GRIEVING: SOME QUESTIONS, SOME ANSWERS

By Dr. Alan Hill

What is Grieving?

Grieving is the natural and healthy process by which we will come to terms with the impact of a tragic loss. Grieving weaves our “unruly” and disturbing experiences back into the tapestry of our lives. Though we will always have an ache in our heart, grieving will gradually bring us acceptance, peace of mind, a sense of integrity and hope.

How Long Will Grieving Take?

The time of and particular course of grieving varies from person to person. Active, healthy grieving requires balance - balancing the time you spend directly working on your grief with the time you spend coping with your day-to-day life. Our hectic schedules at “K” make this a challenging task. We, all, have our limits and some of us may need to ask for extensions from our instructors or consider dropping a course or activity.

What is the Process of Grieving?

Our intense emotional reactions to the loss/tragedy energize and guide our grieving. The process of grieving is the process of working through these feelings. Feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, fear, confusion, numbness, depression, relief, helplessness, nausea/disgust and longing connect us to the issues that we must resolve to come to terms with the tragedy.

How Do I Begin the Process of Grieving?

Grieving is a natural process and usually you can just let it happen by feeling your feelings. Once we start talking about the tragedy or reflect on it, the feelings will come. Good friends can provide a safe and supportive atmosphere for the expression of our feelings. However this natural process can be blocked by certain self-imposed imperatives such as "This shouldn't have an impact on my life", "I must not break down" "I can deal with this on my own" or "I must get tough and just forget about it". Sometimes these sentiments are reinforced by instructors, parents and peers”. Or some of us may try to avoid dealing with the situation by sleeping all the time, staying online all the time, by throwing ourselves into constant work or by using mood-altering substances. If you are having a hard time getting started, please make contact with one of the counselors at the counseling center.

How Do I Work Through My Feelings?

Working through our feelings means that we identify our feelings, connect to the issues the feelings represent, and work to resolve these issues. Talking with peers, parents, clergy, faculty, coaches, administrators and/or counselors promote working through, as does more solitary activities, such as reflection, journal writing, letter writing (not to be necessarily sent), creative activity (poetry, etc.), relevant movies and readings.

How Do I Work Through Shock/Numbness?

Shock tells us that the tragedy threatens to have an overwhelming impact on our lives, and numbness helps us avoid painful and distressing feelings. These feelings are protective of us and are normal and helpful early on in grieving. But if we don't work through these feelings, we will go through our lives in a dazed and zombie-like manner. An important issue to resolve may be “Are we capable of acknowledging and dealing with the emotional impact of this tragedy?”. Sometimes, though, we are so traumatized by our experiences, that we will need professional help to deal with our emotions.
How Do I Work Through Confusion?

Confusion tells us that this tragedy does not make sense to us. An important issue to be resolved may be "How can I make sense of this?" For instance we may wonder "how come bad things happened to people we saw as good?" or how do I reconcile this reprehensible action with someone I respect or care about?" For some of us this becomes a spiritual/religious issue and consultation with a religious/spiritual advisor is highly recommended.

How Do I Work Through Sadness/Longing/Despair?

Sadness tells us that we have suffered a loss, and we think our lives will be greatly different in a way that we will not particularly like. The loss may be the loss of a friend, loss of innocence, loss of faith, loss of the family or relationship (as it was before) etc. One issue is "How can we accept, adjust and live with this loss". Out of despair we struggle to find hope. Some of the means to a hopeful future include: being kind to yourself, creating ways of remembering the people or situation you lost, constructing meaning in you life and envisioning a hopeful future. Suicidal thoughts, hopelessness, depression, and loss of motivation are indications that you need professional help.

How Do I Work Through Fear?

Fear tells us that we are in danger and need to protect ourselves. We may worry what this loss means for our future. It is important to try to take one day at a time, and realize if something does happen, you will deal with it (just like you have in the past). Worrying about all the possible catastrophes will not change anything and will only make your life miserable. Another issue is whether we can trust others and the world now, in light of this loss/tragedy. We must work through our fear until we come to a resolution of a realistic trust and a commitment to protect ourselves from some real dangers. Also our own death may become an issue. For some the realization of their own mortality becomes a positive. They come to see each day as more precious, become less upset over the "small stuff" and have gotten their priorities straight. However, the presence of recurrent panic attacks constant anxiety and/or repeated avoidance behaviors (e.g., "staying in room") suggests a need for professional counseling.

How Do I Work Through Guilt?

Guilt tells us we are responsible for doing something wrong and need to make amends. Issues include" I could and should have done something to prevent this tragedy “or” I could have and should have been nicer to a person who is now gone". Hindsight is 20-20, and we did not know what we know now. If we did, we would have made different decisions. We are certainly responsible for our actions, and it makes sense to wish that we had made different decisions, but to hold ourselves responsible for the loss makes little sense. We best forgive ourselves and commit ourselves to learning from the experience.

How Do I Work Through Anger and Resentment?

Anger tells us that something terribly offensive and unfair has happened and we need to take punitive action. Issues include: "How could someone do something so unfair and offensive?", "This shouldn't have happened-its not fair!!" and "Whose to blame?". We need to accept that indeed this tragedy did happen, and that the world is full of seeming injustices (it is not fair!!). To let go of our resentment we may need to try our best to understand and forgive. Our religious/spiritual tradition may help us believe that justice will ultimately be served, and our commitment to understanding may channel our anger into the constructive action of preventing such tragedies.