

7 Surprising Reactions to Grief and How to Handle Them

Over the years, I've walked with dozens of people through the stages of grief. Grieving is mostly associated with loss—it could be the loss of a job, a relationship or even a life.

Whenever we lose something we value, we grieve. It's natural, healthy and expected.

I have learned no two people grieve exactly the same way. For example, I'm often a delayed griever. I may not even cry at the immediate loss of a loved one, but in the days to come—as I process the loss—tears may flow at seemingly random times.

There are no rules of how to grieve. The only encouragement I give is to grieve with an end in mind. Grief should ultimately lead us to a deeper trust in God as we seek Him for comfort in our grief. But the way you grieve will be different than the way I grieve.

I've also discovered there are reactions to grief which often surprise people about themselves. I've spoken with parents who see their children experience significant grief for the first time—and they are surprised by their actions. We really don't know how we will respond to grief until we are placed in the position of deep sorrow. This is especially true the younger people are and the less experience they have with grief.

And there are certain reactions to grief that we simply don't expect. Everyone expects sadness, for example. But some other emotions may catch us by surprise. That's what this post is about.

Here are seven parts of grief we don't always expect:

1. Regret. You wish you to spent more time with the people you

lost. Or done things differently when the business fails. You think of things you should've said you didn't say.

At some point, you must reconcile the regrets with truth. Time has past. There is nothing you can do to go back in time. *Back to the Future* was a movie, not reality, which is why Cher sang "If I Could Turn Back Time." One of my lifetime and favorite verses is Ecclesiastes 11:3, "And if a tree falls to the north or south, in the place that the tree falls, there it will be." The past is the past. How are you going to be in the future? There's a valid question to work toward in grief.

2. Anger. At God. At other people—even irrational anger. Even at the person you lost.

I've known people who hold on to anger for years. It makes them miserable and everyone around them miserable. They held to a part of grief—a very natural part—but never reconciled their pain to God. In time, the goal should be to leave all hurt at the foot of the cross, allowing God to soften even the angriest heart.

3. Confusion. You can be the most together person ever and you may still struggle to understand life when wrestling through grief.

During the immediate days of grief, a person should be slow to make decisions that have long-term consequences. Allow people you trust—maybe even a counselor—to help you make sense of life for a while. In time, and with God's help, life will become clearer again.

4. Frustration. It seems as though some people simply don't understand. They don't say the right thing. They don't come through as they're supposed to. You can become frustrated at close family members, extended relatives, friends, even the church.

The truth, as I've discovered, is sometimes people don't know

how to respond. Plus, in time of grief we might have unrealistic expectations of others. We can forget others have their own issues they are working through in life. Life keeps moving, although for you it might seem the earth has stopped turning.

5. Comparison. When you are suffering it may seem no one has ever suffered as much as you are and they don't understand the level of your pain. This is natural also in the early days of grief, but if left there, we can respond to others unfairly, ignoring pain in their own life. It isn't usually true we suffer alone—everyone has pain in their life, but grief is full of lots of unexpected emotions.

Actually, there can be a healthy side of comparison if we use it with the right intent. One thing I like to do as a pastor is connect those in grief with someone who has experienced a similar loss, but is further along in the process. Grief support groups can be helpful for this. In time it may be comforting to know there are those who do understand. I think this is part of what Galatians 6:2 means when it commands, "Share each other's burdens."

6. Doubt. The most faithful person can develop deep questions of personal faith. They may wonder where God is and why He allowed what He did. God is always trustworthy and always good, but our emotions can cause us to believe otherwise in times of grief.

This one may require the assistance of others, but certainly involves saturating our hearts and minds with truth. I find the Psalms especially helpful in these moments. I love the truth of Psalm 56:8—"You take account of my wandering; put my tears in Your bottle; are they not in Your book?" God truly does care.

7. Disillusion. I've witnessed people in grief transfer some of their emotions into other aspects of their life. They may

develop distrust of people they previously trusted. The point here is, we transfer emotions—and because emotions can be unpredictable, we don't always transfer them well.

Here is another area in which it is helpful to have someone who can walk through these days of grief with us. A trusted friend is so important—someone who knows us well enough to encourage us—even challenge us when we prolonged too long in irrational thought. Grief may lead us to be wiser in our discernment, but it shouldn't paralyze us from enjoying life in the future. Ultimately, even the deepest pain should guide us to a place of hope and joy. James 1:2 says, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds."

I think it's helpful to know these may be reactions to grief. If you are experiencing some of these, you might consider whether they are an expression of grief.

Any you would add from your experience? {eoa}

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