

## Delayed grief after dad's death? <sup>[1]</sup>

Dear Alice,

I can't stop crying. I haven't cried in months. This morning I was fine and now it's 7:00 at night and I can't stop crying about my dad. He committed suicide five years ago, six in April. What's wrong with me?

Suddenly Sad.

### Answer

Dear Suddenly Sad,

The loss of a parent is one of the most traumatic and devastating losses a person can face. The tears and grieving you are currently experiencing may be painful, but they do not indicate something is wrong with you. In fact, on the contrary, this may be a sign of healing.

We live in a society that does not usually encourage or respect grieving, hence the feeling that intense emotional experiences surrounding loss may indicate that something is wrong, especially if lots of time has passed since the death. But like most human processes, everyone grieves differently. Your grieving processes are influenced by many factors: your brain chemistry, your past experiences with loss, and your relationship to the person you lost are just a few examples.

One common experience among the bereaved is the phenomenon of delayed grief. When a loss occurs and a person is not in a position to fully experience the grief and sadness at that particular moment, the feelings can continue to surface at various points in later years. They often surface in different and unexpected ways. Many things can block the initial grief process. Here are a few:

- **Age.** Losing a parent at a young age can delay the grieving process. Brain development is one culprit for this one, but another is the unique role of a parent. Often, parents are a primary source of emotional support, not only in childhood, but into adulthood as well. Sometimes, children and/or teenagers experience feelings of abandonment when they lose a parent. Feeling orphaned can sometimes be too much to deal with until a person is older. Grieving may sometimes continue (on and off) well in to adulthood.
- **Substance use.** Using substances to cope or to dull the pain of a loss acts as a primary

coping mechanism for some who are grieving. One downside of this is that it interrupts the grieving process by temporarily "shutting off" the painful feelings. The problem here is that the feelings need to eventually be felt in order for full healing to occur.

- **Social support.** How was your social support at the time of the loss? Did/Do others around you allow you to express your feelings of loss and sadness? Did/Do they validate and support you? Did/Do they make (a safe) space for your tears? Both subtle and overt messages that you should just snap out of it or get over it can delay the grieving process.
- **Previous loss.** Grieving patterns from our past can be re-enacted and solidified when new losses occur. Previous losses that are still unresolved can make current pain much more intense because you are experiencing cumulative pain from multiple losses (which can include not only deaths, but break ups, divorce, job loss, loss of a friend, and many others).

There are numerous other factors — culture, gender, socio-economic circumstances, trauma associated with the death, survivor guilt, etc. that can contribute to intense feelings of sadness surfacing unexpectedly. Significant dates and other reminders of the person who was lost may trigger intense feelings of sadness similar to what you felt early on when the loss first occurred.

Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, an esteemed psychiatrist known for her work in the field of grief, described five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Even if you have cycled through all of these, it's possible and common to re-experience them. Experiencing the intense feelings of sadness is a good sign that a new layer of healing may be beginning.

You lost your father to suicide. It would be normal to have lots of feelings of sadness, anger, feelings of confusion or abandonment, and many others. When these strong emotions well up, if you can give yourself the space and permission to cry and feel them, it will help along the healing process. Life circumstances (like needing to work, to attend class, to be there for others, etc.) may get in the way. When this happens, see if you can take space at a later time to "fall apart" a little (or a lot). Enlist the help of supportive others in doing this. Seeing a therapist can also be useful in working through grief. Therapy can help you gain insight into how previous losses may be affecting your present life and provide you with tools for grieving and healing from the pain of your father's death and other losses you may have experienced. Talking to other people who have experienced a similar loss can help, too. You may want to explore support groups for children who have lost a parent.

Thank you for submitting this question. It's an indication of your strength and bravery. May you have a rich and full journey on the path towards healing.

Warmly,

Alice!

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