

## When [Dementia] Grief Feels Like Relief

Anthony came to see me after his wife Theresa died as a result of dementia. "I am not sure I am processing my grief," he shared. "Can grief feel so much like relief?"

It was a great question. Anthony and Theresa had been married for over half a century. They had three children together and eight grandchildren. The family was close. And while their marriage had its normal ups and downs, Anthony still proudly remembered his words at their Golden Anniversary dinner. "I cannot even imagine being married to anyone but Theresa." He fully meant it.

But the last years had been tough. Theresa slipped into dementia and then developed cancer. She did not understand the disease and treatment. Every time she had chemotherapy, she would accuse Anthony of trying to kill her. She was suspicious and difficult to manage. She had bouts of screaming, crying, or depression. The kids tried to help but distance and their own family and work responsibilities limited what they could contribute.

When Theresa finally died, Anthony felt an overwhelming sense of relief. Her suffering was over and so was his. Could this sense of relief be grief?

Grief is a reaction to loss—all the reactions that we have when we experience a loss.

It may be that we find a sense of relief when we have dealt with a long lingering illness. The incessant demands of caregiving and the progressive deterioration of a person we loved makes relief a natural response to loss. After all, the person who died is no longer suffering, and we are no longer suffering as well. That sense of relief does not mean we did not love the person. In fact our very sense of relief may be a manifestation of our love; a sacrifice where we accept the loss to end the other's agony. It is normal and natural. We need not feel guilty. We cannot control our feelings. We can only understand them.

And explore them. This means understanding the roots of our reactions—the reasons for our sense of relief. Sometimes we can do this by ourselves, perhaps by reflecting in a journal. In other cases, we may need to explore this with others; perhaps with a confidante, a clergyperson, a counselor, or within the safety of a support group. We may even find it useful to speak to an empty chair, at the graveside, or in a letter that explains our reactions to the person who died.

It helped Anthony as well to remember Theresa before the dementia. He began to create photograph books for each of the grandchildren. He was able to recapture his memories of the bright, funny, and vivacious woman he married. He began to experience other reactions in addition to the relief. And though it was painful, it was oddly comforting.

Whatever we do, it is critical to remember that grief is a reaction to a loss. These reactions can be as complicated and complex as the situations that produce that loss and the individuals whom we mourn.

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