

TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE “GOING CRAZY SYNDROME”

Part One

By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

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In the beautiful book, *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis wrote about his experience after the death of his wife. He stated,

An odd by-product of my loss is that I’m aware of being an embarrassment to everyone I meet. Perhaps the bereaved ought to be isolated in special settlements like lepers. As he so appropriately teaches from this experience, society often tends to make the bereaved feel intense shame and embarrassment about feelings of grief. I’m not surprised that the most often-asked question I get from the bereaved person is, “Am I crazy?” Shame can be described as the feeling that something you are doing is bad. And you may feel that if you grieve, then you should be ashamed. If you are perceived as “doing well” with your grief, you are considered “strong” and “under control.” The message is that the well-controlled person stays rational at all times.

Combined with this message is another one. Society erroneously implies that if you, as a bereaved person, openly express your feelings of grief, you are immature. If your feelings are fairly intense, you may be labeled “overly-emotional.” If your feelings are extremely intense, you may even be referred to as a “crazy” or a “pathological mourner.”

This is the first in a three-part series to provide an understanding of the “Going Crazy Syndrome.”

Disorganization, Confusion, Searching, Yearning

Perhaps the most isolating and frightening part of your grief journey is the sense of disorganization, confusion, searching and yearning that often comes with loss. These experiences frequently come when you begin to be confronted with the reality of the death. As one bereaved person said, “I felt as if I were a lonely traveler with no companion, and worse yet, no destination. I couldn’t find myself or anybody else.”

This dimension of grief may cause the “going crazy syndrome.” In grief, thoughts and behaviors are different from what you normally experience.

It’s only natural that you may not know if your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are normal or abnormal. The experiences described below are common after the death of someone loved. A major goal of this article is to simply validate these experiences so you will know – You are not crazy!

After the death of someone loved, you may feel a sense of restlessness, agitation, impatience and ongoing confusion. It’s like being in the middle of a wild, rushing river where you can’t get a grasp on anything. Disconnected thoughts race through your mind, and strong emotions may be overwhelming.

You may express disorganization and confusion in your ability to complete any tasks. A project may get started but go unfinished. Forgetfulness and low work effectiveness are commonplace for many people experiencing this dimension of grief. Early morning and late at night are times when you may feel most disoriented and confused. Fatigue and lack of initiative often

accompany these feelings. Everyday pleasures may not seem to matter anymore. You may also experience a restless searching for the person who has died. Yearning and preoccupation with memories can leave you feeling drained. Yes, the work of grieving is draining. It leaves you feeling wiped out.

You might even experience a shift in perception; other people may begin to look like the person in your life who died. You might be at a shopping mall, look down a hallway and think you see the person you loved so much. Or see a car go by that was like the person's who died and find yourself following the car. Sometimes you might hear the garage door open and the person entering the house as he or she had done so many times in the past. If these experiences are happening to you, remember—You are not crazy!

Visual hallucinations occur so frequently that they cannot be considered abnormal. I personally prefer the term "memory picture to hallucination. As part of your searching and yearning when you are bereaved, you may not only experience a sense of the dead person's presence, but you may also have fleeting glimpses of the person across the room. Again, remember those – You are not crazy!

Other common experiences during this time include difficulties with eating and sleeping. You may experience a loss of appetite, or find yourself overeating. Even when you do eat, you may be unable to taste the food. Difficulties in going to sleep and early morning awakening are also common experiences associated with this dimension of grief.

You might find it helpful to remember that disorganization following loss always comes before re-orientations. Some people will try to have you by-pass any kind of disorganization or confusion. While it may seem strange, keep in mind that your disorganization and confusion are actually stepping stones on your path toward healing.

Self-Care Guidelines

If disorganization, confusion, searching, and yearning are, or have been, a part of your grief journey, don't worry about the normalcy of your experience. It is critically important to never forget those reassuring words – You are not crazy!

When you feel disoriented, talk to someone who will understand. To heal, grief must be shared outside of yourself. I hope you have at least one person whom you see who understands and will not judge you. That person must be patient and attentive for you may tell your story over and over again as you work to embrace your grief. He or she must be genuinely

interested in understanding you. If you are trying to talk about your disorganization and confusion, and the person doesn't want to listen, find someone who will meet your needs better. The thoughts, feelings and behaviors of this dimension do not come all at once. They are often experienced in a wave-like fashion. Hopefully, you will have someone to support you through each wave. You may need to talk and cry for long periods of time. At other times, you may just need to be alone.

Don't try to interpret what you may not think and feel. Just experience it. Sometimes when you talk you may not think you make much sense. And you may not. But talking it out can still be self-clarifying at a level you may not even be aware of.

During this time, discourage yourself from making any critical decisions like selling the house and moving to another community. Difficulty with making judgments comes naturally at this part

of the grief experience, ill-timed decisions might result in more losses. Go slow and be patient with yourself.

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Part Two

By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

As C.S. Lewis notes, "Grief is like a long, winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape." As you explore the terrain of your grief journey, you may ask yourself, "Am I crazy?" A vital part of healing in grief is understanding the normalcy of your experience.

My intent is not to prescribe what should be happening to you. Instead, I encourage you to become familiar with what you may encounter while you grieve and do your work of grieving. A vital part of healing in grief is understanding the normalcy of your experience.

The potential aspects of your journey are as follows:

- o Time Distortion
- o Obsessive Reviewing or Ruminating
- o Search for Meaning
- o Is This Death God's Will?
- o Transitional Objects
- o Suicidal Thoughts
- o Anniversary and Holiday Grief Occasions

Time Distortion

"I don't know what day it is, let alone what time it is!" This kind of comment is not unusual when you are grieving. Sometimes, time moves so quickly; other times, it merely crawls. Your sense of past and future may also seem to be frozen in place. You may even lose track of what day or month it is.

This normal experience of time distortion often plays a part in the "going crazy syndrome." No you are not going crazy, but if you don't know this is normal, you may think you are.

Obsessive Review or Ruminating

Obsessive review or ruminating are the psychological terms used for describing how you may repeat the circumstances about the death or stories about the person who has died. It's telling your story over and over again. In your journey, you may often review events of the death and memories of the person who died over and over again.

This normal process helps bring your head and your heart together! Allow yourself to do this. Blocking it out won't help you heal. Don't be angry with yourself if you can't stop wanting to repeat your story. Review or ruminating is a powerful and necessary part of the hard work of mourning.

Yes, it hurts to constantly think and talk about the person you have loved so much. But remember all grief wounds get worse before they get better. Be compassionate with yourself. Try to surround yourself with people who allow and encourage you to repeat whatever you need to tell again.

Search for Meaning

Naturally, you try to make sense of why someone you love died. You may find yourself asking questions like, "Why him or her?", "Why now?", or "Why this way?" Yes, you have questions. You are simply trying to understand your experience. No, there won't always be answers to your questions, yet you still need to give yourself permission to ask them.

As you wrestle with "Why" you may be outraged at your God or Higher Power. You may feel a stagnation or disillusionment with your spiritual life as you embrace your pain. On the other hand, you may feel closer than ever before. You can only be where you are.

You may be able to come up with dozens of reasons why the person who died should not have died under these circumstances or at this time. Whatever the nature or number of questions, asking them is a normal part of your journey.

As you explore the meaning of this experience through your questions, be sure not to commit "spiritual suicide." Do not prohibit yourself from asking the questions you know are within you. If you do, you may shut down your capacity to give and receive love during this vulnerable period in your life.

Be aware that people may try to tell you not to ask questions about your personal search for meaning in your grief journey. Or worse yet, watch out for people who try to have easy answers to your difficult questions. Most bereaved people do not find comfort in pat responses; neither will you. The healing occurs in posing the questions in the first place, not just in finding answers. Find a friend, group, or counselor who will understand your search for meaning and be supportive without attempting to offer answers. Companionship and responsive listening can help you explore your religious and spiritual values, question your philosophy of life, and renew your resources for living!

Is This Death God's Will?

Closely related to the search for meaning is the commonly asked question, "Is this death God's will?" If you have an appreciation of an all-powerful God or Higher Power, you probably find this question particularly difficult.

Sometimes you may reason, "God loves me, so why take this most precious person from me?" Or you may have been told, "It's God's will", and you should just accept it and go on." However, if you internalize this message, you may repress your grief and ignore your human need to mourn.

Repressing your grief because you need to "just accept it and go on," can be selfdestructive. If you don't ask questions and if you don't express feelings, you may ultimately drown in despair. If your soul does not ask, your body will probably protest. Repressing and denying heart-felt questions can, and often does, keep your wounds from healing. Listen to your questions!

Transitional Objects

Transitional objects are belongings of the person in your life who died. They often can give you comfort. Objects such as clothing, books, or prized possessions, can help you feel close to someone you miss so much.

For example, during my counseling session with a bereaved woman, she shared with me that she found it comforting to take one of her husband's favorite shirts to bed with her. She said, "As I clutched his shirt close to me, I didn't feel so alone. But as I worked through my grief, my need for the shirt dwindled over time."

Some people may try to distance you from belongings such as the shirt described above. This behavior fits with the tendency in our culture to move away from grief instead of toward it.

Remember – embrace the comfort provided by familiar objects. To do away with them too soon takes away a sense of security these belongings provide. Once you have moved toward reconciliation, you will probably be better able to decide what to do with them. Some things, however, you may want to keep forever. That's all right too. Simply giving away the belongings of the person you loved does not equate with healing in your grief.

Nor does keeping some belongings mean you have “created a shrine.” This phrase is used when someone keeps everything just as it was for years after the death. Creating a shrine, however, only prevents acknowledging the painful new reality that someone you loved has died. Understanding the difference between transitional objects and creating a shrine is important. The former helps you heal; the latter does not.

Suicidal Thoughts

Thoughts that come and go about questioning if you want to go on living can be a normal part of your grief and mourning. You might say or think, “I'm not sure I'd mind it if I didn't wake up in the morning.” Often this thought is not so much an active wish to kill yourself as it is a wish to ease your pain.

To have these thoughts is normal; however, to make plans and take action to end your life is abnormal. Sometimes your body, mind, and spirit can hurt so much you wonder if you will ever feel alive again. Just remember that in accomplishing the hard work of grieving you will find continual meaning in your life.

If thoughts of suicide take on planning and structure, make sure that you get help immediately. Sometimes tunnel vision can prevent you from seeing choices. Please choose to go on living as you honor the memory of the person in your life that has died.

Anniversary and Holiday Occasions

Naturally, anniversary and holiday occasions can bring about “pangs” of grief. Birthdays, wedding dates, holidays such as Easter, Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas, and other special occasions create a heightened sense of loss. At these times you may likely experience a grief attack or memory embrace.

Your “pangs” of grief may also occur in response to circumstances that bring about reminders of the painful absence of someone in your life. For many families, certain times have special meaning related to family togetherness, and the person who died is more deeply missed at those times. For example, the beginning of Spring, the first snowfall, an annual Fourth of July party, or anytime when activities were shared as a couple or a family.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that these reactions are natural. Sometimes the anticipation of an anniversary or holiday actually turns out to be worse than the day itself.

Interestingly enough, sometimes your internal clock will alert you to an anniversary date you have forgotten. If you notice you are feeling down or experiencing pangs of grief, you may be having an anniversary response. Keep in mind that is normal. Plan ahead when you know some naturally painful times are coming for you. Unfortunately, some bereaved people will not mention anniversaries, holidays, or special occasions to anyone. As a result, they suffer in

silence. As a result, they suffer in silence, and their feelings of isolation increase. Don't let this happen to you. Recognize you will need support and map out how to get it!

TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE "GOING CRAZY SYNDROME"

Part Three

By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

This is the final article in a three part series to address the frequent question "Am I crazy?" My intent is not to prescribe what should be happening to you. Instead, I encourage you to become familiar with what you may encounter as you grieve.

The potential aspects of your journey are as follows:

- o Grief Attacks or Memory Embraces
- o Sudden Changes in Mood
- o Identification Symptoms of Physical Illness
- o Powerlessness and Helplessness
- o Dreams
- o Mystical Experiences
- o Self-Focus

Grief Attacks or Memory Embraces

"I was just sailing along pretty good, when out of nowhere came this overwhelming feeling of grief." This comment often reflects what is called a 'grief attack.' Another term I use for this experience is a "memory embrace." A grief attack or memory embrace is a period of time when you may have intense anxiety and sharp pain.

You may think that long periods of deep depression are the most common part of the grief process. Actually, you may more frequently encounter acute and episodic "pangs" or "spasms" of grief. That's why they are called grief attacks. They sometimes attack you out of nowhere. You may feel an overwhelming sense of missing the person you loved and find yourself openly crying, or perhaps even sobbing. As one woman reflected, "I'll be busy for a while, and sometimes even forget that he has died. Then I'll see his picture or think of his favorite food, and I'll just feel like I can't even move."

Grief attacks are normal. When and if one strikes you, be compassionate with yourself. You have every right to miss the person who has died and to feel temporary paralysis.

Sudden Changes in Mood

When someone loved dies, you may feel like you're surviving fairly well one minute and in the depths of despair the next. Sudden changes in your mood are a difficult, yet natural, part of your grief journey. These can be triggered by driving past a familiar place, a song, an insensitive comment, or even changes in the weather.

Mood changes cause confusion because your self-expectation may be that you should follow a pattern of continually doing better. You probably also have some people around you who share this expectation. Attack this inappropriate expectation and be self-nurturing as you embrace the ebbs and flows of mood change. Be patient with yourself. As you do the work of grieving and move toward healing, the periods of hopelessness will be replaced by periods of hopefulness. During these times, you can benefit from a support system that understands these mood changes are normal.

Identification Symptoms of Physical Illness

Don't be shocked if you have a few physical symptoms like the person who died. Your body is responding to the loss. As you do the hard work of grieving, however, these symptoms should go away. If not, find someone who will listen to you and help you understand what is happening. Also, not everyone will experience these symptoms, and you may be one of those people. Of course, whenever you have questions or concerns about physical symptoms, it is wise to consult a trusted physician.

Powerlessness and Helplessness

Although often ignored, your grief can at times leave you feeling powerless. You may think or say, "What am I going to do? I feel so completely helpless." While part of you realizes you had no control over what happened, another part feels a sense of powerlessness at not having been able to prevent it. You would like to have your life back the way it was, but you can't. You may think, hope, wish and pray the death could be reversed, but you feel powerless to do anything about it.

You also may wonder if you somehow acted differently or been more assertive, you could have prevented the death. Your "if onlys" and "what ifs" are often expressions of wishing you could have been more powerful or control something you could not.

Lack of control is a difficult reality to accept. Yet, it is a reality that over time and through the work of grieving you must encounter. These feelings of helplessness and powerlessness in the face of this painful reality are normal and natural.

Almost paradoxically, by acknowledging and allowing for temporary feelings of helplessness, you ultimately become helpful to yourself. When you try to "stay strong" you often get yourself into trouble. Share your feelings with caring people around you.

Dreams

Dreams are one of the ways the work of grieving takes place. A dream, for example, may reflect a searching for the person who has died. Dreams also provide opportunities to feel close to one who died, to embrace the reality of the death, to gently confront the depth of the loss, to renew memories, or to develop a new self-identity. Dreams may also help you search for meaning in life and death or explore unfinished business. Finally, dreams can show you hope for the future. The content of your dreams often reflects changes in your experience with grieving. So if dreams are part of your journey, make use of them to better understand where you have been, where you are, and where you are going. Also, find a skilled listener who won't interpret your dreams for you, but will listen with you.

On the other hand, you may experience nightmares, particularly after traumatic, violent deaths. These dreams can be very frightening. If your dreams are distressing, talk about them to someone who can support and understand you.

Self-Focus

The very nature of your grief requires a self-focus or a turning inward. This temporary self-focus is necessary for your long-term survival. Turning inward helps you feel protected from an outside world that may be frightening right now.