

*Caring for families*  
**Along The Way**

*Helping you understand your  
journey through grief.*

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# Grief Invites Us to Remember

by Dr. Bill Webster

In a story from ancient Greek mythology, Aurora, who was the goddess of the dawn, loses her son in a battle. When she hears the news, she rushes to the king of the gods, Zeus, and says: "Zeus, even though I am not one of your most powerful goddesses, and even though the loss of my son may seem like a minor thing to you, nevertheless my heart is broken. Please grant me two favours: that my son's death be honoured; and that it never be forgotten."

Zeus grants her wishes. On the day of her son's funeral, there is a mighty storm, and everyone stops to acknowledge the death of her son. The next day, when dawn ushers in another day, everyone notices the world was covered with dew. But those dewdrops were actually Aurora's tears for her dead son. From that day on, Aurora would shed tears, and as she remembered and grieved, the whole world would be reminded of her loss.

But here is the most wonderful thing about the story. Even though she shed teardrops every night, dawn still arose every morning and Aurora did her job of ushering in the new day. Her grief did not put her in a helpless position. Instead her tears were a daily expression of her sorrow. When people throughout the world saw the dewdrops, they saw their own sorrows. But then they proceeded to get on with the day that Aurora had ushered in and got on with their lives.

This story reminds us of the importance of our grief and the significance of honouring our loved ones with our tears. It also reminds us of the necessity of honouring our loved ones even more by going on with life.

But it also illustrates a very important principle, namely that "grief invites us to remember, not to forget."



# Memories are vitally important, yet often a neglected area of grief.

Memories are vitally important, yet often a neglected area of grief. In this culture we are frequently encouraged to try not to think or talk about death and dying, but grief invites us to remember. Hey, don't take my word for it. If you are a grieving person, ask yourself this question: "Since my loved one died, am I thinking more about the person, or am I thinking less about them?" I think almost unanimously grieving people say that they are thinking about their loved one all the time. It's like we can't get them out of our mind.

That is grief inviting us to remember. Sadly we live in a culture that seems to encourage us to forget. The attitude seems to be that if we pretend that everything is normal, somehow we won't have to face the harsh realities that are part of a life-threatening situation or a death. People somehow decide not to talk about it, and act as if nothing has happened. Many grieving people experience what can be described as a "conspiracy of silence."

Surely this is the ultimate denial. For something has happened. Circumstances have meant that life has changed, and indeed will never be the same again. How can we come to terms with, and accept the changes that have occurred, ones which we may not like or did not want, but which are reality, nonetheless?

Memories can help us come to terms with a situation in several ways:

1. Retelling the story can help to make it believable. Often when we hear bad news or some crisis happens, our initial reaction is to say, "I don't believe it." Such is the shocking impact that our mind seems unable to absorb it. Every time we hear the story again or remember it in some way, it becomes more real, more believable.
2. Memories help us put things into perspective. When we are in a difficult situation, we are inclined to think only of that situation. It is constantly on our minds. Often all we can see is our current situation and the misery associated with it. Memories help us see another picture, often a much happier one.

Let me illustrate this important point this way. In the days after my wife died, all I could think about was her death and the circumstances surrounding it. Whenever someone mentioned my wife's name or the situation, all I could remember was her death and that was devastatingly difficult. These, believe me, were not the happiest or the best memories. That picture cannot be erased; however it can become part of a larger photograph album.

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In other words, it is important to remember that the death is not the only picture. There are other snapshots; better images of good times and better days. Although the memories of the death may be difficult, there are also recollections of the life that are so much more beautiful. We come to understand that reliving our memories of the life can help us see that there is much for which to be thankful. There is always more than one way to look at any situation.

We have to put the death in the context of the life. That is what is going to help soften the difficult memories of the death. Helping someone remember the better days does not deny the present reality; it merely serves to put it in a more meaningful and gentler context. Life is difficult right now, but it has not been all bad. Remember when this happened? Do you recall that happy moment, or that humorous incident? These better memories help to put life into perspective, good and bad, happy and sad, enabling the person to come to a better place of reconciling the fact that "that's life." Life should not be defined by this one tragic event.

We must let the light of the years shine on the event, rather than letting the event cast its shadow on the years.





# Sorry, This May Hurt!

by Dr. Bill Webster

**Life is difficult, and sometimes it doesn't seem fair.**

In my work, I have the privilege of meeting people at the most challenging time in their lives. Frances lost her husband Paul after 49 years of marriage, and attended my support group; around the same time, Rob took his own life after a long struggle with prescription drugs and depression, and his parents came to the group seeking help through this devastating loss; Sandy and Glen came for support after their six-year-old daughter died from a rare form of cancer.

While all these situations are unique and present their own challenges, we must remember one thing. Every loss is difficult. There is no such thing as more or less difficult, they are just different. No matter the details, to the person going through the experience it feels like the worst thing that could have happened.

These folks (names changed) came together from diverse circumstances with at least two things in common. First, they had all suffered a life-changing loss; and secondly, they didn't like it.

But there was one other thing they shared. Sadly, some things said to them shortly after the loss had struck them as less than sympathetic. Oh, people meant well, of course, and were really trying to be supportive. But sometimes even well-intended sentiments can be more hurtful than helpful. Pronouncements such as, "You have to pull yourself together; life must go on; you have to be strong; your loved one wouldn't want you to cry or be emotional," are often less than encouraging.

While people desperately want to do something to "make it better," what they really hope is that the grieving person will "get back to normal" or "get over it," and other similar well-intentioned yet misguided sentiments.

These are examples of what I call "fix it" statements, but they do not help because unfortunately that is not how it works. The problem is that while there is much that we can do to help, we can't fix the situation. Grieving people soon discover, albeit frustratingly, that although many people try their best to be supportive, they can't do the one thing that is really wanted.

So, what is the one thing that every grieving person wants?

They want their loved one back. They want their world, as imperfect as it may have been, to be returned to normal. But soon discover there are no wizards to magically wave a wand or sprinkle fairy dust that enables them to get everything back to where it was. And most often that is the most frustrating and infuriating aspect of the whole experience. That hurts.

Have you noticed how often these days following a tragic loss the focus is immediately on hope and healing? Everyone wants to jump right to the solutions without really addressing the problems. I have listened after a tragedy such as a shooting or loss of life, and within a short time, we hear the words, "The healing has begun."

I do understand that it is the fondest wish of everyone that people find hope and healing. But here is the difficulty. How can the healing begin when the hurting hasn't even begun? As much as we would like to jump straight to healing, it is important to point out that it hurts to lose someone you care about.

# So, here is the formula for grief, as difficult to accept as it may be: “First you hurt, and then you heal.”

Grief is a painful protest against something that we don't like, and worst of all, that we are unable to change. Yes, there is hope and there will be healing. You will find ways to go on with life and living. But it is important to say, “First you hurt, then you heal.”

Grief hurts, and you can't avoid the pain of losing someone you care about. Sadly, those who say in so many words “let the healing begin,” are really in effect saying “let's move on.” But how can people begin to heal when they have only just begun to hurt?

So, here is the formula for grief, as difficult to accept as it may be: “First you hurt, and then you heal.”

This “no pain, no gain” principle applies in surgery, fitness and in many diverse areas of life. From my experience, both personal and professional, it also applies to grief. I wish I could find some way to make it “pain-free” but sadly I have not found such a formula. Sadly there are no easy answers or cookie-cutter solutions. Trust me, I wish I had a magic wand that would make the hurt all better and enable us to go straight to hope and healing, but sadly it doesn't work like that.

But don't despair! All is not lost! If you are willing to go through the hurt, you will discover that is the way to healing. You have embarked on a grief journey. With the death of someone you have loved and cared about, you may feel like your whole world has been turned upside down. Trust me; I know from personal experience that losing someone you care about is not easy to endure. The days and months after my wife's death were the most difficult, painful and challenging times of my entire life.

*While your situation may be very different from what I underwent, I have walked where you walk, and I found it was a painful journey.*

*But that said, I can also now state that I did make it through the situation ... admittedly not without stumbles and hurts ... yes and maybe even a few scars.*

While your situation may be very different from what I underwent, I have walked where you walk, and I found it was a painful journey. But that said, I can also now state that I did make it through the situation ... admittedly not without stumbles and hurts ... yes and maybe even a few scars. But that's OK. Scars simply mean you were stronger than whatever tried to hurt you. What matters is that I survived, and made it through the hurt to find healing.

While no one has a magical formula to fix the situation, I sincerely believe there is a way through the maze and my hope is that you will find that road map to guide you on your journey.

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