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Grief tips through the holidays

by KAITLIN CANTRELL

Everything about being out in the world this time of year screams, ?Be Merry, Be Jolly.? Around every corner there are reminders of traditions and memories of past joy. This sustained joy will escape the grasp of many this year. Despite a world that only accepts joy in the holiday season, many may experience pangs of jealousy, depression and grief. They likely will be told (verbally or non-verbally) that they have a ?bah humbug? attitude. There is a lot of pressure to pretend to be jovial this time of year.

When one does manage to have moments of genuine joy, they can be quickly followed by the sinking reality of loss, or a surge of guilt accompanied by negative self talk. ?How can I enjoy myself when my_____ has died.?

These feelings can be compounded by our go to model of support: unhelpful, though well-meaning comments by others. ?You're looking so good.? ?You've got to let it go.? ?At least they're in a better place.? We call this ?bright siding'; trying to replace the uncomfortable feelings and realities by focusing solely on the positives. This results in the opposite outcome, by minimizing the reality and weight of our grief.

How then do we help ourselves both grieve and celebrate, and what are helpful ways to support people who grieve this season? Remember that what a griever is feeling is normal and allowed. It is normal to feel many things this time of year including sadness, anger, regret, as well as joy. No human being needs to be happy every moment of every day. At the same time, experiencing moments of joy does not mean that one is not still grieving intensely. As human beings we often experience a wide range of emotions yet, are only able to express one in any given moment.

We grieve with more than our emotional expression. Our whole being, body, mind and emotional self express grief. Even if we look happy or functional on the outside, this does not mean that what is happening internally is as put together. In fact, many grievers hate hearing that they look well, because they feel anything but well. Assumptions and comparisons in relation to grief are not helpful, and often result in harm, emotionally and relationally.

Ultimately the best approach to grieving or supporting a griever boils down to one word: compassion. It can be helpful to prioritize self compassion as a griever. If you are unsure of accepting invitations, be honest about your own needs. It is okay to accept an invite. It can be helpful to share that you want to be there but say upfront that you may find it necessary to leave early. This will eliminate the pressure of disappointing your host when experiencing a grief burst and need alone time.

When supporting a griever compassion and flexibility is the kindest approach. If you offer an invite, acknowledge that you are okay if they cannot stay, or that if they cancel last minute you will understand. Consider sharing a quiet spot when they arrive that they can wander to if they need a moment to themselves.

One of the hardest realities shared by grievers is how it feels like everyone has moved on and their loved one has been forgotten. Using the name of the loved one and sharing memories removes the elephant from the room and offers the chance for shared spaces of healing. We work hard to put on masks that hide the true feelings we have. Sharing the honest reality of what grief is like for you is less isolating, and not as uncomfortable as we anticipate.

Sometimes we do not want to make things worse by drawing attention to pain, but pain of loss is real. No amount of ignoring it will make it disappear. Distraction has its place and can be helpful only with the right supportive care.

I hope you experience the whole of this holiday season in a compassionate community.

This ?Open Mind? column was written by Kaitlin Cantrell, bereavement coordinator for Hospice Wellington. Open Mind is sponsored by community partners who are committed to raising awareness about mental health, reducing stigma, and providing

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