

National conversations starting to make grieving OK, especially during the holidays

As grief becomes a more visible topic in podcasts and national media, mental health experts say those conversations are helping people feel less isolated and more confident in how they mourn.

Amy Brooke, MA, LCPC, a psychotherapist for OSF HealthCare says CNN's Anderson Cooper's podcast, "[All There Is](#)," creates a public space for discussing loss, which normalizes grief and helps people feel less alone by sharing real experiences and emphasizing that joy can coexist with grief. Brooke also believes it promotes healing through connection and shared stories rather than suppression.

"I think it's a great thing that they were talking about it, because a lot of times people who are grieving feel very alone and isolated and they're afraid of doing it wrong, and so what the podcast does is it helps people see how things are similar and even how people grieve differently." And, she says the podcast makes it clear, that's ok – that there's no, one, right way to grieve, even though the ways people grieve are often judged.

Brooke emphasizes every person's grief is unique because every person's relationship with the person who was lost is unique. That's why you can have siblings in the same family grieve very differently.

Talking about loved ones, no matter how much time has passed, can be an important part of healing and remembrance, Brooke emphasizes.

"A lot of times, when people are grieving, they sometimes feel like they're bothering people if they talk about it, because 'Oh, my mom died a year ago. I shouldn't still be talking about her,' but what the podcast does, it says, 'No, it's okay to talk about it if it's 20 years ago.'"

Some people don't know how to be around someone who has lost someone close to them. Brooke advises just being open to allowing them to share memories. Grief is an expression of love, she stresses, and allowing people to share memories and talk about their loved one is important to helping them honor that loving relationship.

Talk about lost loved ones

"What it does is it makes it about transforming the loss rather than removing the person. We don't want to remove the person from our lives. We're grieving them because they were so important to us. Why would we want to get rid of them?"

Grief is not linear but it's also not cyclical. She calls it similar to "darts being thrown at your soul" and sometimes it pops up in the oddest places. Brooke advises being aware of that because you can better recognize grief when it surfaces at strange times such as during a movie, passing by a store, or even hearing a turn of phrase from a grandchild.

Support groups, she adds, provide a unique type of connection that friends and family sometimes cannot, especially for people who fear burdening those closest to them.

"It is very different than talking to your friends, because a lot of times with our friends, we're afraid we're burdening them, where, with a support group, you have time set aside to actually talk about

that person, and even if you're not talking about it, you're listening to somebody else, and you're giving that support to them, which can feel really good if you feel like you've just been taking."

For people who aren't typically joiners, she recommends exploring online grief groups. There are often some specific to the type of death someone suffered such as from cancer or violence.

Grief often becomes more intense during the holidays, when traditions and memories can magnify a sense of loss. Brooke encourages people to release expectations and redefine what the season looks like for them.

Her advice for reframing the holidays includes allowing yourself to recognize how it's going to be different and then deciding what would be comforting to you. It doesn't have to be comforting to everyone else; she stresses coming up with that kind of new tradition or activity will help you feel better.

There's no timeline on grief

Also, Brooke says be gentle and lower your own expectations of yourself and the holiday.

"The energy we put into trying to make it the same is kind of harmful, because we're using all of our energy to really try to do something that's impossible."

Despite growing awareness, Brooke observes that society still places unrealistic limits on grief, especially in workplaces, which can leave people feeling pressured to move on before they are ready.

"We put a time limit on grief, and for example, if someone's mother dies, we say you actually have three days off to deal with that grief, and three days is not enough time to deal with a loss.

Brooke also thinks society doesn't recognize the importance of the loss of other, significant people in our lives including friends, extended family, and neighbors and that our culture pressures us to compartmentalize grief and move on. Those cultural pressures, Brooke says, can lead to delayed or unprocessed grief that can later show up in physical ailments such as fatigue, sleep/appetite changes, anxiety, depression, isolation and intense sadness/anger.

In some cases, alcohol and substance abuse can arise as people work to suppress grief and avoid thinking about their loss. However, as public conversations about loss continue, experts such as Brooke hope they will lead to more understanding and more grace for people grieving in ways that are deeply personal and impossible to place on a timeline.