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# Pathways

A Newsletter to Help in Bereavement

## The Right Way to Grieve

by Judy Tatelbaum

**O**ne of our misconceptions about the grieving process is that there must be a “right way” to do it. Imagining that there is one correct formula, we may torture ourselves trying to fit into some kind of unreal mold. There isn’t some right way. Grief is an individual experience. There are probably as many responses to pain and loss as there are people in the world.

It is essential that we accept how we ourselves grieve, even if it doesn’t fit our pictures. If we cry uncontrollably, we need to know that’s okay. We may find ourselves angry about our loss or consumed with sadness. Often our grief is a mix of feelings. We may need to be alone more than usual, or we may need the support of a group. Some only share with family. Others of us only share with friends. Our way is our right way.

A problem that can arise is that we tend to expect others to react to loss the same way we do. Stoics assume their intimates will be stoic. Those who cry easily cannot understand why everyone else isn’t crying, too. We are uncomfortable with the variety of ways people express their grief. We sometimes feel angry or frustrated because others in our family don’t grieve as we do.

We mistakenly think because we belong in the same family that we should have the same reactions. We don’t. Family members play roles in a crisis. We have “the crying griever,” “the angry griever,” “the silent sufferer,” “the practical planner” and so on. Each of these different roles is part of the whole family experience of loss.

If not understood, these differences can be a source of misery and conflict within a family leaving us feeling lonely and estranged. Couples can feel alienated when they respond to a shared loss with different feelings. Opposing grieving styles can cause serious conflict unless someone intervenes

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and helps explain these natural differences.

Appreciating differences may be what most helps solidify a family or a couple in a crisis. When my mother was dying, the hospice social worker asked me and my father a profoundly important

question: “How do you grieve?” I said I was a “crier.” My father said that he would be “stoic” and not cry until the end.

Her second, equally important question was: “Can you tolerate how each other grieves?” When we each answered “yes,” my father and I became a team, a partnership working together to ease and face my mother’s death.

With that wonderful social worker’s help we each owned and appreciated our own unique grieving style, and we began to accept our differences. When I cried, my father understood. I stopped judging his seeming lack of emotions.

To learn to appreciate your family’s different reactions, it might be useful to talk together about how each responds to loss or trouble. To be able to support one another in a crisis like the death of a loved one, we must learn to have appreciation and compassion for our own style as well as the uniqueness of others.

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