

IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

REFLECTIONS ON GRIEF AND LOSS

Last spring, the OAAP held a grief support group in Portland. Lawyers came together to share, learn, cry, and laugh together. The group was co-facilitated by OAAP Attorney Counselor Shari R. Gregory, LCSW, JD, and Michael Kahn, LPC, JD. The participants learned to be open with each other about their loss and its impact on their lives and emotions. As they shared their experiences and listened to others, each person benefited. The losses were not all the same, but the participants could relate to the shared experience of loss. In winter of 2015, Shari and Michael look forward to working together to hold a grief workshop in Salem.

Grief looks different for different people on different days

Every time we grieve, it looks and feels a little bit different. In fact, no two people experience grief exactly the same. There are no hard-and-fast expectations about what grief should look like. It depends on various factors: how the person processes his or her feelings, the circumstances surrounding the death, the relationship with the person who died, the meaning of the loss, and what else is going on in the person's life when the loss occurs.

Grief may cause people to feel numb, sad, depressed, angry, and/or anxious. It can cause changes in sleeping and appetite – sometimes people sleep or eat too much and sometimes not enough. At times, talking to loved ones, therapists, religious leaders, or group members can be very helpful and, at other times, bereaved people would rather express themselves

through art, music, journaling, participating in a community activity (e.g., Habitat for Humanity), visiting the cemetery, or quiet time.

During our grief group, participants found it helpful to express their grief through projects that ranged from creating a music CD of grief songs to putting together a photo album of the person who died. In the group and in society, some people find religious grieving rituals comforting, and for others, creating a specific ritual or way to reflect and honor the person who died is extremely helpful. During the group, there was much laughter and some tears. When people grieve, they may feel that having fun would be an insult to the person who died. Participants reminded each other that, although difficult at times, it is okay to continue living life and to experience joy.

Don't get stuck in the idea of a rigid grief model

It is important to understand that the stages-of-grief model, like the one published by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) is not how most people experience grief. Kubler-Ross's studies were with people who were themselves dying, and she was not anticipating that this would be used for a bereavement model. People experience grief in different ways, teaching us there is no "right way to grieve." Learning about other people's grieving process can help someone gain a sense of freedom to grieve in his or her own way. It allows people not to feel weak or bad when they find themselves feeling strong emotions. In addition, understanding and respecting

OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

503-226-1057
1-800-321-OAAP
www.oaap.org

Helping lawyers and judges since 1982

- Alcohol & Chemical Dependency
- Career Change & Transition
- Gambling Addiction
- Mental Health
- Procrastination & Time Management

A free, nonprofit, confidential program for you.

how others grieve are particularly helpful for grieving couples.

The common theme is loss

Although people might be grieving different types of losses with different grieving styles, the common theme is the sense of loss. The primary loss is the death of the person or relationship, and the potential secondary loss can include the death of a dream or change in identity. For example, a couple who lost their child will grieve this horrendous loss, but the dream of their family life is also lost. Part of the healing process will include finding ways to feel whole again and learning to create new dreams.

Grief does not necessarily go away, but it changes

The intensity and regularity of the emotions and reactions usually level off with time, but grief does not disappear. Years after a loss, something could happen – you could hear a song or find a letter – that could trigger some of those familiar emotions. But they won't last nearly as long, and the experience will more likely have positive memories and emotions mixed in. When we first grieve, it encompasses us and, as time passes, we encompass it.

How to comfort someone who is grieving

When talking to a person who is grieving, realize that there are no “right” words. If you are struggling, you could say, “I want to be here to support you, but I don't know what to say.” And don't feel like you have to say anything. Simply being in someone's presence and willing to listen can be very powerful even if the person says very little. You are supporting the person's unique grieving style.

If you are offering assistance, it helps to be specific. Perhaps you can provide rides for someone, help with errands, or bring or prepare meals. You could ask the grieving person if he or she would like to go to the movies or to participate in an activity. At times, grieving people are experiencing loneliness and having someone to assist them or join them in an enjoyable activity can be fulfilling. Remember to respect their needs however they respond. For example, the person may think a movie is a good idea and then need to leave half way through it. The griever knows his or her needs better than anyone else.

Sometimes from grief/loss comes growth

There has been some research about changes in people who have had experiences with loss. Growth can show up in how they relate to others, a realization of their inner strength, a new appreciation for aspects of their life, how they see the world, and spiritual changes. To be clear, nothing good comes from the loss of someone close to you, but sometimes dealing with the loss can lead to growth in some of the above areas.

A final note on grief

If you are grieving, allowing yourself to experience all of your emotions (including “positive” emotions) helps you heal. If you would like help, call the OAAP 503-226-1057 or 1-800-321-6227 for free and confidential assistance.

MICHAEL KAHN, LPC, JD

SHARI R. GREGORY, LCSW, JD
OAAP ATTORNEY COUNSELOR