



Dealing with Grief

By Chaplain Lee Shaw

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Recently I came across a most unique and interesting article written by Edward F. Sulzbach, a retiree from the FBI who is one of the Bureau's most decorated Special Agents. In this article Sulzbach recounts a book that in him provoked a good deal of thought. The book, *In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead* by author James Lee Burke, tells of a Louisiana detective named David Robicheaux. Robicheaux investigates a series of murders outside of New Orleans where in the evening mist of the bayous, he encounters the ghost of Confederate General John Bell Hood of the Texas Brigade. During these encounters, General Hood counsels Robicheaux regarding the challenges he faces. On one occasion, Hood says to Robicheaux, *"Try to keep this in mind. It's just like when they load with horseshoes and chain. You think the barrage will last forever, then suddenly there's a silence that's almost louder than their canon."*

Sulzbach goes on to say in his article, "I have reflected on this statement and, having been in a barrage or two during my life, I can verify the wisdom of General Hood's remark. With the silence that follows the physical, emotional, or mental carnage, comes one of life's great challenges – dealing with the aftermath of a critical incident."

As a Chaplain I have responded to many critical incidents, the repercussions of which are proving to be "louder than a canon loaded with horseshoes and chain." On many occasions our team of chaplains have been called to serve at suicides, fatal shootings, drownings, fatal accidents, fatal structure fires, home invasions, and other traumatic events.

Perhaps you have never suffered such sudden and unexpected tragedies as these. Yet, all of us at some point in our lives must deal with grief. Our love for others ultimately leads to loss and loss always produces hurt and pain. Your critical incident may involve a severe illness, the death of a loved one, a devastating financial loss, or perhaps the experience of a tragic divorce. When the foundations of our lives are rocked the things we truly believe in and hold dear, our values and ideals are tested. At times like these we may become overwhelmed as we realize that we are *not in control* of people or of circumstances and now must face the fact of our own mortality. How we handle things when the "canon goes off" is largely determined by factors in place prior to the event and what happens in the aftermath, during the grieving process.

Phase 1 Shock

At first we are stunned and can't believe this loss has happened. We often experience confusion, disbelief, a sense of helplessness, hopelessness, and that "It can't be true" frame of mind. After notifying a wife that her husband had been killed in an aircraft accident she began screaming, "Don't say that – don't say that." She was in shock and unwilling to accept the fact that her husband had died and would never come home again.

Phase 2 Realization

After the initial shock we begin to see that the nightmare just isn't going away. This is the stage where we begin to accept the reality of the tragedy. As a chaplain, when I hear people begin to speak of their loved one in the past tense I know that they are on the road to accepting their loss. It is at this point that they may experience anger and conflicting feelings. During this period the person may also be restless, unable to sleep, or have difficulty in making decisions. They are haunted by questions like, "How will I go on? What will I do? What good am I without this person?" They may become angry with God. The Bible records for us many instances where hurting people come to God telling Him exactly how they feel. God is well able to handle our feelings of confusion, anger, and hopelessness and His desire is to comfort our hearts.

Phase 3 Retreat

This is the place where people often get stuck. Because we are usually not prepared to handle grief we may try to hide from it. We may already be extremely busy people and don't have time, and certainly don't want to take the time, to deal with our feelings or to talk to anyone about them. An officer recently spoke to me about the death of his brother. He had busied himself for four years when one day it finally hit. He had attempted to ease the pain of his loss, refusing to talk about it and refusing to deal with it by staying very busy. In trying to avoid the reality of the death of a loved one we only prolong what we must face sooner or later. This type of avoidance causes greater difficulty and prevents others from helping us to get through it. At this stage some become restless and confused and may begin to neglect the care of their bodies. Not eating properly or failing to get the appropriate rest and exercise, they now begin to walk down an unrealistic hallway of memories that excludes any of the loved one's imperfections or failures.

Remembering only the “good things,” we bless them with sainthood and we ourselves begin to feel like a failure. “Why didn’t I appreciate them more? Why didn’t I tell them I loved them? Why didn’t I spend more time with them? Why? Why? Why?” You begin to feel like a failure and so begin to retreat from the whole world. This is not a good place to get stuck.

The Bible tells us that there is a time for mourning and it records for us many occasions where forty days of mourning was set aside to remember a loved one. It was a time to retreat from the normal routine of life, a time to weep and to cry and to remember the life and passing of the one we loved. And after the forty days had passed it was time to move on. I know of a lady who lost a child at birth and spoke of how she had been helped by this forty-day principle. When friends called and tried to get her to go places and do things that she wasn't ready to involve herself with, it gave her permission to be alone and to mourn over her loss. She needed this retreat time to weep and to reflect so that she could readjust and go on.

Phase 4 Transition

This is the point at which we begin to turn from guilt and helplessness and begin making plans for the future. After the death of a loved one a husband may feel guilty for wanting to move to a new home. His wife may have loved to garden and plant beautiful flowers around their home. He tries, but finds he does not have the interest or the "green thumb" that she had. He thinks about moving but feels guilty for wanting to leave behind what was so precious to her. He can become trapped in a way of life that belongs to his past, yet has no place in his future. At this transition stage he overcomes the feelings of guilt and begins to realize that major changes are necessary if he is to have a healthy, happy new life. As he pursues his own interests, although these interests may even be in sharp contrast to the way life was before, he begins to discover that life is worth living again. He realizes that just because life will never be the same, it does not mean that it need be less joyful or productive.

Another hurdle that is overcome at this stage is forgiveness. After the death of a loved one we can become haunted by things that we have said, or did not say, or by things we have done, or should have done, but did not do. As people, none of us have perfect relationships. We don't always do and say what we should. More often than not we say and do what we should not. But with God there is forgiveness. In Psalm 51 David realized the error of his ways in regard to his relationship with others and asked the Lord to forgive him. When we humbly ask the Lord to

forgive us we can be assured that, *"as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."* Ps 103:12. Those two points of the compass are infinitely opposite in directions and thus our wrongs are gone!

Phase 5 Recovery

It is at this junction where you begin to look back on the good times with your loved one and remember them joyfully. You now deal realistically with the memories of your loved one. Now the tears you shed are tears of joy – not tears of regret. You know for a fact that life will never be the same but you also know that there is hope and a future. Most importantly you have received the comfort of God and you find yourself able and wanting to comfort others.

Grief is a process – not an event. It takes time to accomplish the work that recovery requires. It is important to remember that grief is a highly individual experience and can vary in intensity, severity, and duration. Things such as personality, determination, life's experiences, relationship to your loved one, and a relationship with God are all important factors that determine the length of the grief process.

I hope and pray that when those horseshoes and chain come flying your way you will remember that God has an eternal purpose in them. While you will certainly grieve because of your loss, you can keep yourself from losing perspective and still appreciate the many good things that can yet happen in and through your life. Helen Keller said, *"When one door closes, another opens, but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us."* It is not so much what happens to us in life that matters, but how we respond to what happens to us that makes all the difference in the world.

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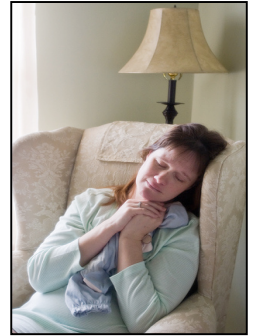
Twelve Principals of Grief



Principal #1

Remember that your grief is unique.

Others may grieve in different ways than you because your experience will be influenced by a variety of factors, including the relationship you had with the person who died; circumstances of the death – whether it was sudden or expected; your support system; and your cultural and religious background. It is important not to compare oneself with others who are grieving, and to consider the “one-day-at-a-time” approach to allow yourself to proceed at your own pace.



Principal #2

Remember that it is often helpful to talk about your grief. By expressing grief openly, healing occurs and you are likely to feel better. Ignoring it will not make your grief go away. It is important to seek out caring friends and relatives who will listen without judging.

Principal #3

Expect to feel a multitude of emotions.

Your head, heart, and spirit will be affected when you are experiencing loss. As a result, you may experience feelings of confusion, disorganization, fear, guilt, relief, or other emotions. Sometimes they may come simultaneously or follow each other within a short period of time. It is important to know that these emotions are normal responses to the death of a loved one even though you may be feeling overwhelmed at the time.

Principal #4

Allow for some numbness that may occur. Part of the grief experience when a loved one dies includes feeling numb or disoriented. It allows your emotions to “catch up” with what you know intellectually and allows you to be insulated from the reality of the death until you can tolerate what you don’t want to believe.

Principal #5

Be tolerant of your physical and emotional limits. You may feel very tired as a result of your feelings of loss and sadness. Your low energy level may impair your ability to think clearly and to make decisions. It is important to nurture yourself by getting daily rest, eating balanced meals, and lowering your expectations of yourself.

Principal #6

You may experience grief attacks or flashbacks. These “surges of grief” or flashbacks (memory embraces) can be frightening and leave you feeling overwhelmed. These feelings are also a normal reaction. Try to find someone who understands how you’re feeling and is willing to listen.

Principal #7

Remember to develop a support system. Although reaching out to others and accepting their help may be difficult, finding people who will provide the understanding you need and who will let you be yourself may be the best action you can take on your own behalf.

Principal #8

Make use of ritual. The funeral ritual serves the dual purpose of acknowledging the death of a loved one and allowing you to express grief. It also provides you with the support of caring people who are also grieving.

Principal #9

You have the freedom to embrace your spirituality. Express your faith in whatever ways that seem appropriate to you. Try to have people around you who support your religious beliefs. You may feel hurt and abandoned and may feel angry with God because of the death of someone you loved, but it is important to realize that this feeling is a normal part of grief. Try to find someone who won't be judgmental about your feelings and who will allow you to explore your thoughts and feelings.

Principal #10

You have the freedom to allow a search for meaning. You may find yourself asking, "Why did he or she die?" Or "Why now?" This search for meaning is often another normal part of the healing process. Some questions have answers. Some do not. Actually, healing occurs in the opportunity to pose the questions, not necessarily in answering them. Find a supportive friend who will listen responsively as you search for meaning.

Principal #11

You have the freedom to cherish your memories. Treasure your memories of your loved one who has died. Share them with your family and friends. Recognize that your memories may make you laugh or cry. In either case, they are a lasting part of the relationship that you had with a very special person in your life.

Principal #12

You have the freedom to move through your grief and heal. The capacity to love requires the necessity to grieve when someone you loved dies. You cannot heal unless you openly express your grief. Denying your grief will only make it become more confusing and overwhelming. Embrace your grief and heal. Reconciling grief will not happen quickly. Remember grief is a process, not an event. Be patient and tolerant with yourself. Never forget that the death of someone you loved changes your life forever. It's not that you will never be happy again. It's simply that you will never be exactly the same as you were before the death.

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