

WHAT DOES IT MEAN to “deal with it?”

DR. BOB BAUGHER

We hear it all the time, “She’s not dealing with her father’s death.”

“I’m trying to deal with this loss.”

“They’ll be dealing with this tragedy for the rest of their lives.”

These statements indicate that the person is somehow required to do something about the loss, that is, deal with it in some way. If so, then what is it that the person must do? What do we mean by deal with it?



When a loss comes into our lives, our brain has three choices:

1. Try to deny the reality of the loss. We say things such as: *This can't be true. No way. It feels like a dream. I keep waiting to wake up.* As time goes by and evidence reveals that the loss is real, our brain finds its defenses crumbling against the harsh reality of the truth.
2. Begin, a little at a time, to let in the pain of the loss.
3. Open up to the enormity of the loss and feel the pain full on.

Whichever of the three methods we use,
the “dealing” part of our grief begins at the
exact moment our brain begins to take on the pain.

Over the years, I've asked hundreds of people in grief the following question: What is it that you actually **do** to deal with loss? Continue reading to see what they said.

EDUCATE

They found ways to learn about what they were experiencing by talking to others who've had a similar loss, by reading articles or books, by attending a support group or lecture, and by going online.

ASK FOR SUPPORT

They called, texted, emailed or visited people in their life and flat out said, "Here is what I need from you." Of course, this can be scary given that some people would not follow through with any degree of support. For many people coping with loss, taking the risk to reach out to others proved helpful. Some found prayer helpful as they searched for comfort in their spirituality.

JOURNAL

At such a difficult time in one's life it seems counterintuitive to record the pain of grief. However, those who did so found that it served two purposes.

- ◆ First, it was a way to get out their thoughts and feelings on paper, confusing as they were.
- ◆ Second, when they read what they had written months later, it gave them a sense of perspective.

Even though revisiting the early pain of their grief proved difficult, it helped them see that, since the time they had written those painful words, things had shifted and emotions had eased, perhaps only a little.

WRITE MEMORIES/STORIES

Here, people wrote stories about the life of their loved one. Sometimes the memories brought instant tears, at other times smiles and even laughter as they revisited a funny episode in the life of this person.

LISTEN TO MUSIC

As with writing, music can bring out an array of emotions. Some people report that, for a time, they cannot play a favorite song of their loved one—the pain is just too great. You decide when you are ready to turn on that song. You know the one (or several) I'm talking about. Just the anticipation of hearing the song may get to you. What we know about music is that playing it over and over will eventually get you to a point where the tears gradually become less. For some people who have done this, the song eventually produced smiles.

PHYSICALLY GET IT OUT

Walk, play a sport, do calisthenics, scream into a pillow, cry, run, but find some way where your body can experience some form of release. Later, when the feeling builds up again, repeat the physical release.

RESEARCH WHY THE DEATH OCCURRED OR SLOWLY RELEASE THE NEED TO KNOW

Following a death, some people feel compelled to find everything that can about the cause, the reason, what could have been done, and the meaning of the loss. In some cases, these people find the answers they seek. In other cases, the answers do not come and they are left with little or nothing to show. This only adds to their grief. However, as the months turn into years, many who came up empty eventually learned to live with unanswered questions.

EXAMINE EXPECTATIONS

Among the many frustrating issues during bereavement is having expectations of other family members and friends that they will be there to provide support, that they will be good listeners, that they will remember important dates, that they will say the name of your loved one. Unfortunately, many of the people we hoped would do these things disappoint us and we are left with our hopes and wishes of support dashed. This can be felt by some as yet another loss. In this case, we have a choice: speak with this person and renew your appeal, speak with someone to get ideas on what else you might do, or let it go. Whatever you do, it hurts when the people around you aren't there for you.

CRY/LAUGH

We all hear that having a good cry can be good for you especially when coping with a loss. Not all people cry after a death. Is this you? If so, do not judge yourself for your lack of tears.

Weeks and months after a death some people cry a lot, some only a little, while some don't cry at all. We don't know why this is, but our job in grief is to not judge ourselves or others for the way they respond.

At some point after the death did you find yourself laughing? What kind of person would laugh when their life has fallen apart? The answer? A normal person.



If your loved one could see you laugh, would he or she say, "Hey, stop that. I'm gone from this earth and you're laughing? What's wrong with you?" Is that what your loved one would say? Unlikely. It may be more like: "Yes, go ahead and laugh and enjoy life while you can."

LOOK AT PICTURES/VIDEO

Much as the case with music, people reported that viewing pictures and video of their loved one was at first painful and for some, excruciating. But with time and gradual exposure they found that doing this brings more comfort than pain.

HELP OTHERS

As you well know, helping others in need can feel good. Doing something for another person, lending a hand, volunteering for a group, and giving without expecting something in return can, for a time, ease some of your grief. Ask yourself: What group or individual needs my help at this time? And then do it.

DISTRACT

People said that, for a time, immersing themselves in grief was all they can do. But, after a while they were able to find little ways to temporarily distract themselves, such as: reading, going online, TV, playing a game or a sport, working on a project, doing something with a friend. Certainly, it is impossible to put aside the

memories and emotional reactions to the loss during the time you are trying to distract. However, people report that making themselves do these things helped a little.

FIND A WAY TO CREATE

Many people found it helpful to create art, to write a story or a poem, to build something, to work in the garden, or even to repair something. There was something about the creative process that seemed to help although some people weren't sure why.

FORGIVE YOURSELF AND STOP BEING SO HARD ON YOURSELF

For most people this was one of the hardest to do. Guilt self-talk such as: *Why didn't I? If only.... I should've or shouldn't have* is a common grief reaction. The question that many people eventually asked themselves was: "What would it take for me to begin to forgive myself?" Another helpful one is: "Can I stop being so hard on myself and begin to treat myself as kindly as I would my best friend?" Can you ask yourself these questions?

FIND MORE WAYS TO FEEL CONNECTED TO YOUR LOVED ONE

Up until a couple decades ago the prevailing so-called wisdom in dealing with a death was to suggest to the person in grief, "Say goodbye." "Sever the ties." "Move on and let go." Now, most grief experts realize that most bereaved people are not helped by these suggestions. Instead many people find ways to still stay connected to their loved one. How have you been able to do that? Here are suggestions: carry a picture or some memento, wear clothing or jewelry of the person, speak to him or her, write the person a letter, go to an important place where you feel a connection with this person, acknowledge important days in the person's life.

TAKE IT ONE DAY AT A TIME

At first it may be more like:
Take it one moment at a time.

To think of next month and next year and beyond without your loved one can be overwhelming. Your job is to find ways to get through the moments by doing some of the above listed suggestions by people who have come before you. By doing some of these things, you can gradually get to a day when the pain is not so great. But it will also be a day when you know that you will always keep the memories of your loved one and be forever grateful that this precious person was in your life.

So, despite all your pain, can you give some of these suggestions a try? You've likely done some of them already. Choose the remaining ones that may work for you; and the next time someone asks how you're doing, you can respond, "I'm dealing with it the best I can."