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# Along The Way

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## How Long?

By Dr. Bill Webster

# How Long?

One of the most frequent questions I am asked is: "How long does grief last?"

My favourite answer: "Grief always takes longer than people who haven't been through it seem to think." But unfortunately, there is no one neat orderly answer to the question. To quote the great baseball coach Yogi Berra, "It ain't over till it's over."

When you catch a flu bug or virus, or when you contract an illness, doctors can usually give a pretty accurate time frame of how long it will take for the situation to run its course. Some think of grief in a similar way, but that is not how it works.

People traditionally thought of the grief process in terms of a "timeline" that begins with a death (or indeed a life-threatening situation that might lead to death) and from there they measure in weeks, months or years the time it takes to "get back to normal." How many times have you heard someone say, "It's been three months, you ought to be over it by now"?

We see this attitude displayed in the workplace where some employers feel three days or one week is an adequate time off work to deal with the loss of an immediate family member. Often other significant emotional losses don't even qualify for consideration. Then it's back to work where in many cases the person is expected to just "get on with it." Those few days may give someone time to plan and attend a service, but that has nothing to do with time necessary to process the emotional pain.

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But more recently, counsellors are realizing that grief does not work in a timeline because in many people's experience, it doesn't come all at once. It is not a few weeks or months and then it fades away. Grief comes and goes.

Certainly, the first few months may be particularly intense. In the early stages, you can be caught up in a whirlwind of things you need to do and work out. At first, you may feel shocked and numb. What makes it more difficult is often after several months, the initial support you had from friends and family starts to fade.

At the same time as people start to provide less support, you may find you feel less numb and more emotional. Sometimes it is when people think we



should be getting ourselves together that we feel like we are falling apart. Only as these things happen can you start to experience how different your life is without the person you loved and start to grieve for that loss.

The first year can be difficult because it generally involves getting through all the “firsts” to realize how much life has changed, both emotionally and practically. Some things only come up once a year, like celebrating a birthday, the first Christmas or Hanukkah, the first anniversary, Mother’s Day, Valentine’s Day, “a year ago today day” and many others things that remind us of our loss. Sometimes it is tied to having to do something the person who died used to do, like renewing the car insurance, completing the taxes or buying a new appliance.

But we have to be careful. If I answer someone’s question, “How long does grief last?” simply by saying, “It takes as long as it takes” or “It could take a year,” that could sound like a life sentence, since their level of pain day by day may be so intense.

The problem with each of these different answers is they all perpetuate one of the greatest of all myths, namely that “time heals.” The passage of time has nothing to do with actually moving through the pain of loss.

When we say to a bereaved person, “You just need some time” or “Time heals all wounds,” we are really saying, “Just sit back and in time you’ll no longer have this sadness, anguish, yearning, guilt, anger and fear you’re feeling now. They’ll fade away, and you’ll be fine.”

WOW! Wouldn’t that be wonderful ... except it doesn’t work! Think about it. Why would it apply to grief when it doesn’t apply to the rest of our lives? After all, we have to look for a new job, search for the right house, study to get through school. Even if we want to win the lottery, we still have to buy a ticket. We always have to take the initiative to do something in order to cause something else to happen.

The point here, though, is that time does not heal all wounds. A more apt saying is “It’s what you do with the time that heals.” Like any other aspect of life, mourning is an active working process, not a passive one.

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#### **So, following are a few suggestions.**

1. Be patient with yourself, remembering “he who has no time to mourn has no time to mend.” Allow yourself time to grieve and feel comfortable in your own time frame even though that may not be in tune with someone else’s expectations.
2. Mention the person’s name. Whether it has been one month or 10 years, speak of them. Remember they lived and celebrate the fact there was a time when they were here. Grief invites us to remember, not to forget.
3. Always remember, you are not failing at grief or at life if you still feel broken, empty and sad even after some time has passed. Time alone will not mend the broken or fix the unfixable. Only you hold the key to that.

So, perhaps the best answer to the original question is this: “The amount of time grief lasts is directly related to the time needed for the grieving person to decide to take effective action to deal with their grief.”





# The Question of Emotions

By Dr. Bill Webster

“ ‘m just so emotional. What should I do?”

The phrase could have been spoken by any one of us, but in this instance, it was a 35-year-old single mother whose husband had died in a tragic vehicle accident. The feelings just welled up inside her and spilled over in tears, disbelief, anger and a host of other reactions in response to her loss.

The response of others, though well intentioned, had been less than helpful.

“You just have to be strong, dear. Joe wouldn’t want you to be falling apart like this. Your children need you to step up to the plate. Life must go on.”

While containing an element of truth, these comments were made in an attempt to get her to control her emotions. People seem to have bought into the myth that emotions are a sign of weakness and even instability. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Many of us are familiar with the five stages of grief and we have come to expect that at some point following a death we might feel denial, anger, bargaining, depression and, ultimately, acceptance. But while that is the theory, it may be surprising to learn that many other emotions can appear that are often unexpected and downright uncomfortable.

So, what is an emotion? The root word in French and in Latin means “to excite” or “to disturb.” Emotion is defined as “a natural instinctive state of mind deriving from one’s circumstances, mood or relationships with others.” When we are happy, we have emotions that express our pleasure. No one tries to change those.

But when we experience grief and sadness, why do people try to replace the emotions of grief with what I call “fix it” statements like “be strong”; “pull yourself together”; or “it’s been three months, you ought to be over it by now”?

As a grief support facilitator, I believe the first question grieving people should ask is not “what should I do?” but “why is this happening?” If you understand the “why,” the “what” and the “how” will fall into place.

When we grieve, we experience emotions because we are disturbed by what has happened. Our whole being and our entire world is shaken by any death or tragedy and that is a natural response. Often after bereavement we cannot accept, believe or comprehend what has happened rationally, and so we respond to that life-changing situation emotionally.

Counsellors generally agree that there are six basic emotions. These are:

**Joy:** feeling happy about life as it is now.

**Sadness:** feeling sad about life as it is now.

**Surprise:** feeling unprepared for something that could or is happening.

**Disgust:** feeling that something is wrong, nasty or just not fair.

**Fear:** being afraid, frightened, scared that things are out of control.

**Anger:** reaction to a situation beyond our control.

## While one person may experience many of the emotions of grief, it is always to a lesser or greater degree than someone else.

While many grieving people will identify with most of these emotions, into this framework we could also weave emotions like:

### Emptiness

Where once there was a spouse, parent, grandparent, child, colleague or friend, there is now a void. The role the deceased played in your life is now empty. No one can ever fill that space, and we have to find ways to fill our lives with something else.

### Helplessness

Most of us rely on someone else to perform a variety of roles in our life. Without that person we may feel helpless. Who will drive at night, do the taxes, install or fix the technology, do the laundry, or cook? While it might take time, many people are surprised when they are able to rise to the occasion and discover they can indeed navigate life by themselves.

### Feeling Lost

When we have a history and have shared a facet of our life with someone, it is easy to feel lost without them. No matter what role the deceased played in our life, whether friend, relative, colleague or neighbour, we are now missing someone whom we relied upon and it can be difficult to see how we will manage without them.

We and our lives are disturbed when someone we love

dies. That's what the word "emotion" means. Grief is an emotional response to a significant loss. If you hadn't needed that relationship, or risked the emotional attachment, you wouldn't be feeling the loss. But you did, and, oh yes, it was worth the risk. It is a high compliment to any relationship that we miss it enough to shed a tear and feel emotional. How awful if we didn't! Tears are not a sign of weakness, but an indication of how special the relationship was. To experience grief is to acknowledge that you are human.

One of my weaknesses in life is a love of chocolate, particularly my favourites: Ferrero Rocher clusters. After a lifetime of research, I have made an amazing discovery: there are no two nut clusters exactly the same! While each consists of the same basic ingredients, every single one is different. Some are round while others are a little "off shape"; some have a few extra nuts, others have a bigger blob of chocolate on top. All have the same basic ingredients, but none are identical.

In the same way, grief is a cluster of emotions. Every individual has their own unique cluster, because we are all different people, with different losses and unique circumstances. While one person may experience many of the emotions of grief, it is always to a lesser or greater degree than someone else.

Every individual, every situation and each relationship is unique, and so don't be surprised if your response to your loss is unique. Don't feel you have to live up to the expectations of other people as to what emotions are appropriate. As William Shakespeare put it, "Everyone can master a grief that is not his own." You are the expert on you, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

*Paradise Row*  
111 Paradise Row  
Saint John, N.B. E2K 3H6  
506-634-7424

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506-634-7425