

Caring for families

Along The Way

Helping you understand your
journey through grief.

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The Aftermath

By Dr. Bill Webster

of Christmas

“It’s that time of the year again.”

What a silly statement with which to begin! Every day, if you think about it, can be described as “that time of the year.”

But somehow January seems to be a particularly difficult point in the calendar for many people. Christmas has come and gone, and if this was your first holiday season after the death of someone you loved and cared about, it can probably be best described as “Anything but Merry.”

Perhaps this time of year offers more challenges than any other. Christmas is often a time when people get together with family and friends. When you have lost someone you love, it can be a pretty stark reminder of the fact this special someone was absent this year.

But when the trees have been discarded and the stockings and decorations put away for another year, sometimes the “post-Christmas season” can be even more challenging. There can actually be a huge let-down after the holidays. I read somewhere that the most depressing day of the year is actually January 24, because it is then the Christmas season credit card bill comes in ... usually depressingly high!

Regardless of how other people react to this time of the year, it’s important we look after ourselves and be encouraged to find what is meaningful for us when we are feeling really low.

Added to the natural grief and depression we may feel, we can also be affected by a condition known as seasonal affective disorder, or SAD, which is related to changes in seasons. More recently, it has been described as “depression with a seasonal pattern” and is often thought to be linked to limited amounts of sunlight. That would explain why SAD begins and ends at about the same time every year – for most people symptoms start around December and continue through the winter months.

People with the syndrome often feel tired and lethargic, and may seem withdrawn to family, friends and colleagues. Other symptoms may include:

- Irritability.
- Tiredness or low energy.
- Feeling depressed most of the day, nearly every day.
- Feeling hopeless or worthless.
- Losing interest in activities once enjoyed.
- Having problems with sleeping or oversleeping.
- Having difficulty concentrating.
- Problems getting along with other people.
- Appetite changes, especially craving foods high in carbohydrates.
- Weight gain.

And as we know, many of these symptoms are also commonly experienced in grief.

One of my “life lessons” in counselling has been the realization that there is a “reason for every reaction.” We need to understand the why behind the behaviour before rushing to find the how to alleviate the symptoms. Reactions never happen in a vacuum. So, we must ask why we may be displaying SAD symptoms. Sometimes, encouraging family participation in counselling or medical assistance can be helpful, not just to learn how to cope with a loved one’s behaviours, but to understand the reasons behind them.

So, if you are affected by SAD, or even just feeling “down” at this time of the year, following are some remedies that can help.

Daily exercise

Try to get outside as often as possible especially during the cold winter months. Regular physical activity helps fight both fatigue and depression, especially if you exercise during the day or near light sources. Even weak sunlight or light reflected off snow can increase your exposure to light. Outdoor light, even when the sky is overcast, is often brighter than “light boxes” which are commonly and effectively used in treating this syndrome.

Find an outdoor hobby you can enjoy throughout the winter months such as skating, skiing, hockey, curling or walking. Arrange your home or office to maximize your exposure to light. Open blinds and sit closer to bright sunlit windows for reading, eating or working while at home or in the office.

Take a holiday and seek the sun

Many of us have to endure long winters ... so if you can, go to some sunny resort or take a Caribbean cruise to enjoy some better weather and even more exposure to brighter sunlight.

Be aware of your moods

Self-awareness can alleviate some of the feelings of distress during these seasons. Be aware of your moods and energy level and attempt to maintain perspective. Above all, remember that SAD is not your fault ... it is a natural condition that can be effectively treated.

Have some fun

It does not indicate you miss the person any less if you have some fun. It’s important to know it’s OK to relax and even have a laugh. But it may also help to take some time out, to give yourself permission to grieve and to be sad when you think of your loved one.



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Some suggestions of things you can do include:

- Find a quiet spot to remember all the good things about the person you are missing.
- Go and do something you used to do together.
- Write a letter to the person.
- Revisit that favourite spot you went to together.
- Share some memories with friends or in a support group.
- Go on a vacation to a warmer climate for a week ... that will not change the situation, but it will give you a respite. It is said 10 minutes in the sun enhances your vitamin D levels.
- Go for a walk, listen to music, go shopping, have a massage or hang out with friends. Do something ... anything. Do one thing today, then maybe one more thing, and before you know it, you will feel better about yourself if not the situation.

I love this quote by Albert Camus: “In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there’s something stronger, something better, pushing right back.”

Hang in! Spring is on the way.



Reflections on a "Horrible Year"

By Dr. Bill Webster

What do you do when you feel like life is falling apart?

In a speech at the Guildhall in London, Queen Elizabeth began by saying, "1992 is not a year on which I shall look back with undiluted pleasure. In the words of one of my more sympathetic correspondents, it has turned out to be an *annus horribilis*."

Several difficult events contributed to her "horrible year." Two of her children were separated or divorced; Princess Diana published a tell-all book in which she revealed her husband's infidelities as well as other unflattering comments about the Royal Family; and on Her Majesty's wedding anniversary, Windsor Castle (one of her official residences) caught fire and was extensively damaged.

Perhaps you look back on this last year with similar feelings. Possibly it has been a particularly difficult one for you, and you have felt like your life has been torn apart. Perhaps someone you loved and cared about has died. Most of us can think back to a time in our lives when it felt like everything was going wrong and life was "horrible."

I am writing this on what would have been my son Steve's 43rd birthday. Sadly, it is not a happy birthday, because Steve died in a tragic accident in July. For me, this the past year will go down as my own "*annus horribilis*."

In the months that have followed, I have experienced an avalanche of feelings and emotions around the loss:

- I feel as though my whole world has been turned upside down.
- I feel devastated by the apparent senselessness of the situation.
- I feel sad because I miss him every day.

Although we did not live close geographically, we talked several times a week by phone or Skype and I miss him calling to ask for advice or some help which I always took great pleasure in offering. I would have done anything for him, and I will continue to miss these opportunities.

When someone dies, we can experience a plethora of emotions that at times threaten to overwhelm us. But while it is different for every individual, these responses change as time goes by.

Our first reaction is often one of disbelief, not being able to fully grasp the gravity of the situation. "Oh no! This must be a mistake. You have the wrong person. This cannot be happening. There has to be some other explanation."

There is a reason for this response. What is really being said is: "I can't bring myself to believe that this unimaginable thing is possible." Yes, you understand in your head that someone has died. But in your heart you resist the fact, allowing yourself time to gather the resources you will need to be able to cope with this mind-boggling fact. This sense of disbelief and questioning enables us to keep life tolerable in that unbearable moment of shock.

Some other possible emotions that can follow:

- You may feel confused.
- You may find it difficult to concentrate. Your mind wanders, usually to thoughts and memories of the deceased.
- You may be forgetful.
- You may find it difficult to make decisions.
- You have no energy, constantly feeling fatigued.
- You feel apathetic, not able to be excited about anything.
- Sometimes, it feels like you are losing your mind.
- You may wonder if you are going crazy.
- You feel anxious about things you never worried about before.
- You may have feelings of anger and irritability.
- You may struggle with feelings of guilt, wondering if you could have done more in the situation.
- You may feel depressed and even wonder if life is worth living anymore.

But there is a reason why all these emotions happen. This is your defence mechanism at work, protecting you from the full devastating impact of your loss. When someone dies, it can be overwhelming. We find ourselves struggling to accept what is unacceptable; to believe what is unbelievable; to come to terms with something that appears incomprehensible.

So, your mind seems to “shut down,” deciding it needs time to take all this in. You are trying to come to terms with something that is devastating, and it takes all the mind power you can muster to do that. After a loss, mere survival is a major accomplishment, taking every ounce of your physical, emotional and mental energy to attain.

Grief hurts, and you can't avoid the pain of losing someone you care about.

Sadly, those who say in so many words, “Let the healing begin,” are in effect really saying, “Let's move on.” But how can people begin to heal when they have only just begun to hurt?

We really only have two choices with grief. Either we control the grief, or the grief will control us. By trying to ignore these difficult days, we really give control to the grief, for it will sneak up and tap us on the shoulder whether we want it to or not.

So, on this day, I have decided to focus on Steve's life. As much as I miss him, what can I do on this noteworthy day to celebrate the fact that he was here. When we can make such challenging days meaningful though difficult, this gives us some measure of control.

So, will you join me in making this commitment to myself and my loved one?

- I will not let myself feel like my life has ended, because it has not.
- I will not let this tragedy defeat me, define me or destroy me.
- I will help and support my son's family, and those whom he cared about.
- I will go on and seek to discover how my life can still be meaningful even in the light of this loss.
- I will do whatever I can to carry on Steve's legacy and, while never forgetting him, will find ways to make the most of what I still have left.

As Maya Angelou wisely said, “If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, then change your attitude towards it.”

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