



Grief Journey Roadblocks

When we lose someone whom we love, we expect to feel sad. The reality of grief, however, is so much more complex, and filled with so many tough emotions and “grief roadblocks” that even the most astute could never foresee.

A “grief roadblock” refers to any of the tough and complicated emotions that stand in the way of our path to healthy grieving. These emotions- like anger, guilt and regret- are very often responsible for leaving a person in a grief limbo and halting their ability to move forward.

Before discussing how to cope with grief roadblocks, it’s worth mentioning that all of this is very “normal”. Not normal for you maybe, and certainly not pleasant, or comfortable. But getting “stuck” at some point along the grief journey is very common and very much to be expected. These emotions will manifest themselves differently for everyone, but here are some examples of what blocks the griever:

ANGER — at the person, disease, drug, or mental illness that took our loved one from us. Anger at our loved ones for leaving us – or anger with God or religion or any other higher power for letting a bad thing happen to a good person.

GUILT — at not being able to do MORE. Whatever that “more” may be . . . encouraging our loved one to take better care of themselves or preventing them from going out the night they died. Guilt at not being able to prevent a suicide or drug overdose or car accident, feeling always that if only we could have just done “more”, they’d still be here.

REGRET — at not saying “I love you” more often. For not spending more time together or for not always being physically or mentally present for our loved one when we felt we should have been.

The list, truly, can go on and on. Because these emotions do just that – they go on and on, spinning us and scrambling us in a cycle that can become so dizzying and disorienting that we don’t know how to get off. There is no moving forward, only looping back again and again, which can lead to little hope of finding any hope at all. These emotions are so empty and meaningless, and they serve no purpose . . . right?
Wrong.

Because the big surprise is that these emotions DO serve a purpose and as soon as we can figure out what that is, we can stop the cycle and begin to move forward in a healthy direction. So, what purpose do they serve?

CONTROL — One of the hardest things to cope with in loss is the realization that we have no control. Not just of our loved one’s life or their passing, but really of any part of life or what happens to us, or the people around us on a day-to-day basis. This can be nearly impossible to accept. So often, instead of turning ourselves over to that very big idea of having no control over anything in life, we try to maintain that sense of control and it manifests itself as guilt . . . “I should have done more”. “I could have prevented it”. “If only I’d been there.” Guilt helps us maintain a sense of control in our world.

CONNECTION — Ruminating, second-guessing, going over and over and over the events leading up to the death of our loved one can do a lot of things, but the one thing most of all? It keeps them in our thoughts. It can be a way of holding on, of never letting go. Of proving to them, ourselves and to the world that we will never forget. And by keeping them always in our thoughts, even with self-torturing and suffering thoughts, they are with us. It is our testament, our tribute, and our purpose — to keep them with us always. Even if it means we wither and suffer in the process.

COMFORT — How odd it may seem to someone who has never gone through it, but there is a dark contentment to be found in the complicated emotions of grief. The feelings of happiness, joy, and humor become the clothes that no longer fit. And for some, anger can be a more comfortable place than sadness. Anger has energy, purpose and often a target.

These complicated emotions can become the distractions that sideline us from the real pain and emptiness that we just can't face, or from the joy or feeling of moving forward that we're afraid to feel. If this is indeed true, what can we possibly do about any of it?

The focus needs to be on redirecting our thinking and our energy.

LETTING GO If our grief roadblock was serving to maintain a sense of control in our lives, perhaps the first step is to figure out how to let go of that need to feel in control all the time. Letting go is probably one of the hardest things to do, but with patience and practice, we can continue to find some acceptance of the idea that we had no control over what happened. Nothing will ever change what has happened. The only thing we truly have power over is this moment — and this moment only.

CREATE A TRIBUTE This is the most complicated part of grieving. How to move forward without leaving our loved one behind? If I experience joy, even for a moment, is it a betrayal to the loved one I've lost? Shouldn't I always suffer in some way, to hold on to them and their memory? By creating a tribute, a memorial, or a ritual to our loved one, we can maintain our connection with them. We can move forward and bring them with us in a way that is healthy and healing for us

WHAT WOULD THEY WANT? What would they want for you? The person who you grieve, whose loss has made it so hard for you move forward . . . what would they want for you? You know the answer. If they were here, if you could talk to them, they would comfort you and counsel you and urge you to pick up the pieces as best you can and to keep making a go at life. Feel your loved one's presence as you can hear their voice and just how they would say this to you. This may be a very painful exercise, but it serves both to maintain our connection with the loved one we've lost, and to take the advice we know they'd be giving us.

None of this will happen overnight. Recognize that grieving is a process that we stumble through, and falter at. And while the process of grieving doesn't have an official end because we will always grieve for the ones we've lost, there is the next step. A step toward healing, toward hope, and yes, even joy. But we can only get there if we do the work to move the roadblocks out of our way. (1)

(1) Adapted from materials posted on www.griefincommon.com