

# TEARS TO JOY

ONE MAN'S JOURNEY  
THROUGH GRIEF

M I K E T U C K E R



**Pacific Press<sup>®</sup>**  
Publishing Association

Nampa, Idaho | Oshawa, Ontario, Canada  
[www.pacificpress.com](http://www.pacificpress.com)

## Chapter 1

# The Experience of Loss

**N**o one lives life without experiencing loss. Loss occurs with the death of a pet, friend, or relative; a divorce or the abandonment of a lover; the moving away of a friend or the moving out of a child; the failure to reach a goal, realize a dream, keep or obtain a job; the removal of a body part through amputation or mastectomy; and many other ways. While these losses may vary greatly in severity, each may require some experience of grief.

*Grief* could be described as the process of psychological, social, and spiritual reactions to loss. It involves intense emotional suffering, acute sorrow, and deep sadness. The mourner remembers the deceased, and this produces uncomfortable, anxious feelings and deep sadness. Symptoms of grief include but are not limited to the following:

- tightness in the throat or heaviness in the chest
- an empty feeling in the stomach often accompanied by a loss of appetite
- feelings of guilt or anger
- restlessness
- loss of concentration
- loss of interest in activities that you used to love
- short-term memory loss
- feeling as though the loss isn't real or that it didn't really happen
- sensing the loved one's presence, expecting the person to walk in the door at the usual time

## Tears to Joy

- hearing the loved one's voice, or seeing his or her face
- having difficulty sleeping
- experiencing an intense preoccupation with the deceased
- feeling intensely angry at the loved one for leaving
- needing to tell and retell stories about the loved one
- experiencing frequent mood changes
- crying at unexpected times

As if all that were not enough, people in grief have immune systems that function at less than optimum, are at greater risk of infection and illness, and even have a greater likelihood of sudden death. Their energies are depleted, and they find themselves less able to deal emotionally and physically with the daily challenges life brings. Everything, no matter how seemingly small, is a big deal! Things that are normally easy now become difficult.

The most intense symptoms may last anywhere from six months to two years! Typically, most people report that the most intense symptoms dissipate at the six- to nine-month mark and then increase sharply at the one-year anniversary of the loss. Following the anniversary, they dissipate once again. But it is possible to grieve actively for up to four or five years without being obsessive with your grief. The rule of thumb is *the sooner and more intensely you grieve, the sooner you get better.*

The last sentence of the previous paragraph may be one of the most important things I can say in this book. Intense, early grieving has been a helpful concept for my own experience with loss. While my journey through grief may be quite different from yours, I firmly believe the concept of early, intense grief to be one of the most impactful ideas I can share.

On the other hand, the longer you delay grieving, the longer it takes to get through the process and the more difficult it becomes. You may be able to ignore grief for a time, but eventually it will catch up with you and exact from you a very dear price. Early, intense grief is a far better approach to any loss.

Once I met a man whose wife died suddenly. The man chose to avoid grief by working insanely long hours seven days a week. He did this for more than ten years! Then he met a woman, fell in love (when he found time to do this, I'll never know!), and asked her to marry him. As the two began to prepare for their wedding day, the man was reminded of his first wedding. That memory seemed to set loose a flood of emotions. The emotions, long suppressed, were now so intense and so overwhelming that the man required hospitalization.

## The Experience of Loss

His wedding had to be postponed while he finally grieved the loss of his wife.

*There is no way around grief. Loss necessitates it.* You cannot run from grief, medicate it, ignore it, outwork it, outdrink it, or rationalize or spiritualize it away. You must go through it. If you attempt to ignore grief, it will eventually catch up with you. And when it does, it will take longer and be a more difficult process than it would have been had you grieved intensely and early.

Every loss requires some experience of grief. It is unavoidable. The experience for some losses may be light and of shorter duration while other losses result in a heavy experience of grief that may last for some time.

In some sense, one never truly recovers from a loss. While the symptoms of loss may dissipate or even leave completely, you will never truly get over your loss. You will forever be changed by your loss and may have periods of sorrow and tears for the rest of your life.

My sister and brother-in-law lost a baby early in their marriage. The baby died late in my sister's pregnancy. While my sister grieved over the loss, my brother-in-law didn't. More than twenty-five years later, while sitting in church at the funeral for a friend, my brother-in-law began weeping uncontrollably. As he processed his tears, he realized he was crying over the baby they had lost many years earlier; a loss he had never truly grieved.

My sister states that for five years after the loss of her baby, she would burst into tears for seemingly no reason. While sitting at a stoplight or shopping for groceries, sorrow would overwhelm her. It's been thirty years since she lost that baby, but from time to time she still feels the need to cry about her baby.

As difficult as the process of grief may be, *it is possible to deal with the pain in such a way that eventually you will once again find joy and a renewed purpose for life.* But this seldom occurs unless you do the hard work of grief.

### **The work of grief**

What is the work of grief? Four activities come to mind: think, write, talk, and cry. These four activities are essential to the process. Let's look at each of these activities.

*Think.* Take a memory trip through the house or other areas that remind you of the lost person. For the bereaved, remembering is a sacred act! Relive many experiences in your mind. Think the thoughts fully when they come, whether the thoughts are pleasant or painful. Thinking and remembering are of vital importance.

*Write.* Keep a journal or notebook. Writing blog posts can be of real value

## Tears to Joy

as well. Write about your feelings. If you don't write, try making an audio or video recording about your feelings. Whether you write or make a recording, tell the story of the deceased's life and, more important, tell the story of your life together. How did you meet? What were the early years like? How did the relationship change through the years? What are some of the more significant, romantic, or even funny stories that are of importance to you?

For losses that do not involve the death of a loved one, it is still important to write about the meaning of that which was lost. For example, women may need to write about the impact of a mastectomy. This includes feelings of beauty and femininity as well as maternal feelings. The loss of a job can reach far beyond the expected financial and career implications for both men and women. The impact this loss has on self-esteem is huge. Writing about these things can be of real value.

*Talk.* Talk with dear friends, counselors, or even with a support group. Details should be told over and over, but you especially need to express your feelings. Talk about the immediate loss. Move back through your total relationship with the person. Express your deepest feelings. Tell your story, even if the story is not a happy story. Even the loss of a dysfunctional relationship must be grieved. These stories are as important to tell as are the stories from healthy relationships.

*Cry.* Don't hold back your tears. Tears are cleansing, so enjoy the therapeutic release provided by your tears.

These four activities compose the essential work of grieving. Others might add such things as exercise, a regular (although not too hectic) daily schedule, joining a support group, prayer, and more. But the activities you must engage in in order to do the work of grief are to think, write, talk, and cry.

My personal experience has found two of the above additional activities to be of real value. *Prayer* and regular, moderate *exercise* have been of inestimable help in my own personal journey. For exercise, I have chosen simply to walk. Since grief makes it next to impossible to focus for long periods of time, I have chosen to follow the advice given by D. L. Moody regarding prayer. Moody said that prayer should be frequent, brief, and intense. I have endeavored to follow this advice.

Adding these two elements to the more classic four activities of grief has been a real help in my recovery, and I recommend them to you.

*Don't expect the journey of grief to be brief.* Be gentle with yourself, and don't hold yourself to the expectations or timetables others may attempt to impose

on you. This is *your* journey, to be made in *your* way, on *your* timetable. While it is also important that you not ignore experts in the field, you will be safe in doing things your way as long as your experience seems to fall within the “normal” range for healthy mourning.

Above all, try to do some of the work of grief every day. Think, write, talk, and cry daily. No doubt, you will take backward steps some days. This is to be expected and is quite normal. But don't lose patience with yourself or even with the process. You *will* get through this, but it may take some time.

### **Why grieve?**

Grief actually has a purpose. We grieve in order to accomplish an objective. The objective is reorganization.

Grief serves as a tribute to the person we've lost. *We grieve greatly because we have loved greatly.* Grief's intensity (not necessarily its length) is directly related to the depth of love we held for the deceased. But it is easy to become so caught up in the tribute that we forget the objective.

I think of grief as a vehicle that takes us from point A to point B. Now admittedly, it's a rather sorry vehicle. It's an old, beat-up Edsel. (Anyone remember how ugly those cars were and how much America hated them?) This Edsel has more than three hundred thousand miles on it, is a gas-guzzler and oil burner, is in serious need of bodywork, and has a tire or two that frequently go flat. The grief Edsel doesn't do much more than thirty-five miles per hour on a good day, but it's the only ride we've got. *Grief* is the vehicle that takes us from the point of loss, which we will call “Disorganization,” to the point of “Reorganization” and, hopefully, “Renewal.”

*Grief* is the emotional suffering we experience when someone we love is taken away. It also involves physical, cognitive, social, behavioral, cultural, religious, and philosophical dimensions. It involves remembering, telling stories, longing, weeping, experiencing deep sorrow, and eventually adjusting to life without that person in it. As painful as it is to think of life without our beloved, it is nonetheless the objective of grief—the thing we've been moving toward all the time.

My own personal process of grief has been difficult, deep, and I believe, thorough. I've dealt with every memory that came to mind, both happy and sad, and I've been as intentional as I know how to be in accomplishing all the tasks and goals of grief. Now it is time to truly march toward the ultimate destination. It is time to begin in earnest my life without Gayle.

## Tears to Joy

I would have preferred to grow old with Gayle, and one day, when I was ninety-five and she was ninety-two, we'd go to sleep and neither would wake up the following morning. Laugh if you will at that fantasy, but that's how I would have preferred it to happen. But I was not afforded that choice.

Since I am somewhat younger than ninety-five (no jokes here), I must assume I have a fair amount of living to do yet if God so allows. *Grief, as ugly as it is, is the only vehicle that is capable of transporting me from the tragedy of my loss to the reality of my future. I pray that future includes faith, ministry, family, hope, love, and joy.* Life is too short and too good when lived well to choose anything other than as full a life as we are capable of living. I want that life! My grief is making it possible for me to experience, yet again, life more abundantly. It can do the same for you!

### Exercises

1. What are your symptoms? What do you feel? Are you sleeping? Eating? Crying? Easily distracted and have a tendency to forget things? Make a list of your symptoms today, and keep this list for future reference.
2. Begin writing something about your loss. You might start by writing about your symptoms and feelings as they are right now. Another idea is to begin to write the story of your life with the deceased. Start at the beginning. It doesn't have to be a literary work of art. Just let the words flow and see what happens.
3. Make a list of people you might begin talking to. It is best to have more than one person so that you don't wear anyone out. If a person wants to know what you want, simply say you need him or her to listen without judging, fixing, or evaluating your words; simply listen and pass you tissues when needed.