

Grief can affect your Relationship in Surprising Ways

Sarah Elizabeth Malinak, M. Div.

Our beloved dog, Buddy, died this week. As a rescue dog, we were never sure of his age, but believe he was at least fifteen. He was a big black dog with white and black dotted “socks” on his feet. Of all the breeds that contributed to his physique, the Labrador retriever in him was most evident. He was beautiful and he seemed to think I had hung the moon. He was a dear family member and, although it is a privilege to be able to help a pet exit this earthly plane, letting him go was painful.

This journey with Buddy brought home to me the affects of grief on a relationship. Grief is a part of every loss, whether it is the loss of a precious heirloom, a job or career, a quality like faith, or a relationship. Some women even feel grief when a fingernail breaks! It doesn’t tend to be long lasting grief, but the loss brings an experience of grief, even if it is short lived.

There are a variety of ways grief can affect your relationship. The most notable is how when we’re grieving our attention turns inward. It can be difficult to tolerate other people complaining about the trials and tribulations of their lives. If your significant other is used to depending on you to process the irritations of the day, you can find it bugs you in a way it never did before. Impatience and arguments can then ensue.

Impatience with the things in life that don’t work tends to become inflamed during grief. Not being able to get the cap off a bottle can result in a broken bottle and feelings of rage. Too many things going wrong, even if they’re insignificant, can result in head banging or a fist through a wall. At this point the grief becomes complicated with the addition of shame for having lost such control over something so seemingly meaningless.

Another way grief affects you and your relationship is how it makes your body ache. It is as if your muscles respond to your emotional state. It can cause you to feel listless and lifeless. Things that used to bring you joy simply don’t any more. Your appreciation for those things will return; but in the meantime, your spouse may be frustrated as his or her attempts to lift your spirit with these things fall flat.

Grieving affects your appetite. Some people crave nurture food when they grieve and others eat less. If your relationship has food issues, grief can shake it up. If dieting is a big part of your relationship, turning to food can cause a great deal of stress. If your partner is concerned that you are eating too little, he or she can come across as a nagging mother and cause consternation.

When grief accompanies a loss through death or separation; landmines (in the form of memories and habits) lie everywhere. My dog Buddy was my shadow. With his declining health, I was in the habit of sneaking out of my office when taking little breaks so as to not wake the sleeping giant. Usually I failed at this and he would pull himself up off the floor, following me to the kitchen or laundry or wherever. During this first week

following his death, whenever I get up from my desk my stomach clinches as I anticipate trying to sneak out, hoping he'll continue to sleep, only to find the floor beside my desk is empty. When the loss is a family member and the landmine is, for instance, bath time with a child that no longer takes place, grief can be crippling to the parents and to their relationship.

The solution to the problem is time and patience. Joy will return. Happiness will come back. Sleeping through the night will occur. Laughter will fill the belly. These things and more will creep back into your life (or your loved one's life) unexpectedly. You won't be able to plan them on your calendar but they will return. In the meantime, recognizing the toll grief takes while choosing to be patient begins the healing process.

If you or a loved one are in the throws of grief, hang in there. Grief is an expression of love. Remind yourselves that a day will come when choosing joy will be the best expression of love for that absent person or pet. In the meantime, giving grief the space it needs is love enough.

*

There is a secret to relationship success that is direct, simple, and effective. We and others have used it to transform marriages that felt burdensome and hurtful into marriages filled with love and satisfaction.

You can discover this secret for yourself in the e-workbook called *Creating the Love You Want: Five Unique Steps to Improve Your Marriage*. Go to <http://www.CreateTheLoveYouWant.com> and order your copy right now. With it, you can begin making a difference for yourself tonight!