

FLOW

Befriending Grief

WHAT HELPED IS THAT I FINALLY FOUND A PURPOSE FOR THIS SOMETIMES-EXCRUCIATING FEELING.

MY FIRST CLUE that I had an issue with sadness occurred in college when I volunteered to be a client for an acquaintance getting her master's in counseling. I approached my first session as a "fun" excursion from studying. We met in her living room, and after settling in she simply and sincerely asked me, "So, how are you doing?" What I remember vividly is bursting into tears, followed by wracking sobs—while my mind freaked out over my embarrassing loss of control. Afterward, I shared the story as a humorous anecdote about the hidden stresses of college life. Ha-ha.

It took another dozen years before I addressed my backlog of tears—by crying a river through a good part of my 30s. At times, it was like being swallowed up by a merciless current, sucking me into whirlpools of unrelenting anguish before spitting me back to shore, sputtering with temporary relief and a mysterious longing I couldn't quite name.

It wasn't until my 40s that I learned to appreciate such powerful feelings as a navigational system for living a more authentic life. I saw my earlier outbursts as a longing to know my own vulnerable heart, and it took more years to understand what it meant to be internally congruent, where my

mind and heart acted as allies instead of adversaries. This required me to explore and accept all my feelings, including and especially the one I denied the most: sadness.

What helped is that I finally found a purpose for this sometimes-excruciating feeling. Sadness is the heart's way of telling us that it's time to let go of an attachment we have. When we are unwilling to let go of something—whether it's a person, a thing, an experience, or an identity—it creates blockage. Sadness is a path to break through.

All feeling states have a mild to wild continuum in how they flow through us. For instance, anger spans a spectrum from mild annoyance to rage. In the realm of sadness there is an arc from minor unhappiness to deep grief. I now consider grief an exalted state of sadness. Simple sadness invites us to go inward and acknowledge a loss. Grief demands that we honor what has been most precious to us. When we humbly prostrate ourselves to Life through grieving, gratitude and renewed resilience emerge. Eventually.

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SHADES OF GRAY

Sadness translates to a heaviness and constriction in the heart area. There is a cloaked quality around the shoulders and chest, a downward quivering of the lips, and sometimes a lump in the throat. Even vision is affected. Life appears duller, and there is often a sense of pressure in the eyes.

Hopelessness is sadness mixed with a sense of powerlessness. When one feels hopeless, possibility recedes from awareness. I find the best approach is to help my clients fully acknowledge any sadness associated with a situation and then to reevaluate what action is theirs to take—and then to take it.

A grieving heart cannot be forced open. Kindness and beauty can act as tenderizers, though. Sincerity helps; safety is key. Sitting quietly with someone who is grieving is more valuable than words. If you are stuck in grief, being near a body of water, and asking for help in unburdening a heavy heart, often helps restore a sense of flow.

One of the biggest obstacles to feeling sad is that it conflicts with one of our greatest American values: productivity. We can harness our anger or fear and channel it into work, but grief has a way of stopping us in our tracks. Perceiving grief as a problem to be overcome (or forever endured) distorts our relationship to this essential human expression. Fear of feeling vulnerable may eclipse the sadness itself. The burden intensifies.

When we dismiss the signals of our broken heart, we start to distance ourselves from life and the people in it. Grief can be postponed, but it will not be denied. When we suffer big losses— as individuals or as a collective—and do not honor them with our tears, we become hardened and hopeless. I believe that a people who have forgotten how to grieve have forgotten how to be truly alive.

Now in my 50s, I sit with people experiencing chronic states of relational distress. Some are feeling shut down or shut out by their mate. Frequently, a client is stuck in a cycle of blame against their current—or former—partner. Inevitably, there is some underlying emotional pain waiting to be explored. More often than not, unexpressed sadness or grief is at the core.

I recall Andy, who chose to keep seeing me after his wife told him she was done with their marriage. A long-time meditator, he spent a good chunk of time after she left facing his ancient fears of loneliness and “not being good enough.” He also feared losing connection with his two grown daughters because he relied on his partner to be his emotional emissary. He eventually came to appreciate his own company and life beyond marriage. Still, he continued to blame his wife for not expressing her dissatisfaction more clearly over the years.

One day Andy vehemently proclaimed, “After the divorce, she’s dead to me.” Behind his anger, I sensed he was preparing himself to mourn the letting go of his 19-year marriage. When he finally cracked, he literally clutched his chest and sobbed. He took his broken heart back to his practice and sat with it. Beyond the loss of the marriage, he discovered a deep remorse for his inability to behave differently with his wife. When he forgave

himself for his unconscious behaviors, he found forgiveness for her as well.

Andy’s new awareness of his heart became a source of wonder for him. After being led by his head most of his life, he now finds delight in listening to the subtle wisdom of his heart. It’s helped him forge more authentic connections with his daughters, friends, and yes, his ex-wife. Last I heard, they were dating and enjoying a new level of intimacy together.

—JOY HOSEY

