

PONDERINGS ALONG THE PATH

By Nadine Boyd



Dear Compassionate Friends:

You often hear about the stages of grief. It's usually broken down into five stages: Denial & Isolation, Anger, Bargaining, Depression/Worry and Acceptance.

Denial and isolation is the "first" stage of grief. I believe it is the body and mind's way of sheltering you from the unbelievable shock and pain of this loss. You are often numb and detached from the rest of your world. Often you find it difficult to concentrate or focus, even to complete simple everyday tasks. You may find yourself reading the same paragraph over and over, or unable to concentrate long enough to watch a movie or complete a task at work. Denial is really quite effective, as long as you can make it work for you. If you can deny the unimaginable and unthinkable ever happened, you don't have to deal with the pain. Again, this is your body and mind's coping mechanism.

Anger is self-explanatory. You will definitely know when you hit this stage. You are unbelievably angry. Maybe you're angry at the medical facility or lack of medical care, someone who you believe caused your child's death. Maybe you are angry at the universe or God-that your child died. You feel singled out-why did this happen to me or my family? Why my child? Often this anger is unleashed at unexpected people or times; for instance, when well-meaning people try to comfort you with empty phrases that actually make you feel worse. "You shouldn't feel that way", "he's in a better place", "are you still going to those meetings, the cemetery, you haven't changed her room, and on and on...". Give yourself permission to feel your feelings. It's ok to be angry. There were a lot of times when I needed to scream in the car or cry in the laundry room!

If you have been grieving a while and you are not feeling denial or anger as often, you may think "whew! I'm glad that's over!" You may not realize that those "stages" or feelings are never really over. You may be coasting along feeling better and thinking you are actually handling it pretty well, and then: "wham!" something triggers those feelings and you are unexpectedly right back to anger. I often think with fondness of a lovely Friend a few years back. Only a few weeks after her daughter's death she remarked to her husband and the group she was very glad she was through those first two stages of denial and anger. She wasn't, of course, she was actually still in shock and disbelief.

The bargaining stage is often where grieving families begin blaming themselves. I call this the "shoulda, coulda, woulda" stage. "I shoulda taken him to the hospital earlier. If only I could have known how bad she was feeling....and on and on". A very good Friend who had also lost her daughter to kidney disease helped me so much when she asked me what we would have done differently with Aaron's care. When I stopped to think about it I realized we had done the best we could with the knowledge, medical care and drugs available at that time. It brought me a lot of healing and a lot closer to forgiving myself.

Depression/worry is also self-explanatory. You need to be prepared and aware you are going to feel sadness. You are going to worry that you are "short-changing" your spouse, your family and very likely your job. You cannot avoid this stage or "stuff" your sadness. It takes a lot of energy to grieve. Try to get enough rest, exercise and eat healthy foods. Try to be around people who understand you have changed and will listen if you need to talk and won't turn away if you need to cry. I also learned to avoid negative, needy people who made everything about them. Their negativity becomes like those black holes in space, that sucks all energy. You become exhausted. The irony is they usually don't want a solution to their problems, because that would take away attention from them.

If you have trouble focusing at work use tools to help you. I should have brought stock in "sticky" notes, because they were so crucial to me at work.

I have a problem with the stage named "acceptance". I have written about this in previous columns, and to me this implies you are "okay" with this situation; you "accept" this situation. I feel like I will never "accept" losing my child-it is completely "unacceptable". To me, this stage is more of the "peace that passes all understanding". We didn't get a choice about losing our child, and we have "mostly" worked through the denial and anger. We have a giant hole in our hearts that will never be completely healed, but we have to go on living with our torn, mended hearts until we can be reunited with our child in Heaven. We understand we are different now. We may have lost friends along this journey to healing, but now know who are "real" Friends, there with us through good time and bad, there with us for the long haul. We still miss our child with all our heart. We will always wish they are here in our arms, but we understand they are still our children and we are still their family.

Everyone grieves differently and is on different timetables, but it is very common to flip back and forth between the stages of grief. If it has been a while, and you feel "stuck" in your grief or still unable to function, there is no shame in seeking medical or professional help. There is help available. Grief is very isolating and you may feel very much alone, but it is very healing to reach out to others who care and understand. It is healing for both you and the people you reach out to. We "get" it.

I wish you comfort and healing. I wish you more "good" days on your journey to healing and the "peace that passes all understanding".

In friendship,

Nadine