

Grief

This is an excerpt from a Question and Answer Magazine column that Dr. Taft wrote several years ago and while the problems might not be the exact same as yours we feel the answers can be relevant and helpful to us all.

When does the hurting stop? I've lost several close family members within the last two years, and even more recently the man I loved walked out on me, bag and baggage. I'm sad and cry at the drop of a hat. My children don't live anywhere nearby. If it wasn't for my job, I don't think I could make it through the days. But my nights are so lonely. So, Dr. Philip, when does the hurting stop? And, should I ever trust a man again?

Thank you for your vulnerable question. You are clearly reeling from multiple experiences of loss: loss of close family members as well as the loss of your love relationship. Your isolation, sadness and tears are normal but painful grief reactions. A person experiencing any one of the circumstances that you mention would react with a major emotional adjustment that is called bereavement. Typical features of bereavement can include feelings of sadness, insomnia, poor appetite, weight loss, etc. and it can be easily mistaken for a clinical condition called Major Depression. The symptoms of bereavement typically improve within two months of the loss. Yet, your situation is more complicated because you suffer from multiple losses over the past two years. Psychologists and counselors become concerned when a person's symptoms persist beyond two months after the loss. This may indicate that the emotional adjustment to the loss has not healed and may have transformed into clinical depression. Proper evaluation and treatment from a psychologist or clinical counselor is imperative if you fit this description.

A few years ago I attended a seminar offered by a well-credentialed educator and grief counselor, Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D. He identified six needs a person experiences when they go through a loss. These are:

- 1) To be able to embrace a new reality that someone we love has died.
- 2) To be able to embrace the pain of a loss. You have to feel it to heal it.
- 3) To remember the person who has died (perhaps through a post-death ritual such as recognizing their birthday or the anniversary of their death).
- 4) To begin to develop a new self-identity.

- 5) To search for meaning.
- 6) To have ongoing support (even long after the death/loss).

I think that these needs are just as relevant to the loss of divorce as they are to the loss of death. Though our culture often downplays the devastation of divorce, I tend to think of it more like C.S. Lewis describes in his book “Mere Christianity”. Here he likens divorce to “...something like cutting up a living body, as a kind of surgical operation.” Thus, the goal for any grieving person is not to get over their grief but to learn to live with it. Mourning doesn’t end it just changes in its intensity.

Now, let me address another point in your letter. You seem rather isolated in your bereavement. I recommend several steps for your own self-care. First, consider journaling and prayer/meditation. If you’re a spiritual person these practices can really facilitate healing and deepen your spiritual walk. Even if you are not a spiritual person, there is tremendous research to support the physical and emotional benefits of prayer/mediation.

Next, try to begin to establish a social support system. Since your children do not live close by you will need to reach out to the local community. You mentioned that your job is really helping you survive right now. My hunch is that it is helpful because of the daily social interaction and support you receive from your co-workers. Consider developing a relationship with a friend at work or attending a local church community. Remember that just going to work or church will not develop the deep relationships you need. Small group bible studies or ministry teams within the church are better suited for building relationships. Also, your local church may already have a formal or informal grief/loss or divorce recovery group, though I am not currently aware of one. Perhaps the best available support group in Corsicana is offered through the recently formed “Celebrate Recovery” Program that meets at Grace Community Church every Monday night. This program is supported and staffed by volunteers from several local churches and is intended to be nondemoninational. This program is not just for alcohol and drug addicts. It is for anyone who is struggling with a “hurt, habit or hang-up”.

Finally, your question about being able to trust again is definitely understandable. Unfortunately I can’t answer that for you. This world is a painful place full of unpredictable losses. I am not aware of anyone that completes their life without encountering quite a bit of pain. Learning to trust again is a slow and difficult emotional and cognitive process and it is different for everyone. In my experience

those that turn to their spiritual belief system, take an active role in their healing and seek out resources for their self-care have a better outcome than those that wait for the healing to come and stay in chronic survival mode.