

# DIP INTO DENIAL

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"I can't believe she's gone."

"It can't be true. It's like a dream—a nightmare."

"This just can't be happening."

## Words like these are common when a

loved one dies. It's a form of denial—not the type where a person absolutely refuses to acknowledge that a death has occurred, but rather our brain's inability to grasp the horror of what has actually happened in our life. In this article we'll look at what's good and not so good about the denial process.

Consider the room you are in as you read this. Look around and imagine for a moment that, at

some point in the future you have moved to a new location never to see this room again. How many memories are associated with the room? Hundreds? Thousands? These memories are stored in your brain and all it takes is the proper trigger or stimulus for them to come into your mind. If you later walk into a room with a similar-looking ceiling or floor, the memories may come flooding back.

What does this have to do with death?

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Who in your life has died? How many thousands of memories of this person do you have stored in your brain?

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At the moment you found that this person died, your brain began to attempt to adjust to this significant new information. But, what an adjustment! How does a brain rectify its thousands of messages that tell us the person is alive with relatively fewer, recent experiences that say the person is dead, never to return? The answer is: our brain uses the mechanism of denial.

When a death occurs, one way to understand how the denial process might work is to refer to the scale below with 100% denial at one end and 0% denial at the other:

**TOTAL DENIAL**

**NO DENIAL**

100%-----50%-----0%

In this way it is helpful to see denial as a process that begins with no brain cells “getting” that your loved one died. At the other extreme is a point in which every single brain cell associated with your loved one’s life has been altered with the knowledge of the death.

In my years of work with bereaved people, I have concluded that no one who has had a significant loved one die gets to 0% denial with that person. When I talk to people whose child, spouse, or sibling died 20, 30 or more years, I often ask if there are times when they still can’t believe that their loved one died, will never come back, is gone forever and so on.

#### **INVARIABLY THEY SAY THINGS LIKE THE FOLLOWING:**

- ◆ “I know she’s dead. But sometimes I shake my head and still can’t believe it.”
- ◆ “Even years later I will sometimes hear a car approach the house and for a second think, oh, he’s home from work.”
- ◆ “Last month I was sitting in church and my heart skipped a beat because I saw a man who looked like my husband.”
- ◆ “I’ll be driving down the street and glance at a girl riding a bicycle and—I know it’s crazy—I have to drive around the block and look once more even though I know it’s not her.”

When we think of the initial reactions to loss, we immediately think of denial. When we think of unhealthy grief reactions, we think of continued denial—or “bad” denial. So-called “good” denial serves the function of assisting our brain as it deals with the pain of loss.

A helpful way to think about this is to imagine the brain as a large sponge with more than ten billion cells that contain life experiences stored deep within it. During every waking moment sensations from the outside world impinge on the outer layer. When a series of negative death-related events (announcement of the death, seeing the dead body, going to the funeral) enter the outer layer and begin working their way deep inside, the brain cannot handle this highly negative, painful, and incompatible information and attempts to find a way to comprehend and adjust to it. So, it

uses the mechanism of denial—sort of like adding a cushiony fluid to the tissues thereby protecting the deeper layers.

In this way, painful information takes longer to really sink in. Denial, therefore, is a way for the brain to buy time, a way to provide this cushion as the long-term memories begin their painful process of adjusting to and integrating with the reality of the death.

Have you ever had a dream that someone you knew died? And when you woke up, even though you knew they were still alive, you felt temporarily different about this person?

Your brain was trying to make sense of what it perceived to be “new” information. As the hours and day wore on, your brain was able to categorize the new experience as “false.”

When a real death occurs, because of its past experience with dreams of death, your brain may initially interpret the feelings surrounding the death as “feeling like a dream—a nightmare.”

Did you feel this way when the death first occurred? Many people report that the funeral “felt like a dream,” or was a haze or seemed unreal. This is especially true when the death is unexpected, when none of your brain cells had any time to adjust to the new information.

This is why people often appear to be functioning—at least going through the motions of living—during the first few days, weeks, and months following the death of a loved one. They

are still in shock. The deeper parts of their brain have not yet begun to process the enormity of their loss.

As time goes by and the shock begins to wear off, the brain begins to “let in” the harsh reality of the death; and the person often feels worse than they did earlier. During the first few years following the death of their loved one, many bereaved people report the awful realization that, in some ways, the second year was more difficult. A good part of the reason for this is that not until the second year that much of the shock has worn off, denial is decreasing, and more brain cells have “gotten” the fuller impact of the death.

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As you continue to encounter the harsh and painful reminders that your loved one is dead, your brain, in its own way, will gradually, albeit painfully, begin to absorb the reality of what has taken place.

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In an attempt to move through their denial some people bombard their brain with the harsh realities of the death. You may feel a great need to talk and talk about it. You may return again and again to the place where your loved one died. We continue to see this in the hundreds of people who have returned to visit Ground Zero years after 9/11/01.

Other people find ways to avoid the truth of what has taken place by, for example, choosing never to visit the place where their loved one died, not talking about it, avoiding the reminders, and finding any way they can to deny that the death has occurred.

Is this unhealthy? Is there a point where this becomes unhealthy?

The answer is complex because one of the ways that some people cope with the intensity of their loss is to take moments during the day and pretend that their loved one is still alive.

For example, bereaved parents have told me that, at times, they have soothed their pain by saying, “She is down the street at her friend’s house.” “He is away at college.” “He is at the store with her father.”

These episodes of denial, coupled with a deeper understanding that the death really did occur are, in themselves, not an unhealthy form of denial. What is unhealthy (bad denial) is when a person says, "My husband didn't die. He's okay." "My brother is away and will be back." "This isn't true, someone is playing a trick on me. I know she's still alive."

As you continue to cope with your loss, keep in mind that, as your denial continues to come and go, it is up to you to decide how much "reality" to take in.

Be kind to yourself and don't let someone else decide how much input on the death you need. Most importantly, as see yourself move down the denial scale and feel more of the pain of your loss, realize that your brain is continuing to go through the most dramatic adjustment in the human condition. It's called bereavement.