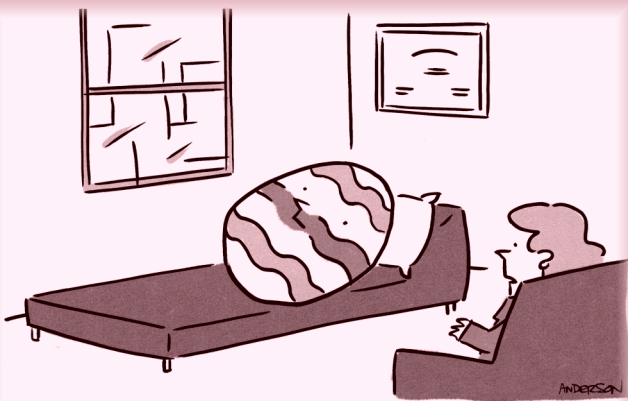
BREAK TIME

Sometimes the best advice is a break from advice. Take 5 and enjoy these tidbits of this & that.

- It is speculated that the custom of April Fools began in France during the 16th century, after the new year calendar was moved from April 1st to January 1st. Those who continued to celebrate the April new year were considered fools, and often the victims of practical jokes.
- The first Webster Dictionary was copyrighted by Noah Webster on April 14, 1828.
- Spring was formerly referred to as lent, which was changed to springtime around the 1300s, and eventually was shortened to spring. Spring is derived from the time of year when plants begin to grow again or spring from the earth.



- April babies are known for their strong and creative personality, a characteristic many individuals and industries value.



"I want to focus on decorating the egg within."

