

HOW OUR BRAIN TRIES TO manage the pain of grief

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It's a fact of which you are quite aware: Your brain does not like pain and discomfort. When pain comes into our lives, our brain immediately activates to search for ways to reduce it. Touch a hot stove and your finger jerks away so fast you hardly have time to realize that it was hot. Someone rejects you and your brain scrambles to find some way—any way to ease the hurt.

When the ensuing pain of grief follows the death of a loved one, our brain springs into action to reduce the overwhelming, white-hot pain of loss.

However, it often fails miserably. Why is this? Because, when grief comes into our life, the reality and pain of the loss is seared so deeply into our brain that hardly anything we do alleviates the pain.

However, people do try a number of methods in an attempt to reduce—if only slightly—the impact of the death. Many of the attempts seem to occur automatically.

See if you relate to any of the following.

- Deny. I can't believe this happened. It feels like a dream.
- Distract. I've been putting in a lot of overtime at work.
- Avoid. I don't go to the closet where his clothes are hanging.
- Escape. I went out of town over the holiday. I just couldn't bear it.
- Fantasize. Sometimes I think she's just away at work.
- Justify. I was not a good person, so I deserve this pain.
- Insulate. I just feel numb.
- Sublimate. I've poured myself into a fundraiser in his name.
- Discount. I just tell myself that it's better this way.
- Ignore. I just try not to think about it.

A 2018 study was conducted by the Columbia University School of Engineering and Applied Science called, *Ongoing Monitoring of Mindwandering in Avoidant Grief Through Cortico-Basal-Ganglia Interactions*.

The researchers found that grieverers were often unaware that they were not allowing thoughts of loss to enter their consciousness. They concluded that this thought-blocking may exhaust mental energy and that, at times, the harsh reality of the loss will find a way to break through.



The question the researchers want to further explore is: Does frequent use of these thought-blocking methods lead to later problems in coping with the loss?

Further research into this issue will uncover the extent to which attempts to block the painful reality of a death might lead to later problems. I suspect that all of us use one or more of these methods. Not doing so would likely cause an extreme amount of pain, something few of us could bear.

The two big questions for all of us who grieve are:

1. What is the right amount of mental blocking that each of us should use to reduce the pain of our loss?
2. How much denial, distracting, avoiding, and escaping will lead to future problems?

The answers could help all of us to more effectively cope with our grief.