



Handling the Grief of Divorce

Grief in Divorce is Difficult and No One Size Fits All

When are you just going to get over it and get on with your life?

If you've experienced a grief-causing experience, then you've heard or felt this from your friends. Maybe your family even. That question could be as much about their needs as yours. You see, they don't know how to relate to you in grief. And, they do care about your well-being. Problem is, there is no schedule for your grief. Oh, there is prolonged acute grief. There is deferred grief sometimes. But there is no "normal" to what you are going through. What does this mean for you? For starters, this means that in some ways you may never completely "get over it." You're really after some healthy adjustments and lessons that will help you to move forward in life. And, you're in a process of self-rediscovery apart from your married life. You won't be able to let others suggest a hurried-up timetable for all of that to happen.

Divorced grief recovery involves reflection and hard emotional work

So give yourself access to the honesty of your soul. That is a risky journey to take. Divorcees who allow this part of their journey to happen will often tell me (once safely on the other side!) that the exercise was rewarding. Part of the "aloneness" of divorce is that you are quite stuck with yourself! Marriage, family, household responsibilities are all busying. They also can distract you from the essence of who you have become. You have changed over the years of your marriage. You are now living a new reality. You have suffered hurt, and are even confronting the mixture of your own blame in the dissolution of your marriage. That is a lot to process. The movement toward reflection and adjustment will come as you task in these areas and more. So, again, give yourself access.

There is a difference between "Loneliness" and "Alone-ness"

None of us wants to feel lonely. We fear this, and with good reason. Divorcees can sometimes feel lonely while surrounded by friends, co-workers or family. This is painful and hurtful. But some good doses of "Alone-ness" are necessary for the divorce recovery process. The introspection mentioned above requires that you be by yourself some. Spend the occasional quiet night at home. Allow yourself some isolation and come to know this alone-ness as a friend rather than an enemy. You have work to do and it's okay to be alone so that you can. Alone-ness can be risky, but that risk may just lead you to freedom through new self-awareness and discovery!

Our best understandings of grief acknowledge some "stages"

Divorced grief tracks very similarly with death grief. Whether it be Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' book "On Death and Dying" or some other model, there is a progression to grief. In some manner, there are shock/denial, anger, reflection, and adjustment tasks involved. And you don't necessarily move right through these in a 1,2,3, 4 sort of pattern. You may have a rather messy journey along this process, meandering back and forth between them at times. Just as you think you're "done" with being angry, there you are again! None of this will happen within just a week or two, either. While most won't become clinically depressed, some may. Your feelings are what they are. Allow yourself the full experience. Get help with it if you need to.

One size doesn't fit all

You should feel a common theme by now: each person's grief is as unique and individual as he or she is. Your personality, how you view life, your faith values or lack of, and the particular relational experiences you've had all factor in to what you will perceive as grief. We can wish there were "3 A-B-C's to Get Over Grief in One Convenient Evening". There's not. This is not a puzzle to be solved, a life treasure-hunt to be followed. Grief is a process to be lived. One feeling and insight at a time. And, it is your process.

Time heals all wounds. If I can stay busy enough I will heal.

This mindset is instinctive, and almost always quite destructive. Among other things, your divorce experience is a loss. Your grieving will wait on you if you try to just busy your way through it. Or, if you are tempted to think that a next love will cure what ails you. You must move toward growth that is only possible as you deal with the grief. You will need to spend enough time to unplug and reflect. That's not easy in our culture of noise, speed and distraction. Only the kind of "time" well spent in reflection and helpful support will heal you. God has gifted you with some resources to call upon in the form of healthy friends/family, professional counseling, well-written books and divorce groups.

Expressing the things I'm really feeling can't be healthy.

People wouldn't believe what's inside me!

Stop fearing your feelings. As long as you push them down inside, then you may not be doing much that is constructive with them. Yes, you have to be wise and discerning about whom you self-disclose with. But, you do need some safe persons with whom you can be truthful. There is a profound power to hearing our words leave our mouths when they are coming up out of our souls! That power may prove to be healing, freeing even. Your feelings are neither good nor bad until you act out on them. Your feelings are simply yours! Don't fear them. Name them, and then explore.

Persons of faith are not immune from divorce or its aftermath

Persons of faith actually divorce at the same rate as persons who declare no faith background. The notion that as a person of faith you are more of a failure is not true. And, the notion that your faith should completely and always comfort your grief is not fair. Truth is, you may even experience somewhat of a spiritual crisis as part of your grief journey. Your God is large enough to stay at your side even in those times. Are you upset with God? Admit it, pray it even! You may get some well-intentioned but harmful advice or theology from your friends of faith. Receive this as graciously as you can but filter it in light of your own belief and experience. God can walk with you through rockier spiritual terrain than you might think.

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