
The Beacon

Guiding You Through the Process of Change

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Grieving the Loss of Things You Never Had

Some losses are obvious - the death of a loved one, the loss of a home or a job. When we know we have experienced a loss, we know we need to grieve in order to help ourselves move forward and lessen the emotional pain. However, sometimes we may fail to identify something as a loss, and thereby fail to allow ourselves to go through a meaningful grieving process.

Some difficult losses involve things that we never actually had in the first place. For example:

A Fantasy Marriage- Whether you are still together, or divorced, you may not have/had the relationship you hoped for when you got married. Maybe you decided to separate, or maybe you decided to stay together. In either case, you no longer have the hope for a dream marriage. Reality requires you to give up the fantasy relationship, and the dream is lost.

A Fantasy Outside Relationship/An Affair- If you have ended an affair, you may feel some sort of loss. Though an affair necessarily exists in a “bubble,” separate from the rest of your life, it may involve very real feelings. You may feel grief at the loss of the relationship itself, or the loss of the fantasy that it would evolve into a “real” relationship. You may miss the other person and the attention or affection they provided. If you feel that the affair brought out a new or dormant part of yourself, you may miss that part of you, and the way you felt when you were together. Though you may be fully committed to your marriage, or to ending the affair for other reasons, the loss may need to be acknowledged in order to move on.

A Fantasy Family Relationship- Maybe you have always hoped that your relationship with your parent(s), sibling(s), etc, would change in a particular way. There may come a point when it becomes clear that the relationship is never going to evolve in the way that you had hoped. Continuing trying to force the change, or despairing over the reality of the situation, may cause significant distress. Acknowledging the loss of the dream relationship may help you find acceptance and enjoyment with the current relationship as it truly exists.

A Fantasy Career, Body, Bank Account, etc.- Everyone has some disappointments in life. The true difficulties arise when a “disappointment” becomes an obsession, or a cause for self-

deprecation. In such situations, it may be easier to get to the goal of self-acceptance if you allow yourself to acknowledge and grieve the fantasy.

Grieving this type of loss, of something that you never truly had in the first place, is likely to involve the following steps:

Acknowledging the loss/giving yourself permission to feel the pain- Recognizing that you have experienced a loss is the first step to progressing through the grieving process and moving forward. The types of losses discussed above are different from the stereotypical “loss” (e.g., the death of a loved one), but nonetheless may result in very real feelings of grief and despair. You need to acknowledge the pain and its source in order to deal with it effectively.

Allowing yourself to grieve/say goodbye- Different people grieve in different ways, and any way that works for you is fine. Sometimes, simply having a forum in which to express your grief is extremely cathartic (e.g., a sympathetic friend, a journal, a therapist). Sometimes, it is helpful to “say goodbye” - either literally or with a symbolic gesture (e.g., a song, a poem, a letter, a meaningful trip). The specific process of working through your grief is a personal decision on a personal timeline. Whatever you choose, you need to be patient with yourself as you move through your emotions.

Moving on- Moving forward is similarly different depending on the situation. It may mean accepting your current (marital, family) relationship as it is, and striving to find contentment within it, or boundaries around it. Moving forward in the case of an affair may mean finding another way to awaken the dormant part of you that was revived in the outside relationship. Importantly, moving forward from this type of a loss often requires finding acceptance and peace with yourself that remains strong, despite the situations and people that fill your days and nights.

References:

On Grief and Grieving by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler
The Grief Recovery Handbook by John W. James and Russell Friedman
A New Normal: Learning to Live with Grief and Loss by Darlene Cross

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