

Finding Balance in Grief

By Kenneth Doka

I am worried about my mother. Ever since Dad died, she hardly ever seems to go out anymore. She sits in the apartment all the time. Whenever I suggest a shopping trip, she claims she is not in the “mood”. Shouldn’t she go out more?

My sister-in-law’s behavior concerns me. Ever since my brother died, she is never home. She constantly is on the run—going from one place to another. The house is in disarray, as she never has time to clean it. She says she cannot be alone with her memories. Is she simply running away from grief?

Two comments—both from concerned relatives—illustrate many of the problems that we may experience when we grieve.

Both comments highlight the dilemma that we often face in grief. We receive so much advice, often contradictory, from those around us. Clean out the closets—No, leave them. Express your feelings, but be strong. Sometimes we just never know what we are supposed to do or how we are expected to feel. We may feel that no matter what we do in our grief, someone will be displeased or give us a disapproving glance.

These comments also point to a real problem we may experience as we grieve, finding a sense of balance. Grief is an individual occurrence as we all are unique and our losses are different. This is no “one size fits all” solution. Yet, as we face questions about how we deal with grief, it is useful to consider the question of balance.

We all need time alone even as we should spend time with others. We need to spend time with our grief even as we require respite. Each of our equations—how much time alone and how much time with others—is individual.

Begin by looking at past patterns. Were we loners or people who always wanted to be with others? Before our loss, did we spend a lot of time being inactive or were we always on the move? Generally, there is less reason for concern when our present patterns are aligned with our past.

How have we dealt with loss before? Did we go into a cocoon—emerging into activity later? Were we always in motion as we faced losses past? And did these patterns work for us? Would we wish we handled it differently as we look back? Again, patterns that worked in the past remain guides for the present.

How do we spend time—either alone or with others? Do we stay at home sulking, depressed and miserable? Or is the time mixed—sometimes mourning our loss, others in doing the work that needs to be done? When we are together with others, are we focused only on our own pain, or clearly avoiding grief or memories, or mixing moments of grief with times of sharing and periods of respite? Even in our activity alone or with others, there is value in balance.

There are no easy answers to the questions posed above. That should not surprise us. There are no easy formulas—just questions that guide our journey.

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