



Toward an Understanding of the
“Going Crazy Syndrome”
Part Three
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This is the final article in a three part series to address the frequent question, “Am I crazy?”

As previously noted, 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 and do your work of mourning.

The potential aspects of your journey that I will explore are as follows:

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

Grief Attacks or Memory Embraces

“I was just sailing along feeling pretty good, when out of nowhere came this overwhelming feeling of grief.” This comment often reflects what is commonly 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 grief and mourning. 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 awhile, and sometimes even forget 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. Whatever you do, don’t try to deny a grief attack when you experience it. It is probably more powerful than you are.

I like to think of grief attacks as a reflection of how those we love are determined not to be forgotten. Although the pain of a grief attack hurts so deeply, embrace it, or you can risk emotional, spiritual and physical paralysis.

Sudden Changes in Mood

When someone loved dies, you may feel like you are 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 mood changes can be small or very dramatic. They 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 inappropriate self-expectation may be that you should follow a pattern of continually feeling 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 changes.

If you have these ups and downs, don't be hard on yourself. Be patient with yourself. As you do the work of mourning and move toward healing, the periods of hopelessness will be replaced by periods of hopefulness. During these times, you can also benefit from a support system that understands these mood changes are normal.

Identification Symptoms of Physical Illness

When you care deeply about someone and they die, you sometimes develop ways to identify with and feel close to that person. One way is by relating to the physical symptoms of the person who died. For example, if she died from a brain tumor you may have more frequent headaches. If he died from a heart attack, you may have chest pains. Of course, to check for organic problems is important, but you should also be aware that you might be experiencing identification symptoms of physical illness. Bereaved people have shared with me these examples.

“She had awful pain in her stomach and, after she died, I began to have them, too. It kind of made me feel close to her. After a while the stomach pain went away and I felt some sense of loss. As I have healed, I've been able to let go of the stomach pain.”

“I loved him so much. After he died, I wanted to be just like him. One of the ways I did it was to be dizzy just like he used to be all the time.”

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 mourning, 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 at times can 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 to the way it was, but you can't. You may think, hope, wish, and pray the death could be reversed, but feel powerless to do anything about it.

Also, you may wonder if you would have somehow acted differently or been more assertive, you could have prevented the death. Your “if only” 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 mourning 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

Dreaming about the person in your life who has died may be a part of your grief journey. If it is, remember no one is a better expert than you are in understanding what your dreams mean to you.

Dreams are one of the ways the work of mourning takes place. They may or may not play an important part in your dream experience. A dream, for example, may reflect a searching for the person who has died. Dreams also provide opportunities to feel close to someone loved who died, to embrace the reality of the death, to gently confront the depth of the loss, to renew the memories, or to develop a new self-identity. Dreams also may 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 mourning. 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 who 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.

Mystical Experiences

When someone loved dies, you may possibly have experiences that are not always rationally explainable. However, that doesn't mean something is wrong with these experiences. The sad reality is if you share these experiences with others, you may be considered “mentally ill.” In fact, you are actually mystically sensitive.

The primary form of mystical experience that bereaved people have taught me about is communication with the person who died. Some people find the experience hard to believe and try to explain it away in a rational manner. “I must have been dreaming,” or “I was probably half-asleep.” Others try to distance themselves from the experience because they are taught that such things are impossible: “a rational mind just doesn't experience those kinds of things.” So, if you want to be considered “rational” or “sane,” what would make sense is for you to feel compelled to distance yourself from this kind of “irrational” experience.

Types of mystical experiences vary. In Alabama, for example, a mother, whose daughter had died, woke up one summer morning. She looked out the window and saw it snowing in her yard only. The snow lasted for 15 minutes and then stopped. The mother understood this as a communication telling her that her daughter was all right and not to worry so much. In another instance, a man, whose wife had died, saw her laying on the couch in his living room. "It's like she came to me and wrapped me in her arms. I felt warm and happy...I experienced her presence."

I have listened and learned from hundreds of people who have experienced seeing, hearing, and feeling the presence of someone who has died. I am a scientist and supposed to be "rational." I can only tell you to remain open to experiences in this realm. Don't judge yourself or others who have these mystical experiences. Or, if you don't have any mystical experiences, don't think that something is wrong with 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.

Some people may try to "take your grief away from you" by preventing you from any kind of self-focus. They may want you to quickly re-enter the outside world without understanding your need for a temporary retreat. If turning inward is part of your experience, be assured you are normal.

The word TEMPORARY in relationship to this self-focus is important. You may move back and forth between needing time alone and time with other people. Be aware that if you stay only in a self focused, inward mode, you may risk development of a pattern of not sharing your grief. As you well know by now, not sharing your grief will stunt your healing process.

When you are in pain following the death of someone loved, the turning inward and the need for self-focus is analogous to what occurs when you have a physical wound. You cover a physical wound with a bandage for a period of time. Then you expose the wound to the open air that contains healing properties as well as contaminants. The emotional, physical, and spiritual pain of grief certainly demands the same kind of respect.

A Final Word

The aspects of grief outlined above are in no way an all-inclusive list of potential experiences that might relate to the question "Am I crazy?" However, my hope is that this information helps you better understand the normalcy of your unique journey into grief.

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