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Toward an Understanding of the “Going Crazy Syndrome”

Part Two
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As C. S. Lewis noted, “Grief is like a long, winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape.” As you explore the terrain of your unique grief journey, you may ask yourself, “Am I crazy?” A vital part of healing in grief is understanding the normalcy of your experience.

This article is the second in a three-part series to address this frequent question, “Am I crazy?” In the first article, I provided information about the normalcy of disorganization and confusion that often comes when we mourn the death of someone loved. In this article, I address other aspects of grief and mourning that, unless normalized, might make you think you are crazy.

My intent is not to prescribe what should be happening to you. Instead, I encourage you to become familiar with what you may encounter while you grieve and do your work of mourning. A vital part of healing in grief is understanding the normalcy of your experience.

The potential aspects of your journey that I explore here are as follows:

- Time Distortion
- Obsessive Review or Ruminating
- Search for Meaning
- Is This Death God’s Will?
- Transitional Objects
- Suicidal Thoughts
- Anniversary and Holiday Grief Occasions

Time Distortion

“I don’t know what day it is, let alone what time it is!” This kind of comment is not unusual when you are mourning. Sometimes, time moves so quickly; at other times, it merely crawls. Your sense of past and future may also seem to be frozen in place. You may lose track of what day or even what month it is.

This normal experience of time distortion often plays a part in the “going crazy syndrome.” No, you are not crazy. But if you don’t know this is normal, you may think you are.

Obsessive Review or Ruminating

Obsessive review or ruminating are the psychological terms used for describing how you may repeat the circumstances about the death or stories about the person who has died.

It's "telling your story" over and over again. In your grief journey, you may often review events of the death and memories of the person who died over and over.

This normal process helps bring your head and your heart together! Allow yourself to do this. Blocking it out won't help you heal. Don't be angry with yourself if you can't seem to stop wanting to repeat your story. Review or rumination is a powerful and necessary part of the hard work of mourning.

Yes, it hurts to constantly think and talk about the person you loved so much. But remember – all grief wounds get worse before they get better. Be compassionate with yourself. Try to surround yourself with people who allow and encourage you to repeat whatever you need to tell again.

Search for Meaning

Naturally, you try to make sense of why someone you love died. You may find yourself asking questions like "Why him or her?", "Why now?", "Why this way?" Yes, you have questions. You are human and are simply trying to understand your experience. No, answers won't always be, and often aren't, specific to your questions. Yet, you still need to give yourself permission to ask them.

As you wrestle with "Why?" you may be outraged at your God or Higher Power. You may feel a stagnation or disillusionment with your spiritual life as you embrace your pain. On the other hand, you may feel closer than ever before. You can only be where you are.

You may be able to come up with dozens of reasons why the person who died should not have died under these circumstances or at this time. Whatever the nature or number of your questions, asking them is a normal part of your grief journey.

As you explore the meaning of this experience through your questions, be certain not to commit "spiritual suicide." Do not prohibit yourself from asking the questions you know are within you. If you do, you may shut down your capacity to give and receive love during this vulnerable period in your life.

Be aware that people may try to tell you not to ask questions about your personal search for meaning in your grief journey. Or worse yet, watch out for people who always try to have easy answers to your difficult questions. Most bereaved people do not find comfort in pat responses; neither will you. The healing occurs in posing the questions in the first place, not just in finding answers.

Find a friend, group, or counselor who will understand your need to search for meaning and be supportive without attempting to offer answers. Companionship and responsive listening can help you explore your religious and spiritual values, question your philosophy of life, and renew your resources for living!

Is This Death God's Will?

Closely related to the search for meaning is the commonly asked question, "Is this death God's will?" If you have a perception of an all-powerful God or Higher Power, you probably find this question particularly difficult.

Sometimes you may reason: "God loves me, so why take this most precious person from me?" Or you may have been told, "It is God's will, and you should just accept it and go on." If you, however, internalize this message, you may repress your grief and ignore your human need to mourn.

Repressing your grief because you need to "just accept it and go on" can be self-destructive. If you don't ask questions and if you don't express feelings, you may ultimately drown in despair. If your soul does not ask, your body will probably protest. Repressing and denying heart-felt questions can, and often does, keep your wounds from healing. Listen to your questions!

Transitional Objects

Transitional objects are belongings of the person in your life who died. They often can give you comfort. Objects such as clothing, books, or prized possessions can help you feel close to someone you miss so much.

For example, during my counseling with a bereaved woman, she shared with me that she found it comforting to take one of her husband's favorite shirts to bed with her. She said, "As I clutched his shirt close to me, I didn't feel so alone. But as I worked with my grief, my need for the shirt dwindled over time."

Some people may try to distance you from belongings such as the shirt described above. This behavior fits with the tendency in our culture to move away from grief instead of toward it.

Remember: Embrace the comfort provided by familiar objects. To do away with them too soon takes away a sense of security these belongings provide. Once you have moved toward reconciliation, you will probably be better able to decide what to do with them. Some things, however, you may want to keep forever. That's all right, too. Simply giving away the belongings of the person you loved does not equate with healing in your grief.

Nor does keeping some belongings mean you have "created a shrine." This phrase is used when someone keeps everything just as it was for years after the death. Creating a shrine, however, only prevents acknowledging the painful new reality that someone you love has died. Understanding the difference between transitional objects and creating a shrine is important. The former helps you heal; the latter does not.

Suicidal Thoughts

Thoughts that come and go about questioning if you want to go on living can be a normal part of your grief and mourning. You might say or think, "I'm not sure I'd mind if I didn't wake up in the morning." Often this thought is not so much an active wish to kill yourself as it is a wish to ease your pain.

To have these thoughts is normal; however, to make plans and take action to end your life is abnormal. Sometimes your body, mind, and spirit can hurt so much you wonder if you will ever feel alive again. Just remember that in accomplishing the hard

work of mourning, you can and will find continued meaning in your life. Let yourself be helped as you have hope for your healing.

If thoughts of suicide take on planning and structure, make certain that you get help immediately. Sometimes tunnel vision can prevent you from seeing choices. Please choose to go on living as you honor the memory of the person in your life who has died.

Anniversary and Holiday Grief Occasions

Naturally, anniversary and holiday occasions can bring about “pangs” of grief. Birthdays; wedding dates; holidays such as Easter, Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas; and other special occasions create a heightened sense of loss. At these times, you may likely experience a grief attack or memory embrace.

Your “pangs” of grief may also occur in response to circumstances that bring about reminders of the painful absence of someone in your life. For many families, certain times have special meaning related to family togetherness, and the person who died is more deeply missed at those times. For example, the beginning of Spring, the first snowfall, an annual Fourth of July party, or anytime when activities were shared as a couple or a family.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that these reactions are natural. Sometimes the anticipation of an anniversary or holiday actually turns out to be worse than the day itself.

Interestingly enough, sometimes your internal clock will alert you to an anniversary date you may have forgotten. If you notice you are feeling down or experiencing “pangs” of grief, you may be having an anniversary response. Keep in mind that it is normal.

Plan ahead when you know some naturally painful times are coming for you. Unfortunately, some bereaved people will not mention anniversaries, holidays or special occasions to anyone. As a result, they suffer in silence, and their feelings of isolation increase. Don’t let this happen to you. Recognize you will need support and map out how to get it!

The aspects of grief outlined above are in no way an all-inclusive list of potential experiences that might relate to the question, “Am I crazy?” However, my hope is that this information helps you better understand the normalcy of your unique journey into grief.

In the final article in this series I explore Grief Attacks or Memory Embraces, Sudden Changes in Mood, Identification Symptoms of Physical Illness, Powerlessness and Helplessness, Dreams, Mystical Experiences, and Self-Focus.

Reference

Lewis, C.S., *A Grief Observed*, 1963, Seabury Press, New York, NY

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