

Misconceptions of Grief

The following information is based on the teachings of Dr. Wolfelt. There are myths concerning the grieving process and personal experiences following the death of a loved one. The myths, or misconceptions as we will refer to them, are misleading and discouraging. It is fitting in our plea for grief understanding, to realize that society has adopted as truths certain statements about grief that have become damaging and actually lead individuals to misguided condolences and blind comfort. Following is a partial list of misconceptions about grief that may very well change the course of your grief.

In Dr. Allen Wolfelt's book "Understanding your grief, Ten Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing your Heart", we are reminded that to first begin to understand the power of grief and all of the unexpected changes that could occur following the death of a loved one, we first must acknowledge the misconceptions around grief that society so casually accepts as truth.

Misconception 1: Grief and Mourning are the same thing.

The word misconception is defined as this.... a mistaken notion you might have about something you believe to be true...but it actually is not true at all. Death and grief are not commonly welcome topics of conversation in our society, so as you can see, misconceptions concerning grief and mourning are quite common. The first misconception Dr. Wolfelt teaches us in this book is that grief and mourning are the same word and that they share the same meaning. Separating and understanding the difference in the use of these two words will certainly enhance our ability to relate to others and provide a more clear expression as we attempt to share with others how we are feeling.

Grief is the constellation of INTERNAL thoughts and feelings we have when someone dies. Identify if possible as your grief is all that you experience on the inside, as if you were the container for your pain and sorrow.

Mourning is the ability to take the grief inside of you and to express it outwardly to others around you. Ways of expressing our grief and turning it into mourning would include talking with others, crying with others, celebrating special occasions and creative expressions of art or other talents. Mourning spins our our grief into action and this outward expression of grief is where healing begins to appear.

Misconception 2: Grief and Mourning progress in predictable orderly stages.

The concept of "stages of grief" was popularized in the 1969 with the publication of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' text, On Death and Dying. This was an important book as she listed the five stages of grief that she saw terminally ill patients experience in the face of their own death. We recall this list as denial; anger; bargaining; depression and acceptance. Kubler-Ross never intended this list of five stages to be interpreted as a sequence to be followed by all mourners.

It is important to learn that although we may experience anger, denial, depression or acceptance.... the misconception of grief is that there is not an orderly nor predictable path in which we grieve.

The path of sorrow and pain lead us toward healing and reconciliation. We encourage you to remember that as unique as your emotional journey may be following the death of a loved one so is the wilderness of grief. There simply is no orderly fashion in which our healing occurs.

Misconception 3: You should move away from grief, not toward it.

‘We are healed of a suffering only by experiencing it in full.’ (Marcell Proust) Isolation is the enemy in this misconception. Society oddly enough will often encourage you to move away or to ignore your grief. It is necessary in your experience of grief to remind yourself that leaning in and toward the pain of loss will facilitate the eventual healing. When your grief is ignored or minimized, you will begin to feel isolated. Masking or moving away from your grief creates anxiety and often depression. Social recognition related to your pain is essential for resolved grief to occur. Unfortunately, many individuals view grief as something to be overcome rather than something that truly needs to be experienced. The myth is that grieving is weakness and should be done quietly and quickly without anyone watching. In a society repressed grief...don’t let this happen to you.

Misconception 4: Tears of grief are a sign of weakness

Tears of grief are often associated with personal inadequacy and weakness. The worst thing you can do is to allow this judgment to prevent you from crying. While tears may result in a feeling of helplessness for your friends and family, you must not let others stifle or dictate your need to mourn openly.

Misconception 5: Being Upset and openly mourning means you are being weak in your faith.

Mourning is a spiritual journey of the heart and soul. Don’t let others take your grief away in the name of faith.

It is best to remember in this time of deep sorrow and confusion the important words of wisdom “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

Misconception 6: When someone you love dies, you only grieve and mourn for the physical loss of the person.

When someone you love dies, you don’t just lose the presence of that person; you lose many connections to yourself and to the world. These potential losses can be referred to as secondary losses. Among the losses include loss of self, loss of identity, loss of personality and often times the loss of goals and dreams. When we lose the life of a loved one we possibly may lose our health, our financial stability, our joy and in many circumstance we may lose our desire to live out life.

Grief strikes in many ways and dimensions. We rarely ever just lose the presence of our loved one.

Misconception 7: You should try not to think about the person who died on holidays, anniversaries and birthdays.

Trying not to think about something that your heart and soul are nudging you to think about is a bad idea. It is natural and healthy for your grief to well up and over on special occasions.... even long after the death itself. Ignoring such happy memories will only further complicate your grief.

Misconception 8: After someone you love dies, the goal should be to ‘GET OVER’ your grief as soon as possible.

We simply do not ever “get over “the loss of a loved one. It is quite unfortunate that as a society we should ever ask that of a family member, a friend or co-worker. The truth of this misconception is that we do not get over or move past a death.... we learn to carry on in life with it. We learn to integrate the loss into our life and into the very fabric of our being.

Misconception 9: Nobody can help you with your grief.

Sharing your pain with someone else with not make it disappear, but over time, will certainly make it more bearable. Although someone may say to you, “nobody can help you but yourself”, the most compassionate thing you can do for yourself in this time of grief is to reach out to others for help. Reaching out helps you to stay connected in a time when all you may feel up to is to hide in fear.

Misconception 10: When grief and mourning are finally reconciled, they never come up again.

Grief moves in and out life the waves crashing on the shore of an ocean. Sometimes when you least expect it, a huge wave of grief will crash into your heart and you will be reminded of why you loved another so dearly. Allow yourself to embrace these waves of emotion and memory, for you will forever feel the sting of grief of a loved one gone. Grief will not always dominate your every thought or emotion, but as the waves of grief sneak in from time to time, embrace the love of having shared.

Just as misguided as the societal myths of grief, so is the power of harnessing the realities of truth of a grieving soul. The following encouraging information will provide insight of the uniqueness of your grief and opportunity to embrace your unique grieving journey.

To learn more of Dr. Wolfelt’s teachings and writings in the area of grief and loss please visit:

www.centerforloss.com