

Making Meaning

Our world is constantly impacted by trauma and tragedy. From war zones like Iraq and Afghanistan, devastations and loss like the earthquake in Canterbury, to getting a diagnosis of cancer. When you receive a diagnosis of cancer, often your and your family's or whanau's world is turned upside down. Suddenly there are no certainties.

Grief is a feeling of sadness in response to a loss. Grief is far more than just an emotional response (Worden 1991¹). It encompasses the feelings, physical sensations, psychological and social interactions of a person, family and community. Every person's expression and experience of grief is unique and individual. Grief is not a one size fits all! Their loss may be temporary or permanent, life-altering, or a minor inconvenience for them or their family, e.g. hair loss from cancer treatment can be very important to some, but less important to others². How you have faced change, loss or grief in the past may inform how you do it now. A possibility is for you to look for some new tools to add to your tool kit.

You may have many feelings, experiences and thoughts. They can be any of these: disbelief, denial, repeating things, reality, confusion, anxiety, bargaining, depression, relief, guilt, anger, loneliness, despair, sadness, preoccupation, bitterness, waiting, hope, helplessness, envy, frustration, seeking information, blocking out information, looking for comfort, finding or losing friends, new situations and peace. Do any of these resonate with you?

Robert Neimeyer writes about grief and loss. When I heard him speak, a few years ago, I remember he said something like this: **If you can make meaning, then you can accommodate; if you can accommodate then you can adjust; when you adjust you can go on to live a normal and reconciled life.**

To feel grief and loss is normal:

N = numb

O = overwhelming

R = reality check – is this for real?

M = making meaning

A = accommodation and adjustment

L = liminality – walking in the in-between space. Life has changed, things are the same yet different, different language, experiences, challenges, this is the in-between time. You have moved from where you were but not yet found the new or different space that you are moving to.

Some things that may help: keep a journal, spend time in your garden, chop wood, mow lawns, scream at the wind, go to the movies, have coffee, paint or walk on the beach. Use rituals to help find ways to express what you are feeling or experiencing. Talk about it with someone. Join a group. Come into the Cancer Society rooms and borrow some books, talk with a nurse, talk with a counsellor.

¹ Worden, J. W. (1991). Four Tasks of Grief Model. The New Song Centre for Children and Those Who Love Them.

² <http://www.livestrong.org/Get-Help/Learn-About-Cancer/Cancer-Support-Topics/Emotional-Effects-of-Cancer/Grief-and-Loss>

Even years after you have finished treatment there can be reminders of the experience which can bring up grief. Here are some examples of things that can trigger some of these emotions:

- Sensory reminders such as certain tastes or smells.
- Medical appointments, even those that are routine.
- Hearing about someone who has been diagnosed with cancer or who has died from cancer.
- Anniversary dates e.g. date of diagnosis, end of treatment, date of the death of a loved one.
- Family events like weddings, graduations, birthdays, and holidays.
- Experiencing on-going losses because of the after effects of treatment.

Hot Tips

- Good people get cancer, life is hard, accept this
- It is not what life dishes up that is important – it is how you choose to respond
- Learn your body signals – when you start to feel up-tight, angry – take a walk or concentrate on your breathing and slow it down
- Seek out a listening ear
- Get creative
- Lace up your sneakers – getting exercise is a good stress reliever
- Keep moving forward – use your energy to move, accommodate and adjust
- Think marshmallow – sometimes you need to lighten up – watch the negative thinking
- Watch your stress and anxiety. Maintain good emotional health when in treatment or after being treated
- Move towards having work, exercise & emotional balance.

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