

Newly Embarking

A Stephy's Place Reflection on Grief and Mourning
April 12,2024

Kevin J. Keelen

If you are unfortunately new to this “journey” of grief, I hope that this reflection can help you in some way, even with just a tad more insight into what you have embarked upon. It isn't until we lose a loved one that we “embark” on this roller coaster of emotion, confusion, fear, sadness, exhaustion, and pain. We couldn't possibly know what this felt like until it happened. Our friends and family members who have not had this particular loss cannot comprehend the depth, the weight, the magnitude of it all.

In a loss of spouse group recently, someone brought in a piece found on the internet from “*The Widow's Handbook*” written by Kelley Lynn, who was reflecting on the loss of a spouse, however I will be sharing it with you as if it were written for any loss:

The death [of someone you love] can literally change every single thing in your world going forward. The way you eat changes. The way you watch TV changes. Your friend circle changes (or disappears entirely). Your family dynamic changes (or disappears entirely). Your financial status changes. Your job situation changes. It affects your self-worth. Your self-esteem. Your confidence. Your rhythms, The way you breathe. Your mentality. Your brain function. (Ever heard the term grief brain? If you don't know what it is, count yourself lucky). Your physical body. Your hobbies and interests. Your sense of security. Your sense of humor. Your sense of womanhood or manhood. **EVERY SINGLE THING CHANGES.** You are handed a new life that you never asked for and that you don't particularly want. It is the hardest, most gut-wrenching, horrific, life-altering of things to live with.

It makes sense to know that many of us, or most of us, especially in early grief, spend some time, or a lot of time, protesting this life-shattering experience. It is unacceptable, and for some of us it can

remain unacceptable. During our time of protest, many of us become angry, and for good reasons. This can be confusing because we all know that sadness seems very natural to feel after a loss, but anger can get sticky. There are so many emotions that we may be wrestling with in our bodies and brains- guilt, regret, fear, confusion, and perhaps sadness unlike we have ever known. It really does affect everything in our lives, even our physical health.

With all this to bear, it helps to know that we don't have to navigate it alone. In our support groups we share all of it, and that can be one of the most healing and helpful things we can do for ourselves. A support group can be a vital part of our healing, but we usually need more. We need to give our full attention to our own ongoing self-care.

I believe that true self-care is not selfish nor narcissistic, but rather absolutely necessary for our healing. If our tank is empty, we cannot move forward. We can't care for anyone else if we don't take care of ourselves. Self-care is simply refueling ourselves, and the best self-care is tending to ourselves in mind, in body and in spirit.

Quite often in groups I refer to what I call *The Toolbox for Grief*. The toolbox is full of many suggestions for self-care that have proven to be helpful to people in the grieving process. Some tools help some folks, and some do not, but we simply can't know if it's helpful or not if we don't give it a try. I know that takes energy and perhaps even a desire that you may be lacking right now, but perhaps you can just choose one and take it from there. See how it feels.

There are many other tools and helpful ideas than those in my toolbox below, but these seem to be some of the most common and helpful. Please keep in mind that everyone grieves differently, so different strokes for different folks.

Through it all, please be gentle with yourself. Be kind to yourself. Be a best friend to yourself. Eat nourishing food and drink lots of water as you tend to yourself in mind, body, and spirit.

THE TOOLBOX FOR EARLY GRIEF

Talking. Talking about our loss and feelings can be the most helpful of tools. Since you are already in a support group, you already know how this can help, however only one hour a week may not be enough time to share, and so it can be very helpful to have a counselor or therapist, or just a really good friend to talk with regularly, one who doesn't want to 'fix' us or "should" on us. We need to remember that *grief* is all the pent-up feelings, pains, and emotions within us, and *mourning* is the release of all this, getting it out in some way. Mourning is what allows grief to begin to soften as we heal.

Writing. Just write. Sit with a paper and pen, or a computer, laptop, phone, or iPad and write and write and write whatever comes out. Write about the confusion, the questions, the struggles, the day, the night, what pisses you off, all of it. Writing is another way to get it from the inside out. Writing, or journaling, is a very effective way to mourn. It has helped me for many decades.

Breathing. People who grieve breathe shallowly. Our bodies are deprived of the oxygen we so desperately need. Breathing calms us down and can effectively change our thought pattern. Breathing is underestimated as a very important tool.

Moving. We need to move our bodies or we will begin to atrophy. I have walked through all my losses, and I feel it has helped me more than anything. Any kind of exercise is helpful, -running, gym, stretching at home, team sports, pickleball, biking, dancing, walking, etc. Yoga has even more beneficial results as it can help us in mind, body, and spirit.

Meditating. This does not have to be complicated or painful. There are many websites and apps that are helpful such as insighttimer.com or Calm or YouTube. Meditations on mindfulness can be most helpful in early grief.

Praying. As we try to take care of our minds and bodies, we can also tend to our spiritual life, depending on our belief system, or if we believe at all, and where our relationship with God is or isn't at this point. Meditation can certainly be a form of prayer, but it doesn't have to be. Prayer can be prayers we've learned that are comforting or conversation

with our Higher Power. Perhaps reading spiritual books or speaking with a spiritual director or clergy can also be helpful on this arduous journey. Grief can harbor heavy spiritual wrestling. And that's ok. It may help to talk about it and pray about it.

Sleeping. I know that many of you are having trouble sleeping. I have heard about many suggestions that work for some and not for others. Often people can get to sleep but wake up and can't get back to sleep. Not sleeping sucks and definitely affects our overall health. Try to take naps whenever you can. If you need more time to rest, try to take it. It's best to try natural remedies first, and if nothing helps perhaps talk to your doctor. It's that important.

Cuddling. Even if we cuddle or sleep with a piece of their clothing or their pillow, it's an act of self-care, or if we cuddle with pets, or children, or loved ones, or friends, it all helps.

Creating. If you can create art or crafts or gardening, other things such as making furniture, it can be very helpful in giving a distraction from our pain and a feeling of accomplishment.

Bathing-it's a very nice thing to do for ourselves to take a nice hot bubble bath or a long shower and do some relaxing and grooming. It's true self-care. Mani-pedis and massages are also self-care.

Distracting. It's imperative that we try to distract ourselves from the overwhelmingness of it all. TV, games, movies, watching comedies, reading, listening to music (if you can). It's all about changing the channel in our brain and giving it permission to go someplace else.

Leaning. It's a bit of a balancing act, leaning in and leaning out, but we can't always be distracted by keeping busy or trying to run from our pain. The only thing that heals grief is to grieve and mourn. We need to take time out to lean into our grief, allowing ourselves to be in a quiet, reflective space so that we can feel whatever washes over us.

Volunteering. In time, not too soon, but when we're ready, it helps to help others and to get out of our own stuff and to feel like we're making a difference and having a purpose.