

Grief Has No Expiration Date, Part II: Coping with the Loss of Loved Ones to Addiction

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In part one of this column I discussed grief of family members who lost loved ones to addiction. I discussed how we lose our loved ones in many ways:

- Active addiction, which takes center stage of the life of the addicted members, making them unable to fully function in a responsible manner in the family
- Incarceration, which can take them away from us for years
- Death from an overdose, accident, suicide or medical condition caused or worsened by the addiction

This column discusses how family members cope with the intense pain and sorrow caused by the loss of their loved ones. Over time, many individuals show resilience and use their experiences to help others deal with losing their loved ones.

Coping with Loss and Grief

Following are strategies to cope with loss and grief (Daley & Douaihy, 2013).

Embrace it

We need to accept our loss and all our emotions, including anger or rage, confusion, anxiety, sadness, depression, emptiness or guilt. Healing over time involves *feeling* pain and suffering, not running away from them by getting involved in too many activities. We should avoid using food, alcohol, drugs or sex in unhealthy ways to escape our pain. There is no rushing the healing process, although some of us attempt to.

Share it

Recovery is a “we” and not an “I” process—we do not go through it alone. Telling our stories of loss allows us to release emotional tensions; get love, support, and compassion from others; and change how we think about our loved ones. Keep in mind that not everyone who hears our stories will fully understand what it is like to lose a loved one. Or, they may think that it is time for us to move beyond our grief.

Seek Support

Letting others into our inner world enables us to connect in ways that are emotionally and spiritually healthy. We should avoid the extremes of isolating from others or engaging in so much activity that we have little time to think and reflect on our loss. Some of us benefit from grief groups, many of which are specific to the loss of loved ones to addiction. One mother stated that getting and giving support to other grieving parents “was the only time I could pour my heart out without being judged. I didn’t have to worry how much I cried, how much I screamed, how many times I said I wish I were dead,



how much I hated my life.” The acceptance and understanding of others can be a powerful antidote to intense emotions.

Attend a Mutual Support Program

Programs like Al-Anon, Nar-Anon or others can connect us to others who have suffered in similar ways, but who are also healing. Members share hope and strength, and help each other learn to cope with loss. Some communities have family support programs that offer a range of educational and support services.

Seek Professional Help

Counseling or therapy can help with anxiety, depression, bitterness, rage or other struggles associated with our grief. Treatment can help us focus on our strengths and accomplishments, and less on our loss. Professional support can help us better understand addiction, forgive our loved ones, forgive ourselves, and live well in the present, which is the best way to deal with a difficult situation.

Some people experience “complicated grief,” which persists over time. This involves a sense of disbelief regarding the death of loved ones; anger and bitterness over the loss; recurrent periods of painful emotions with intense yearning and longing for the lost loved ones; preoccupation with thoughts of the lost loved ones; and avoiding situations or activities that may

be a reminder of the loss (Shear, Frank, Houck, & Reynolds III, 2005). Several therapies—including one developed specifically for complicated grief—may help. Some people benefit from medication if depressive symptoms persist and interfere with their ability to function.

Reflect

It is okay to feel anger, loneliness, depression or other emotions or moods after losing loved ones. As these emotions feel less intense or painful, we can reflect on experiences or memories that bring us joy or other positive emotions. We may experience positive feelings from looking at photos, videos or other items associated with our loved ones and our lives with them. We may feel good when we reflect on our loss, even if at times we feel sad and miss them terribly.

Practice Good Health Care

We need to get rest and sleep, eat properly, and exercise. Exercise actually helps release emotional energy. Good physical health habits can affect our moods or behaviors in positive ways. We also have to be careful about using alcohol or drugs to escape our pain.

Use Spirituality

Some of us are initially angry at God and wonder why our loved ones were taken away. Many of us find peace and comfort in prayer, religious services or our personal relationship with God or a higher power. Over time we accept and understand our loss, and find meaning in it.

Forgive the Addicted Family Member

Some of us harbor anger towards the people we lost. We may wonder how they could have allowed themselves to be controlled by addiction, or how could they have ignored or treated the family so poorly. As we understand how drugs can hold people's brains captive to the need to feel euphoria, it may be easier to let go and forgive. Our addicted loved ones were sick, and their judgement and behaviors were influenced by their addiction.

Recovery programs promote "making amends" so that addicted individuals can take steps to undo the damage caused to loved ones. This often enables those of us affected by our loved ones' addiction to be more open to forgiveness, which is

better than revenge or vindictiveness. Nar-Anon and Al-Anon also suggest making amends for family members in recovery.

Write

Some of us write about our experiences, thoughts, and emotions, and reflect upon the people we lost. When my wife of thirty years died of cancer years ago, I wrote in a journal, which gave me relief and sometimes gave me perspective on love, death, and grief. I have vivid memories of being wide awake at 2:00 AM, outside my wife's hospital room, during the final days of her life. Writing made me think about how my life and that of my children was changing drastically. I used this to motivate myself to later write a grief journal so I could share my experiences with others.

Help Children with their Grief

Children and siblings are affected by losses and need to grieve and share their feelings and worries. Some kids who lose parents or siblings worry about losing another family member. We can encourage our children to share their grief and discuss their questions or worries. We can share memories of the people we've lost by looking at family photos or videos. We can pay respects with our children in a cemetery or mausoleum. We can talk before and after the trip with our children about their thoughts, feelings or questions.

Giving Back: Service to Others

I am impressed by the resilience, love, altruism, and kindness of many who have lost loved ones to addiction. Many give back to others through service in formal and informal ways. Sometimes they lend a compassionate ear to those new to grief and support them. They encourage them to share their stories, emotions, and thoughts about losing loved ones. They reach out and stay connected to those who may isolate themselves and avoid social interaction. They gently suggest ways to soothe themselves during periods of stress or internal struggles.

Here are some ways these people have given back:

- Starting or facilitating support or grief groups for other family members
- Opening up treatment programs that include family services

- Sponsoring vigils in which family members acknowledge their losses
- Speaking to groups about their experiences losing loved ones
- Writing books about their losses and the journey of recovery

Each person needs to find what works best for them. Many of us heal over time as we through work our grief and learn to live with our loss. ©

Internet Resources

- www.caringinfo.org
- www.compassionatefriends.org
- www.davidkessler.org
- www.griefandrecovery.com
- www.griefnet.org
- www.journeyofhearts.org
- www.webhealing.com

Suggested Readings

- Harvard. (2010). *Coping with grief and loss: A guide to healing when mourning the death of a loved one*. Boston, MA: Harvard Health Publications.
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