



What's Your Grief I.Q.?

“My friend is stuck in grief...what can I do to help?” This is a question I often hear, and I've learned to ask, “What do you mean your friend is *stuck* in grief?” Usually they will say something like, “Well, her husband died 14 months ago, and she's still very depressed. Isn't it about time she moves forward with her life?” Or, they may say, “His wife moved out a year ago, and he's in worse shape now than when she left him.”

Surprisingly, the problem isn't *that these people are stuck in grief*. The issue is that their friends don't realize how long it can take to heal and rebuild after a heart-wrenching loss. As a psychologist and someone who has experienced deep sorrow, I've seen too many people hurt by well-meaning friends, family, or coworkers who want to help, but honestly don't understand the pain of loss.

What your grief I.Q.? Do you know how respond properly when someone you know is grieving? Here are seven truths to keep in mind:

1. The first 6 – 18 months are the most difficult.

During this time period, loved ones are no longer actively reaching out to the hurting person, but it's a stage when the numbness begins to disappear and reality sinks in: Life has forever changed. While you may think that one year after a death or divorce is plenty of time to grieve, the reality is those who hurt may feel worse.

Make a note on your calendar to remind yourself that you will be needed around six to eighteen months after the crisis. You could write a note, make a phone call, offer a book, or send some flowers to let them know you understand that their pain continues.

2. Grief is not a time to produce, achieve, or accomplish.

When something or someone we cherish vanishes from our lives, we soon discover that the most routine tasks become extremely difficult. This is the result of mental, emotional, and physical resources becoming severely depleted.

Yet, too many people are given misinformation in these situations. For example, Brooke was told after the death of her younger brother to “keep herself busy” and “time has a way of healing these things.” So, she tried to keep up with her hectic schedule. But, two years later, she found herself close to a breakdown.

Although routines can be comforting, busyness does not give someone the time to rebuild his or her exhausted resources. Help your loved one carve out the time and space necessary to process, rest, and renew.

3. There isn't a painkiller for every pain.

When comparing modern society to the previous century, Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message* wrote, “The main difference today is not how much people are hurting, but how much they expect to be relieved from their hurting.”¹ As soon as we feel any kind of discomfort we look for some way to get rid of it. And, when someone we love is suffering, we work hard to fix the problem or find a painkiller. But, as Sallie said after she lost her teenage son, “There's nothing

on earth that can soothe my pain.” It was only her faith in God that provided her with a sense of comfort.

While you may be searching and yearning for something to take away your loved one’s pain, realize that it may not exist. No one is guaranteed a pain-free life. Rather than feeling helpless to make a difference, step in and let them know that you love them, are praying for them, and are willing to help with their basic needs. Simply knowing that others care can be a huge comfort.

4. Don’t compare losses.

Many people are like my friend Heather who play *the comparison game* every time they confront a loss. Heather took whatever pain she was experiencing, be it the death of a dream or the death of a friend, and compared it to someone else’s pain. Since she could always find someone with a loss more tragic than hers, however, she never allowed herself to grieve.

So, it’s important to help others accept their feelings of sadness. You could say something like, “There’s nothing wrong with you. Your pain is *your* pain. It’s OK to feel it.” Don’t minimize their distress by comparing their loss to someone else, because the reason *why* they’re hurting isn’t the main focus. It doesn’t matter whether they are hurting over the death of a dream, the death of a career, or an unwanted move. Encourage them to understand that for them this is a loss and their heart is broken.

5. Anger, as well as sadness, is part of grief.

Anger is a common reaction to loss. After the loss of my health and my job, I expected deep sadness. But, what surprised me was feelings of seething rage. “How dare they take away my job because I’m too ill to work!” I fumed. “I didn’t plan on having a recurrence of cancer and a bone marrow transplant. Where’s their sense of compassion?”

How can you help someone who’s furious with God, and everyone else, deal with what has happened to them? Instead of dismissing their anger, acknowledge it with a sincere comment such as, “I’d be angry too if that happened to me!” This assures the grieving person that you realize the difficulty of their loss.

6. People grieve differently.

Everyone eventually experiences some level of grief, but not everyone processes grief in the same way. Jennifer Sands, whose husband died during the terrorist attacks on 9/11 said, “Grieving is as individual as a fingerprint.”

Some people prefer time alone with an occasional visitor. Others want a steady stream of company and lots of phone calls. Likewise, some want to take control of the situation while others withdraw, content to let things work out on their own.

In order to *help* rather than *hinder*, think about the personality of the person you want to support. Resist the urge to make someone adjust their grieving process to fit your view. Your compassion combined with sensitivity can make a big difference between hurting or healing.

7. Grief can last longer than you expect.

Our culture rarely talks about *how long* it takes to heal after a difficult loss. Dr. Elizabeth Palazzi, a psychologist in Pennsylvania, says, “Grieving takes longer than anybody ever has the patience for.” One reason grief lasts so long is that emotional setbacks are part of the process.

One afternoon, my friend Janet dashed into the mall for a quick trip to her favorite cosmetic counter. As she passed the counter of men's fragrances she caught a whiff of her husband's cologne. She froze for a moment, and then left the store sobbing. Her husband had died three years earlier. But, it only took one smell and a split second to throw her back into the grip of grief.

Sights, sounds, and smells are examples of triggers that cause emotional setbacks. These are to be expected. It often takes 2 – 5 years before someone is able to rebuild his or her life and create a "new normal." If you find yourself getting impatient, resist the temptation to say, "Shouldn't you be over this by now?" Instead, offer comfort by saying, "I can't begin to imagine what you're going through, but please know that I care."

While "normal" life may continue for many of us, remember that a grieving person's pain continues. Our role is not to judge whether someone is stuck in their grief or grieving correctly. Rather, our role is to give hurting individuals our love, grace, and *lots* of time.

Note: This article was adapted from:
A Gift of Mourning Glories:
Restoring Your Life After Loss.



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¹ Eugene Peterson, *Critique*, 7 (1997), 12.