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Not ready to talk about loss ^[1]

Dear Alice,

My father just died. I'm really depressed. I'm not looking for sympathy, so I haven't told any of my friends. I'm not on good terms with my family and that has made the situation all the more difficult. I feel like I need somebody to talk to, but I'm afraid to approach my friends. I know in situations like this people over-compensate by smothering the person with sympathy and attention. What I need is the exact opposite. I need to work this out on my own. Maybe someone that will be there when I want them to be. I'm not looking for the number of a hotline where I will just end up talking to a stranger. Nor do I want to talk to the counselors or any other strangers. You're the first person that I've said anything to about this. Who can I talk to about this?

Signed,
No where to go

Answer

Dear No where to go,

First off, what you're going through is extremely difficult so kudos to you for reaching out. Everyone grieves for the loss of a loved one in a unique way and on a different timetable. It seems as though you've thought about what feels right for you and have determined that you'd like to process your feelings on your own. However, knowing that you might want to have someone on hand when you may need them, there are ways for you to let someone know you appreciate and want the support but need space in the interim. As you navigate this difficult situation, it may be useful to also employ some coping strategies to help you through this time.

While you continue to decide how to process your feelings and mourn in your own way, taking care of yourself — both your mind and body — can go a long way on the road to healing. Here are a few tips for prioritizing your well-being during this time:

- It's wise to face your grief. Acknowledging your pain can help you move forward, as unresolved grief may result in mental and physical health issues down the line. In fact, pushing away feelings of sadness can actually make the healing process last longer.
- You may benefit from finding an outlet for your feelings. This could take many forms,

including journaling, scrapbooking pictures and mementos of your favorite memories, or even getting involved in a cause that was meaningful to your father.

- Prioritizing your physical health can help you through this process as well. When your body feels good, your mind may start to follow. You can do this by getting adequate sleep [2], managing your stress, eating nutritious foods, being physically active, and avoiding the use of alcohol or drugs as a coping mechanism [3].
- Although less direct, volunteering in the community may help in your healing process. Helping others has proven to be an effective activity for those who have experienced a loss.

Another critical aspect of the healing process is enlisting support of people in your social network. You mention that you don't want to talk about this with anyone right now, but you may find that you feel like sharing as you move through your grief. Since this is your unique process, you may decide to reach out to anyone with whom you feel comfortable, such as friends, other family members, resident advisors (RAs), faculty members, or perhaps clergy members. It may also help to talk to someone who's been there — have any of your friends or a person you know lost a parent or someone close to them? They might also be able to connect with you and understand what you're going through.

You mentioned your concern that people tend to overcompensate their sympathy when this type of loss occurs. Is it possible that the folks you anticipate responding this way care about you, but just don't know exactly what you need? It's okay to be clear and direct about what you need from your loved ones and to accept offers of support and help. If and when you do choose to talk about your feelings, you can let them know what you're looking for in return so they're better able to support you — whether that's just for someone to listen, a shoulder to cry on, or assistance with any necessary arrangements connected with your loss. To open up the conversation about your loss you may start by saying, "I want to share with you how I am feeling" or "I feel ready to share what has been on my mind." You could also preface the conversation by explaining what you expect in return. For instance, you may say, "I just need someone to listen," or "You don't need to say anything, I just want someone here." If you're concerned about how your grief might impact you in the future, you can be proactive by identifying times and dates (e.g., holidays or your father's birthday), activities, locations, or smells that might evoke some strong feelings and memories for you. It could be helpful to let those around you know, prior to these events, the ways in which they can support you that make you feel comfortable during those times.

No matter how you decide to proceed, it's worth repeating that there's no one way to do it. Taking care of yourself and accepting the support of others can set the stage for healing as you move forward. This is also good to keep in mind because you mention feeling depressed. Though the experience of grief can have many of the same symptoms as depression, they aren't the same. If you find that your grief doesn't lessen with time, becomes more intense, or keeps you from day-to-day functioning, it may be time to talk with a mental health professional to help you process your grief and continue to heal.

Thinking of you during this difficult time,

Alice!

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