

8 Ways to Navigate the Dark Path of Grief

I've lost three close friends during the past two years. Robert and James died in 2021, and Doug died just a few weeks ago, on August 21. You'd think by now that I'd be an expert in how to grieve a loss, especially since I also lost my parents recently. But working through grief is like trying to find your way through a forest in the dark. There is no map. You just have to feel your way through it.

Grief is a strange combination of emotions that can include both pain and numbness, and both sadness and anger. I've read many books and articles about grief, and I've talked to pastors and counselors. What has helped me most is knowing that I'm not alone. Plenty of people have traveled down this road before me.

If you or someone you love is suffering from a painful loss, these guidelines will help:

1. It's okay to cry. When we cry, it's like letting the pressure out of a steam kettle; it's never healthy to hold back tears. John 11:35 reminds us that Jesus wept after His friend Lazarus died. Jesus was the Son of God, but He was also fully human and He experienced the same emotions we do. Matthew Henry wrote: "Tears are a tribute to our deceased friends. When the body is sown, it must be watered. But we must not sorrow as those that have no hope; for we have a good hope through grace both concerning them and concerning ourselves."

2. Look for the lighter side. My father said a lot of funny things during the last months of his life because he was brain damaged, so I kept a list of his comments. If our loved ones are in God's presence now, certainly we can rejoice even while

we grieve. Try to recall the funny things your loved ones said or did, and your laughter will be like doses of the best medicine.

3. Take a break. It's vital for us to hit the pause button after a death and savor the memories. We need to mute the background noise of life so we can meditate on all the ways our loved ones blessed us. Music is also a gift in those sacred moments. Sometimes I listen to my dad's favorite Big Band music from the 1940s because it reminds me of him. I have also found incredible strength from the hymn "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross," which we sang at my mother's funeral.

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4. Think about heaven. Colossians 3:2 (NASB 1995) says: "Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on the earth." It does the soul good to meditate on the reality of eternal life. After my dad died, I read the excellent book "Heaven" by Randy Alcorn. Don't lose sight of the fact that if your loved ones were Christians, you are going to see them again.

5. Make a memorial. Both my parents are buried in a cemetery near my house, so I can visit that special place. But you can also enshrine your memories in other ways. I have a corner in my study where I keep my father's World War II photos. I'm planting hydrangeas in my backyard because they were my mother's favorite flower. I also cherish a framed photo of my spiritual mother, June, who died in 2020.

6. Talk to others. It's tempting to hide in a cave when we are at a low point. But the worst thing you can do after a loss is isolate. We need each other, especially during times of mourning. Join a grief support group and talk regularly with friends. You need hugs, loving words and extra encouragement.

I have another close friend, Jeff, who was friends with Doug; we make a point to talk often so we can process our pain together.

7. Write down your thoughts. Journaling is important when you are grieving. The flowers you received during a funeral will die quickly, but the memories you write down will last. After my friend Doug's death, I realized I had many of his texts still in my phone. I made a point to save them so I can go back and read his words of encouragement.

8. Stay active. Grief can sap your energy and make you tired. It's important to get plenty of rest—but don't sleep all day or abuse alcohol, drugs or food to find the comfort that only God can give. If possible, take a mental health break from work; if you can't do that, at least make sure you have time for exercise. A long walk outdoors can be the best therapy.

"The death of a beloved is an amputation"—that's how C.S. Lewis described the loss of his wife in his book "A Grief Observed." You may never fully recover from losing a loved one, but the scar of that loss is a permanent reminder of how much you loved them. Even though grief is a dark path, the Lord will walk beside you all the way. {eoa}

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