

Sweat, Chocolate and Good Deeds: How to Deal With Grief

“If there’s a more helpless feeling than trying to reach someone you love who’s trapped underground, I don’t know it.”
–Katniss Everdeen in *Mockingjay* (the final book of *The Hunger Games* trilogy)

Don’t worry, new *Hunger Games* fans ... the above passage is *not* a spoiler! The main character, Katniss—revealing backstory—is describing how she felt while waiting to hear whether her father survived a mine explosion.

As many of you may know, my dad died unexpectedly of what an ultrasound indicated was ventricular fibrillation, that is, an abnormal heart rhythm caused by fluttering contractions of the ventricles. (No autopsy was performed, so I won’t *really* know until I see him in heaven.)

A young woman my age whom I met recently at our CrossFit gym is grieving the sudden death of her father, and I find myself fumbling over my words when I try offering any kind of consolation. I thought I would be better at that sort of thing.

Maybe it’s difficult for me because while thoughts of Scripture and tidbits of advice swim through my mind, I’m teaching her how to perform a barbell clean and one-arm dumbbell snatch. Or maybe it’s because I know deep down that the kindest, warmest hugs and sincerest words of comfort barely make a dent in the ice-hard cloak of grief.

I began this post with the quote from Katniss because when I read it a few nights ago, images and feelings from my dad’s “Graduation Day,” as I like to refer to it, flooded my brain, and I was transported back to that gentle slope where I finally said goodbye, where the angels lifted his spirit and

escorted him toward the castle of hot-pink clouds billowing in the distance. I say “finally” because, though I knew his spirit was already in heaven, I refused to stop performing CPR and commanding breath to fill his lungs. I felt so helpless, as Katniss said. I was struck with the desperate, terrifying sensation that he was trapped and that I was failing him.

In the days that followed, the Lord was more than good to me; His Spirit never left my side. I didn’t feel the debilitating pangs of guilt that I feared might consume me. No, I felt peace. *Peace!* Of course I grieved, wrapped myself up in the last light-blue Oxford shirt he’d worn and cried until no tears were left. But my spirit was serene because I knew exactly where he was and that our separation would be short-lived, “a mist” on the waters of eternity (James 4:14).

It’s been almost four years since Dad’s “Graduation Day,” and the truth is, I still cry sometimes because I want so much to talk with him, to tell him how much I can dead lift (because he really would care more than anyone!), that I can run a near sub-7-minute mile now, and that my husband shares so much in common with him. I want to ask him for feedback on the novel I’m writing, send him a personalized poem for Father’s Day and see the perfect frame he picks out for it to hang in his office.

I heard a preacher once say that we mustn’t let grief turn to sin. He explained that grief has the potential to prevent us from doing the things God’s called us to; it can trap us, like Katniss’ father, in an underground mine of suffocating, disorienting darkness.

When I feel sadness settling over me, I’ve found the following five tips tremendously helpful for priming the pump for peace to flow.

1. Let it out. Bottling up emotions is never helpful. The Bible is full of examples of God’s people mourning—and they

weren't discreet about it. Jacob, for instance, tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and grieved for days after his sons lied and told him his favorite son, Joseph, had been devoured by a wild animal (Gen. 37:34). Even Jesus wept after his friend Lazarus died (John 11:35). What's important to keep in mind, however, is that God is always faithful to refill our hearts with happiness. He yearns to turn our mourning into dancing and our grief into gladness (Ps. 30:11).

Invite your loving Father to comfort you while you cry. Let His Word wash over you and remind you that your sorrow may last for the night, but joy comes in the morning (Ps. 30:5).

"The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me. My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise him." (Ps. 28:7, NIV)

2. Find someone to lean on. The Bible says we are to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn (Rom. 12:15). Don't feel ashamed to let your spouse, a close friend or family member know that you're feeling down or depressed. Our brothers and sisters in Christ are to be encouragers for us in dark hours. Talking to them, letting them pray for you, simply having someone keep you company will strengthen and refresh you.

"Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble." (Eccl. 4:9-10, NLT)

3. Help others. Sometimes all it takes to chase away sadness is to bring someone else happiness. The Bible says we're to not only look out for our own interests but to the interests of others also (Phil. 2:4). Instead of focusing on what will make *you* feel better, seek ways in which you can bless others, even if it's by doing something small like making a phone call to an old friend or cooking dinner for the mom next door whose

kids all have the flu. Next time you're feeling low and decide to extend a helping hand, see if you aren't rewarded with a gladdened heart.

"And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Heb. 13:16, NIV).

4. Work out. Exercise is a wonderful way to help heal a hurting heart. Physical activity releases endorphins that are your body's natural chemicals responsible for enhancing mood, improving sleep patterns and decreasing stress hormones. Try to work out for 30 minutes a day, three to five times a week. For an added bonus, break a sweat in the sunshine instead of indoors. Studies now show that sunshine helps the brain produce more of the mood-lifting chemical serotonin.

5. Eat chocolate (and other mood-boosting foods). Meat loaf, mashed potatoes and macaroni and cheese are all considered classic comfort foods. But eating unhealthily while you're grieving or struggling with recurring sadness will only exacerbate gloomy emotions. Try to limit refined carbohydrates, such as white breads, crackers and regular pasta. Concentrated sugars from soda, juice, sugar and other sweets cause your blood sugar to spike rapidly and then plummet quickly.

Also avoid trans fats. Preliminary research has found a link between trans-fatty acid intake and biological changes that lead to depression. It's believed these unhealthy fats cause inflammatory responses in your body that can interfere with mood-boosting neurotransmitters. Notorious for including many trans fats in their menu items are fast-food restaurants. Other sources include margarine, soups like Ramen noodles, baked goods like doughnuts, gravy mixes and salad dressings.

The Bible says that in whatever we do, whether eating or drinking, rejoicing or mourning, we're to do it for God's glory (1 Cor. 10:31). So if a neighbor brings you a dozen

glazed doughnuts—with sprinkles!—to “cheer you up,” enjoy in moderation, but don’t look to your favorite tasty treats for relief.

Below are a few foods that *truly* can bring comfort:

- **Dark chocolate.** Yes, it’s true! A recent study published in the *Journal of Psychopharmacology* found that just a few ounces of it can result in a better mood by stimulating the production of endorphins. Just don’t overdo it or you may be sad all over again because you’ve gained a few pounds!
- **Greek yogurt.** Greek yogurt is another great go-to because of its commendable calcium content. Proper calcium levels alert your body to release feel-good neurotransmitters.
- **Honey.** As most of us know, overdoing it on sugar releases harmful free radicals in our bodies. Even though honey is sweet like sugar, it’s full of beneficial compounds like quercetin and kaempferol that help clean up free radicals and reduce inflammation. Inflammation has negative effects on the brain, which can cause us to feel depressed.

“But he would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.” (Ps. 81:16, ESV).

Other mood-elevating foods include eggs, asparagus, cherry tomatoes and Swiss chard.

I pray these tips are helpful to you and that you always remember that the Lord is near to the broken-hearted (Ps. 34:18).

Stay fit, stay faithful.

Diana Anderson-Tyler is the author of Creation House’s Fit for

Faith: A Christian Woman's Guide to Total Fitness. Her popular website can be found at [www.fithisfaith.com](#), and she is the owner and a coach at CrossFit 925. Diana can be reached on Twitter.

For the original article, visit [www.fithisfaith.com](#).