

SHOULD I KEEP MY changing grief a secret

DR. BOB BAUGHER

When your daughter or son died, you discovered what the depths of grief were. You didn't want to live.

Why go on when your precious child has been torn from your grasp? Like many parents you may have thought of suicide.

Early in their bereavement process many parents have said to me something like, "Bob, I'm not going to go out and kill myself, but if I'm driving down the street and a semi-truck is coming at me, I'm not going to get out of the way. I can't take this. The pain [of living each day] is too great."

These feelings are common; but fortunately for most parents the power of these feelings subsides as the months and years go on. And so does, as one father called it, whose three-year-old son died in an auto accident, the white-hot pain of grief.

If you are more than a couple years from the day of your child's death, you may have begun to notice that the white-hot pain is not so intense. Although the grief is still there and although you would give anything to bring back your child, the pain may have eased in certain areas of your grief.

For example, when your child died, you may have experienced incredible guilt. You might have said to yourself, "What kind of parent am I whose child would die?" Do any of the following phrases sound familiar?

- ◆ "If only....."
- ◆ "I should have....."
- ◆ "Why didn't I.....?"
- ◆ "I feel so guilty about..."

These are guilt statements. Anger is also a huge issue for many. Have any of the following words come up for you following your son or daughter's death?

- ◆ Mad
- ◆ Upset
- ◆ Irritated
- ◆ Enraged
- ◆ Ticked
- ◆ Po'd
- ◆ Furious
- ◆ bitter
- ◆ Frustrated

As time has passed have you seen yourself not as mad, upset, irritated and so on? In addition, are you not as numb, fearful, and sad? Has your concentration improved somewhat?

In other words, is your grief changing?

At the same time have you noticed that people around you have not changed as much as you? That is, even though you have begun to see the intensity of your grief subsiding, you see that others who also love your child are still feeling the white-hot intensity of grief. The question I have for you is, "Should you tell others that your grief has been changing?"



Let's look at the positives and negatives of this question. First, sharing where you are in your grief process is quite helpful for most people. It is at the core of the credo of The Compassionate Friends and is the title of this magazine, *We Need Not Walk Alone*.

However, should you tell everyone? Including those who are not as far along as you? By the way, isn't the term "far along" interesting? It assumes that grief is a straight path when in fact grief is more like a maze in which you hit dead ends, circle back to the beginning, and often get lost.

Sharing your feelings is an honest reflection of who we are as humans. Why hide what we are truly experiencing? Those who care for us would want to know if we are beginning to feel better. Make sense?

However, there is another side to sharing your grief journey. What if you told the people in your life that the heaviness of your grief is lifting? What harm could this do? Those of you who have done this, know what is coming in this paragraph.

Telling others that you are not hurting so much can lead and has led to some of the following responses:

1. "Oh, you must not love your child as much as I do."
2. "Good, you're getting over it. Now I don't have to support you as much. And you don't need to go to those *Passionate Buddies* meetings or whatever they call themselves. I never knew what you saw in that group anyway."
3. "You must be blocking your feelings. You haven't really dealt with your grief. Perhaps you need therapy."
4. "So, you're not as angry anymore? Well, I still am."
5. "Are you forgetting the life of our daughter (or son)?"
6. "I guess I'm glad you're getting better; but I'm not."
7. "I'm glad you're recovering. I'm looking forward to getting the old *you* back."

Which path is preferable regarding your changing grief: sharing it or keeping it a secret?

We've come to the point where you can begin to answer this question for yourself. Think of each person in your life who is coping with the death of your child. One by one, imagine what his or her response might be if you shared your changing grief.

Can you take a moment now to do the following? If you are married, think of your spouse. What would he or she say about your grief? If your parents are alive, what would they say if they knew exactly how you are now feeling? The same question for your siblings and other relatives. How would your brother react? What about your sister? What would she say? And what about your close friends—how would they react? In which of the ways (1-7 above) might any of these people respond?

How did you do? Of course you cannot always predict how a loved one will react.

Remember to permit yourself to grieve however you grieve.

Try not to be so hard on yourself and decide whether or not you wish to share with others where you are in your grief. If you've already done what you need to in this area, good for you. If not, I hope this article has given you a way to make the decisions that are best for you.