

DO I NEED GRIEF COUNSELLING?

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A dear friend recently asked me: "How do you work out if you need grief counselling? I have been through a lot but I'm just not sure if I need help. I feel like I'm doing OK but I'm worried I might be storing up problems for myself later on."

I can totally resonate with the question (and I don't think I gave a very satisfactory answer either!). Grief is the 100% statistic of life, every single one of us will grieve, both for the life-changing loss of a loved one, and the smaller losses of love, health opportunity, finance or reputation.

The fact is humans are always losing the things that they are attached to, because time drives the perpetual cycle of change, stripping us of the people and things that give our lives deeper meaning. Even positive changes can provoke a grief response; the young bride or groom, who miss their parents. The promoted boss, who misses her old team. The parent whose children have left home and misses the noise and mess of the old family home. To a greater or lesser extent we are constantly journeying through grief as we journey through a changing life.

However, there will be seasons and events that will create a far greater grief reaction in us than others. Again, these cannot be easily qualified, they will be different for each individual, but they will usually provoke the same sort of emotions: numbness, shock, extreme tiredness, regret, guilt, anxiety, emotional overwhelm and anger. In many ways the signs of significant grief are not dissimilar to those exhibited in depression, yet it is the causation which qualifies these as grief. Note that you can become clinically depressed following a season of grief so always consult your healthcare provider if you are concerned.

How can I work out if I am doing it right?

Well, that is one of the real challenges about grief recovery; there is no single model. Ecclesiastes 3:4 says that there is, "A time to cry and a time to laugh. A time to grieve and a time to dance." Perhaps this verse gives us more insight than we might initially expect. The reality of life is that the vast majority of us do not need direct counselling support with the grief that we are experiencing (even if it is significant) and at the right moment we will move into a 'time of laughter or a time of dancing'. However, for some of us that time won't come whilst we are working on this stuff alone. Jesus said in Matthew 5:4, 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.'

The best medicine for grief is not professional but relational. We have been created for comfort. Even our 'sad tears' are more viscous than our 'eye cleaning tears' because they have been designed to track slowly down our faces in order that they provoke the comfort and compassion of others. There is absolutely no doubt that we need each other in our grief, and we need God. But what about professional help?

I worked on the Bereavement Journey whilst I was at HTB and with Cruse whilst I was working in Grenfell. Both are incredible resources and involved wonderful people. I think we would probably all agree that the best sort of grief support is the natural community around the individual. With that, and alongside some more information from organisations like these, most people will live and heal best within the relationships around them. Friends and family tend to both enable the grief and ground the change whilst anchoring the person with love. However, people's circumstances differ hugely and many either don't have access to that community or just don't feel able to express how they are feeling on the inside. For them, grief counselling is always going to be a helpful support.

Are there any markers I should look out for?

A brilliant therapist called Elisabeth Kübler-Ross spent years working in a hospice and she identified that the typical flow of a person's grief journey passed through 5 notable emotions: Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance. This journey can fluctuate in intensity, and even flow in both directions, but the accepted time perimeters were 6 months to 4 years to completion. (Often averaging out at 18 months, with the first 4-6 weeks being the most intense of all.) You can explore her work by searching her name or 'The Cycle of Death and Dying' or 'The Change Curve'.

I guess it makes sense to say that if we get locked into the cycle at any point and don't make it further, it's time to reach out for help. This is sometimes known as the inability to 'move on'. But remember, it's never about replacing what has been lost with something else, it's just about being able to remember the loss without overwhelming emotion. Remember that it is still completely normal to be sad at times and even feel a strong resurgence of emotions around any anniversary or event that is notable.

Other things that are very important indicators of concern (and for which you should see emergency support) around grief are suicidal thoughts, depression, sleeplessness, self-harm/impulsive behaviour and interference with work or family function. Whilst these things are certainly not experienced by everyone, they are still common and there is no shame in these feelings. Your healthcare provider will be able to guide you to the right support.

At the end of the day, we need to ask ourselves and others, 'How am I doing with this?'. Grief is a terrible experience; we must not try to go it alone. "The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." (Psalm 34:18)
Best be unsure if you need counselling and have some anyway, then need some and miss out.

Will Van Der Hart, 04/04/2022

