



Beverly Carter

Managing Grief

@iStockphoto.com/tolgart

Good Grief: Part 1 Be Kind to Yourself

Grief is an inevitable, inescapable part of life.

Over the past 25 years, I have experienced the deaths of five members of my immediate family; three resulted from a sudden tragic event or accident and two were more or less predictable. Each experience of death has brought a deeper, meaningful awareness and understanding of just how important communicating is in our healing.

As a start, I found one of the hardest things was communicating with myself. A normally capable and energetic woman, I was brought to a standstill in a way that no previous life experience or education ever prepared me.

And somewhere, maybe osmosis from my culture, crying (or PDG “Public Display of Grief”) seemed a personal weakness.

One day, with my two-and-a-half-year-old in tow, I broke down sobbing in the public library and shared my story with the librarian who just happened to be close. The librarian modelled compassion by listening

and giving time and words of comfort to help me get through my day. Unbeknownst to me at the time, my learning from her was twofold:

- to communicate permission to yourself to accept your expressions of grief; and
- not to be afraid to communicate with someone in their grief.

By personally accepting that I was allowed to grieve, letting myself learn and help other people deal with this roller coaster of a ride with unexpected twists or turns (of grief), paved the way to healthier grieving.

There is no one-size-fits-all, but our inner dialogue matters.

You are not perfect and never will be. Just do your best in the moment.

Here are 10 points I learned about grieving.

Acknowledge Yourself

1. What I am dealing with really sucks.

There is often no preparation for grief except life experience. I always say no experience is bad, but some are hard. In a recent discussion with a war vet who experienced severe

PTSD, we found a shared experience where we have turned our past challenges into positive ones. Every time an ambulance passes me, I always take pause to send positive thoughts to the person inside and to the person’s family.

2. PDG is not weakness. It is my current reality. It is stress-relief.

Get comfortable with it as not every hour of every day is great. From one who knows, eventually there will be more better days than bad. Sometimes you may start out crying and end up having a laugh.

3. My new normal does not allow me to do my old normal.

Grief is exhausting. Period. Brain fog can be normal for months. More sleep and a good work/life balance are important. In some cases, we will have energy to start to resume our regular activities soon after our loved one has died but be prepared for that to change . . . sometimes months down the road.

I have a friend who grieved her husband after he battled multiple bouts with cancer. She went back to work after the first week he died because that is what she needed then. She needed something in her

life to seem normal and routine and just give her a reason to wake up in the mornings. At month 6, she was exhausted. At that point, she embraced her grief and took a leave of absence from work for 3 months.

4. I will practise forgiveness of myself.

You are not perfect and never will be. Just do your best in the moment. Forgive thyself for not being the superstar or not completing things normally. Maybe you are short with other people and say things in a way you did not mean. Maybe there is just not much engagement in day-to-day activities. Perhaps you feel as if you are floating along and, while physically present, mentally you are checked out.

5. I will practise forgiveness of others.

Most people come from a heart-centred place, even when they put their foot in their mouths. Fear can take hold of our natural support circle and cause people to act in ways that may seem foreign to you.

Death is not a comfortable topic for many people and they may not have a lot of framework around how to act or what to say. In my own experience, I found the more traumatic the event, the more challenged my friends and family were. In some cases, I never saw people again. It was probably that aspect of how that one event changed the relationships with my people that compounded my grief experience. Oddly, I could handle the death (with time and healing), but how people changed hurt a lot. At the same time, some people outside my inner circle really stepped up to the point where I saw them in a new light.

6. I will practise gratitude.

Mentally tell yourself every day three aspects of your life for which you are grateful. While not everything about life will seem rosy during grief, turning your mind to something positive can help your mood and energy.

7. I will have at least one activity to define my day that gives me space and time to heal.

Take a walk. Take a bath. Look at some photos. Smile. Look at the sky, nature, or birds.

8. I will accept help from my circle of people.

Keep a list of "to do's" and if someone asks to help, say to yourself, "I give myself permission to share this task."

9. I will keep doing something I normally love.

After Dad died, I did not feel like getting off the couch to do my favourite weekly activity of sailing. I was exhausted yet surprised that grief had crept into my being.

It was no easy task, but I recall a conversation on the boat when the crew was talking about another sailor who left the sport because of a divorce. Several years later, he simply said, "I wish I'd kept sailing." The real meaning was he let grief get in the way of living. In my experience, it took about 6 months before the joy returned, but I always felt physically and mentally better after my day of sailing.

10. I will seek help from a counselor or therapist.

As well-meaning as our friends and family are, sometimes we just need a boost. We can get stuck. It is truly okay to accept a helping hand from a professional source.

Grief is a predictably unpredictable human experience. An individual's grieving process is as unique as each person. It speaks to our depth and complexities, our relationships, and the love and the bonds we hold with the person who died. Grief is good because it allows us to be enriched through our healing. I recommend that you accept your grief in the same way you accept that the sun and moon rise and fall each day.

Communicating with my clients, or with anyone in grief, is not a complex act.

Good Grief: Part 2 Be Kind to Others

As a Notary Public with an active practice in Wills and Estates, I see clients who have recently lost their partners or are dealing with the death of a family member or friend.

Death is not the only reason for grief. It can be triggered by other life events such as the breakdown, loss, or change in a marriage or a family relationship, the loss of a job, or the passing of a pet.

When a person walks through my office door, I can usually tell by the individual's demeanour or the documents we are doing that the client has had a loss, the trigger for a loss, or the person is experiencing some degree of grief. I take a moment to communicate with the person to recognize the loss.

Communicating with my clients, or with anyone in grief, is not a complex act. A stranger can communicate effectively with a person in grief without knowing the individual or the circumstance.

The model put forth by the librarian was one of kindness and sincerity. She wasn't afraid to face what many would find an uncomfortable situation; instead, she took the time to recognize and engage with a person in a world of hurt.

When dealing with a grieving person, I find that sincerity and simplicity of thought are the actions that matter most. I always stress that people should be kind to themselves and never apologize for the inescapable grief that we humans can experience.

Death is not a comfortable topic for many people...

HELP BC MEDICAL HEROES WITH A GIFT IN A WILL.



**Make a
tax-deductible gift
to TB Vets today!**

tbvets.org/legacy-giving

TB Vets Charitable Foundation
Arming Frontline Medical Heroes
with Life-Saving Respiratory Equipment
Registered Charity #87416 1482 RR0001

If there is one single message to give, it is simply to be kind...

Here are some general guidelines for communicating that apply to almost any situation whether or not you know the person.

- **If you don't know what to say, say just that.**

"I am at a loss for words. I really don't know how to express myself or what to say. I am so sorry for the death of... "

- **Just reach out.**

Don't let your own fears—of not knowing what to say or intruding or seeing someone in heartbreak—hold you back. Whatever you do, your sincerity and caring is what matters. It will shine through.

- **Just listen.**

Listening is the most important part of the communicating process. Don't be afraid to listen to someone in tears or anger. You may find you share some laughter together along the path. Throughout the conversation, confirm what you have heard, such as, "You must have been so shocked."

- **Be patient.**

Grief is a process of holistic healing. Often a grieving person needs to adapt to a whole new day-to-day personal culture and routine.

- **Don't try to fix it. You cannot.**

The grieving person knows it cannot get fixed.

- **Asking "How are you doing?" can be a burden for a grieving person to answer.**

Questions are good but unless you truly want to know and you are a safe person for the grieving person to answer honestly, steer clear of that question.

- **If someone is having a bad day, do not take it personally.**

Do not judge. Accept and respect the person's expression of grief in the moment. His or her moods, feelings, and energy levels will fluctuate and change—you will not see them all.

- **Practise a random act of kindness and help with a task or chore.**

If you offer to help, follow through. Don't wait to be asked. The grieving person's response to a generic, open-ended question such as, "let me know what I can do" may be a challenge. Instead, tell the person you are available on Thursday, from 1 to 3 PM, and that you want to help with an errand, chore, or task. Gauge the response to your timing and his or her interest level.

- **Manage your own expectations about communicating.**

When leaving a phone message, let the person know you don't need a response. You are just thinking of him or her and you will call again. And then call again.

In my Notary practice, I certify copies of death certificates as a courtesy. When arriving in my office, most people do not expect that gesture. I tell them I have been through some challenging deaths and it is my small way of giving back; their shock turns quickly to relief and gratitude.

Not only are grieving families propelled into a whirlwind of practical activity plus a lot of calls and communications for about a month, they find there are a lot of unexpected expenses. And they are exhausted.

With the complementary service and taking the time to be aware, ask, and listen, being personally engaged and interested in my client is truly the simplest of communicating. Through sincerity and kindness by such small gestures, I am afforded the privilege of trust and heartfelt two-way communicating with my client.

If there is one single message to give, it is simply to be kind to others. ▲

BC Notary Beverly Carter
practises in Victoria.