

EMPATHY AND brain pain relief

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One of the many lessons we can learn from a death is to reserve our opinions until we have walked in another person's shoes.

Despite this, many people react almost instinctively to reduce their own pain caused by the empathy they feel as they listen to the story of the tragic death of a child, sibling, partner or other beloved person.

Reading this, you might be saying, "I don't judge any-more. The death of my loved one has taught me to accept others and not judge."

This article is written with caring and concern to shed some light on an area that few people talk about. Let me begin by telling a story.

I have worked with hundreds of bereaved parents for more than two decades. For five years I was a clinician with the University School of Nursing Parent Bereavement project in which we worked with more than 100 parents in small groups for a 10-week period in the early months following death of their child by accident, suicide, or homicide. By the end of the project I had heard what seemed to be every imaginable story of horrendous death.

I wasn't prepared for my reaction to the following story which I have modified to protect the confidentiality of those involved.



Sitting with a group of seven parents I listened to a father describe the death of his son in a freeway auto accident. I sat, as did the parents, empathetically listening to a story of monumental tragic proportions watching this man struggling to express the details of his son's final moments. It was a scene not unlike many I had experienced over the past 20 years, but the pain was no less excruciating. Then I heard this father say, ". . . and he had alcohol problems."

At that instant I remember feeling a shift in my response to his story, almost a relief. I caught myself saying in my head something like, "Oh, I see."

And then catching myself and saying, I see? What am I doing? This father is describing the death of his son and I'm feeling somewhat relieved?

It was as if a part of my brain was trying to ease my pain by saying, "He had alcohol problems—*that's* it. *That* explains how this senseless tragedy could have taken place."

For a moment the senseless seemed to make *some* sense.

If our brain could speak to us during the exact moment that a fellow human being is crying, telling the story of the death of a loved one, and describing the intense pain of grief, it might say something like, "My God, this is terrible. I can't take all this pain. **Do** something to make it not hurt so much."

I believe our response to this plea of our wounded brain is to make a desperate attempt to reduce the pain and try to make some sense of this.

I call this brain pain relief.

Let me continue with my example. Here was my brain saying, "Oh, I see, it was alcohol that contributed to the death."

Perhaps at a deeper level my brain was saying, "And since my own children don't drink and drive (something, of course, that I could never prove, but want to believe), this tragedy won't happen to them."

However, I was in for a surprise, and I believe that this is why I was able to catch myself during these short-lived, brain-soothing thoughts. What this father said next took away my brief feeling of relief. His words were, "Alcohol was not involved in this accident. They found none in this bloodstream."

I remember the immediate shift I felt. But this time I was back into the pain, back into the depths of the senseless tragedy of the death of this young man and back into the grief of this devastated father sitting no more than three feet from me. Yet there was a part of me that still wanted, in some small way, to link the alcohol problems with the accident. That's how insistent my brain was.

I then remember saying to myself, "*Don't forget what just happened to you.*"

And this is why I am sharing with you today what I hope is some insight for you into the working of the human mind.

Perhaps your own life tragedies have modified the tendency toward Brain Pain Relief. If so, then you have moved beyond the reaction of most people. But for the rest of humanity, whose brains continue to attempt to protect them, it is important to be aware of how subtle and automatic this reaction can be.

Another facet of this mode of thinking occurs when people say to themselves, “Yes, this story is tragic; but it’s not as bad as...”

To judge by comparison is, I believe, another way for our brain to minimize the pain of loss. A final example of this tendency is shown when people who listen to your story of loss fall into the trap of beginning a sentence with the deadly words, “At least...”

Again, the brain is begging to reduce the pain.

What can we do about this natural tendency? I have three suggestions.

First, realize that it is more likely to occur when we are listening to information regarding a tragedy. When you know that you are about to listen to the story of a death (in many cases you won’t see it coming, except perhaps at a grief support meeting), you might say to yourself, “I need to watch my tendency to try to make sense of this tragedy and try not to compare it with other tragedies.”

Second, as the person tells you their story, try to counter the minimization process by saying to yourself phrases such as:

“Let the pain be. Accept it.”

“Don’t try to look for reasons.”

“Just be there for this person.”

Third, forgive yourself if you catch yourself judging. Remember, it is a natural human quality to try to reduce the pain in our lives. The important fact is that you are now more aware of what you have been doing and you can focus more on providing what we all need: a caring listener who is going to be there and not judge. This is the greatest gift you can give.