

Embracing the Sadness of Grief

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"In every heart there is an inner room, where we can hold our greatest treasures and our deepest pain."

— Marianne Williamson

Sadness is a hallmark symptom of grief, which in turn is the consequence of losing something we care about. In this way you could say that sadness and love are inextricably linked.

Yes, when you are grieving, it is normal to feel sad. I would even argue that it is necessary to feel sad. But *why* is it necessary? Why does the emotion we call sadness have to exist at all? Couldn't we just move from loss to shock to acceptance without all that pain in the middle?

The answer is that sadness plays an essential role. It forces us to regroup—physically, cognitively, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. When we are sad, we instinctively turn inward. We withdraw. We slow down. It's as if our soul presses the pause button and says, "Whoa, whoa, whoaaa. Time out. I need to acknowledge what's happened here and really consider what I want to do next."

This very ability to consider our own existence is, in fact, what defines us as human beings. Unlike other animals, we are self-aware. And to be self-aware is to feel sadness but also joy and timeless love.

I sometimes call the necessary sadness of grief "sitting in your wound." When you sit in the wound of your grief, you surrender to it. You acquiesce to the instinct to slow down and turn inward. You allow yourself to appropriately wallow in the pain. You shut the world out for a time so that, eventually, you have created space to let the world back in.

The dark night of the soul

While grief affects all aspects of your life—your physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual selves, it is fundamentally a spiritual journey. In grief, your understanding of who you are, why you are here, and whether or not life is worth living is challenged. A significant loss plunges you into what C.S. Lewis, Eckhart Tolle, and various Christian mystics have called "the dark night of the soul."

Life suddenly seems meaningless. Nothing makes sense. Everything you believed and held dear has been turned upside-down. The structure of your world collapses.

The dark night of the soul can be a long and very black night indeed. If you are struggling with depression after a loss, you are probably inhabiting that long, dark night. It is uncomfortable and scary. The pain of that place can seem intolerable, and yet the only way to emerge into the light of a new morning is to experience the night. As a wise person once observed, "Darkness is the chair upon which light sits."

The necessity of stillness

Many of the messages that people in grief are given contradict the need for stillness: "Carry on;" "Keep busy;" "I have someone for you to meet." Yet, the paradox for many griever is that as they try to frantically move forward, they often lose their way.

Times of stillness are not anchored in a psychological need but in a spiritual necessity. A lack of stillness hastens confusion and disorientation and results in a waning of the spirit. If you do not rest in stillness for a time, you cannot and will not find your way out of the wilderness of grief.

Stillness allows for the transition from "soul work" to "spirit work." According to the groundbreaking thinking of psychologist Carl Jung, "soul work" is the downward movement of the psyche. It is the willingness to connect with what is dark, deep, and not necessarily pleasant. "Spirit work," on the other hand, involves the upward, ascending movement of the psyche. It is during spirit work that you find renewed meaning and joy in life.

Soul work comes before spirit work. Soul work lays the ground for spirit work. The spirit cannot ascend until the soul first descends. The withdrawal, slowing down, and stillness of sadness create the conditions necessary for soul work.

Liminal space

Sadness lives in liminal space. "*Limina*" is the Latin word for threshold, the space betwixt and between. When you are in liminal space, you are not busily and unthinkingly going about your daily life. Neither are you living from a place of assuredness about your relationships and beliefs. Instead, you are unsettled. Both your mindless daily routine and your core beliefs have been shaken, forcing you to reconsider who you are, why you're here, and what life means. It's uncomfortable being in liminal space, but that's where sadness takes you. Without sadness, you wouldn't go there. But it is only in liminal space that you can reconstruct your shattered worldview and reemerge as the transformed you that is ready to live and love fully again.

Sadness and empathy

Another evolutionary and still relevant reason for sadness is that it alerts others to the thoughts and feelings that are inside you. We all know what someone who is sad looks like. His posture is slumped. He moves slowly. His eyes and mouth droop. Being able to read others' sadness is useful because it gives us a chance to reach out and support them. In centuries past we intentionally made our sadness more evident as a signal for others to support us. We wore black for a year, and we donned black armbands. We literally wore our hearts on our sleeves.

Sadness elicits empathy—which is a close cousin to love. Empathy and love are the glue of human connection. And human connection is what makes life worth living.

Receiving and accepting support from others is an essential need of mourning—one we'll talk more about later in this book. If you try to deny or hide your sadness, you are closing a door that leads to healing.

Your divine spark

Your spiritual self is who you are deep inside—your innermost essence, stripped of all the external trappings of your life. It is who you were before you took on your earthly form, and it is who you will continue to be after you leave it. It is your soul, or "divine spark"—what Meister Eckhart described as "that which gives depth and purpose to our living." It is the still, small voice inside of you.

When you are grieving, your divine spark struggles like a candle in the wind. Many hundreds of people in grief have said to me variations on, "I feel so hopeless" or "I am not sure I can go on living." Like yours, the losses that have touched their lives have naturally muted, if not extinguished, their divine sparks.

When you are depressed, you no longer feel the warm glow of your divine spark inside you. Instead, everything feels dark and cold. The way to relight your divine spark is to turn inward and give your pain the attention it needs and deserves.

Honoring your pain

From my own experiences with loss as well as those of thousands of grieving people I have companioned over the years, I have learned that you cannot go around the pain of your grief. Instead, you must open to the pain. You must acknowledge the inevitability of the pain. You must gently embrace the pain. You must honor the pain.

"What?" you naturally protest. "Honor the pain?" As crazy as it may sound, your pain is the key that opens your heart and ushers you on your way to healing.

Honoring means recognizing the value of and respecting. It is not instinctive to see grief and the need to openly mourn as something to honor; yet the capacity to love requires the necessity to mourn. To honor your grief is not self-destructive or harmful, it is self-sustaining and life-giving.

Yet you have probably been taught that pain and sadness are indications that something is wrong and that you should find ways to alleviate the pain. In our culture, pain and feelings of loss are experiences most people try to avoid. Why? Because the role of pain and suffering is misunderstood. Normal thoughts and feelings after a loss are often seen as unnecessary and inappropriate.

Unfortunately, our culture has an unwritten rule that says while physical illness is usually beyond your control, emotional distress is your fault. In other words, some people think you should be able to “control” or subdue your feelings of sadness. Nothing could be further from the truth. Your sadness is a symptom of your wound. Just as physical wounds require attention, so do emotional wounds.

Paradoxically, the only way to lessen your pain is to move toward it, not away from it. Moving toward your sadness is not easy to do. Every time you admit to feeling sad, people around you may say things like, “Oh, don’t be sad” or “Get a hold of yourself,” or “Just think about what you have to be thankful for.” Comments like these hinder, not help, your healing. If your heart and soul are prevented from feeling the sadness, odds are your body may be harmed in the process. Your grief is the result of an injury to your spirit. Now you must attend to your injury.

You will learn over time that the pain of your grief will keep trying to get your attention until you have the courage to gently, and in small doses, open to its presence. The alternative—denying or suppressing your pain—is in fact more painful. I have learned that the pain that surrounds the *closed* heart of grief is the pain of living against yourself, the pain of denying how the loss changes you, the pain of feeling alone and isolated—unable to openly mourn, unable to love and be loved by those around you.

Yes, the sadness, depression, and pain of loss are essential experiences in life. You are reading this article because you are feeling this and are struggling with the depression. Acknowledging that depression in grief is normal and necessary—even if the people and the culture around you are telling you that you don’t have to feel depressed, that there are ways around the pain— is one significant step on the pathway to healing. The next step is understanding if your depression may be what is called “clinical depression” and, if so, having the courage and self-compassion to seek help.