

The New York Times

LETTERS

How We Grieve: Everyone Is Different

January 18, 2015

To the Editor:

"[Getting Grief Right](#)," by Patrick O'Malley (Sunday Review, Jan. 11), is puzzling. It purports to criticize generalizations about grief and our treatment of people who grieve.

He notes that grief can be a complex process and that stage theories and the promise of closure are not helpful. But he then offers his own abstractions, including his belief that one's depth of grief corresponds to the depth of one's love for what has been lost.



BIANCA BAGNARELLI

While this thought may have been comforting to the grieving mother in his article, his call for "getting grief right" could place yet another burden on someone who may be healing faster than expected.

I am sure that Mr. O'Malley knows from his own loss the tortuous path that trauma can take. Along with sadness, regret, confusion and yearning, therapists are also aware of an untold number of responses, like guilt, relief and acceptance.

What we do best as therapists is to be there with our patients, without expectations or judgments, without providing explanations or solutions, giving them permission to feel what they need to.

LAURA TAHIR
New York, Jan. 12, 2015

The writer is a psychologist.

To the Editor:

Patrick O'Malley's article is among the finest that I have read about the process of dealing with grief in that it clearly avoids talking down to the bereaved, and while it refers to the stages of grief elaborated by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, it avoids the trap of declaring that each individual must go through each of the stages, something even Dr. Kübler-Ross does not mandate.

I found in my years as a hospital chaplain that it is essential to deal with the individual as an individual and to avoid making statements such as "I know how you feel" and/or "I understand how you feel," because no one ever really does.

There is, of course, a mass of material about dealing with grief, but another of the best I have found is Roberta Temes's "Living With an Empty Chair."

EMIL DANSKER
Cincinnati, Jan. 12, 2015

To the Editor:

Patrick O'Malley's article about grief was spot on. Our daughter died at 16 in a car accident; we had no guidance as to the grieving process, but we learned by doing.

What I learned, I taught to medical students and residents to help them understand what they as physicians could do for families after patients die.

Two things Mr. O'Malley talks about are important: Those grieving need to know as much as possible about the circumstances of the death before the grieving process can begin, and when a doctor has been involved in the final care, it should include a frank discussion with him or her.

Second, discussion groups with others who are also grieving or with an understanding and empathetic person (especially a physician or other health care worker) can be very useful, as one can realize that he or she is not alone and that the ways to resolution (not closure) are varied.

Doctors and those who work with them can play a useful role in helping those who survive a loss, provided that they themselves understand the processes of grieving.

WENDELL F. ROSSE
Chapel Hill, N.C., Jan. 12, 2015

The writer, professor emeritus of medicine at Duke University, is a former chief of hematology and oncology at Duke.

To the Editor:

I was moved by Patrick O'Malley's excellent article about grief. He writes of his patients, "The size of their grief corresponds to the depth of their love." I agree.

But in my own psychotherapy practice, in which I see many bereaved people, I have also often found that the size of their grief corresponds to the extent of their unfinished business, and to the loss of the possibility of repairing a difficult relationship or the hope of gaining the love they feel that they never had.

CAROL P. HAUSMAN
Washington, Jan. 11, 2015

The writer, a clinical psychologist, is coordinator of the Washington Jewish Healing Network.

To the Editor:

I have been grieving the death of my wife since last May. I keep asking myself, When does it stop? Then I read Patrick O'Malley's remark to his patients that the size of one's grief corresponds to the depth of one's love. Now I understand why I am still grieving and why it will probably last for a long time.

BEN D'ANTONIO
Phoenixville, Pa., Jan. 12, 2015