

WHEN OTHERS MINIMIZE our grief

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I enter the large conference room that holds more than 20 round tables and glance at the people sitting around them in groups, chatting quietly. Their faces reveal nothing of the tragedies that brought them here, many having driven or flown hundreds of miles. I've been asked to come here today in an attempt to explain some of their unremitting, agonizing pain, to help—as I've been requested—to “unconfuse” them a little.

But before I stand in front of this group, another helper will take us through the introductions. As I sit there, I begin to realize that I am half holding my breath as each person or couple in this room stands for a few seconds and speaks a precious name followed by where and when the death occurred.

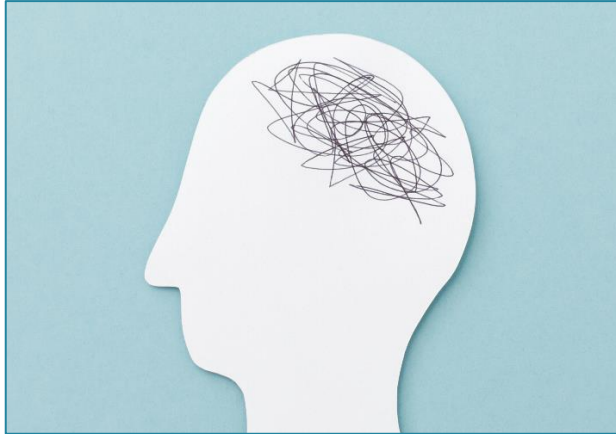
I watch the facial features of each person quickly change from neutral, stern, or determined to lost, sorrowful, helpless.

As the mothers, fathers, husbands, and wives state the name of their loved one and the location of the death, I am aware that my stomach is tightening in anticipation of the year of death. The date today is June 11, 2013. So, when I hear “May 4th two thousand...” I find myself saying, “No, don't let it be recent.” And when I hear “four” or even “eight” I let out a quiet, relieved breath.

**But when I hear, “two thousand ten,”
“eleven,” or “twelve,” I cringe.
Why the difference?**

Why should it matter whether it was years ago or this year? What it comes down to is the fact that my brain is attempting to protect itself. That's its job, isn't it? Our brain is wired to motivate us to find any way it can to shield itself from the experience of discomfort, irritation, pain. However, if we can come up with reasons to tolerate any of these states of disequilibrium, we can deal with pain. (Think about why we exercise or walk past that delicious piece of cake. We've conjured reasons to endure that discomfort.)

The death of a loved one is often senseless. Therefore, watching another human being struggle with death leaves us—and by extension, our brain—with no good reason to tolerate the pain. Our brain is left to its own devices.



One common technique used by our brain is to find any way it can to distance itself from the vicarious pain of death. Today I found myself doing this exact thing again and again as each sentence finished with the year of the death.

When I heard “eleven” or “twelve,” my brain had nowhere to hide. The pain was instant and could not be cushioned.

A few seconds later I was met with another sting, and another and another.

Does it really matter to the bereaved person whether the death took place a few minutes ago or several years ago? Given that the person is dead either way, the answer is, of course, “No.” But from a viewer such as myself, my brain has a reflexive response that goes something like this: “If the death took place many years ago, then I—

your brain—do not have to hurt as much.”

What does this mean to navigate a world filled with nonbereaved people whose brains try to minimize their pain? What do you get? You get clichés. You hear, “At least you have your family, your health, your friends, your dog...” You are quickly handed tissues to mop up the tears. You see them look at their watches and their face says, “Hasn’t it been long enough?”

Blame it on the brain. It’s what our brains do. It’s not purposely done to cause more pain, or to leave you feeling even more alone.

It’s a natural reaction of the brain.

Prior to your loved one’s death, you probably did the same thing. You tossed out a few clichés and wondered why the person was still grieving. But now you know better. Now you know what you need. It is what most grieving people need: one or more persons who can listen without judging as you go on and on. Someone who can tolerate your pain. Someone who permits you to cry—or not cry. A person who doesn’t hesitate to say your loved one’s name. A friend who is there for you.

Now that you have a little more insight into the brain, can you find it in your heart to tolerate some of the things people say? Someday, they will find themselves in your shoes, and will realize that what they used to believe were helpful phrases were just their brain’s way of attempting to reduce their own pain. In this case, their brain will now sadly know what real pain is. When this does happen, I bet you will be there to help. And when this person says to you through their tears, “I’m so sorry for not understanding what you were going through,” I bet you’ll reply, “It’s okay. I’m here.”

And their brain will be thankful.