



Grief Triggers

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Grief is a strange beast that we learn to live with. We don't get over it as if it were a surmountable object. We can become more comfortable with our discomfort but there is no finite time for grief as there is no finite time for love. Grief is often a private affair that others cannot share or perhaps even understand. Grief can spring out of drawers and cupboards, off shelves, from photographs, wafts to our nostrils upon a perfume, is precipitated by music, clutches at our heart, hollows out our insides and plummets us to the depths. It is indeed a strange beast to know and understand, to embrace, digest and assimilate.

Petrea King, 'The Empty Chair at Christmas'

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You may well wonder what exactly is meant by a 'grief trigger'. The answer is simple - anything that brings up memories of a loss that has happened to you.

Sometimes, we think of obvious times of the year that such triggers will be the strongest - birthdays, Christmas, family occasions, holiday times and the like. One of the hardest to bear is the anniversary of the death, particularly in the early years - it's common to recall all the things you did together as you count down the days to the time of the death. Sometimes you will remember every detail of the last weeks, days, hours, moments.

But there are other triggers that can also trip you up unexpectedly. Like times when you see someone who looks like your loved one or hear of someone with the same name or age or job. Favourite colours, songs, TV shows, food – all of these links can cause a memory to ignite some feelings inside you. The change of the seasons - where smells, colours and nature remind you of this specific time of the year and what it means to you. Favourite places, your regular cafe or just seeing couples or families spending time together - these can trigger memories when you too shared happy times like this.

Grief triggers can be upsetting because they re-ignite emotions and create feelings of sadness, longing, regret, loneliness, thoughts of 'if only' and more. Often they spring up unexpectedly to embarrass you amongst company or surprise you with their intensity. Of course, they can also bring memories of great joy and gratitude for the happiness that you had. But one of the problems for grievers is that it's hard to know if it's OK to share these memories and feelings because those around you probably think you have moved on and are no longer still affected by your loss. They don't know that there is nothing more comforting than being able to share and reminisce with someone, even cry with someone. Finding the right person who is sensitive to such triggers can make a real difference to the way you cope with them.

"Memories are where our loved ones continue to live after they're gone; it's why we hold onto objects that remind us of them and go to places where they feel near. True, when someone we love dies we are forevermore at risk of their memory triggering aftershocks of the pain. But inversely, if we let them, such reminders may also fill us with warmth and comfort."

Eleanor Haley, 'Grief Triggers and Positive Memory: a Continuum'

www.whatsyourgrief.com

For more information please go to Fact Sheet 16 'Coping With Grief At Christmas Time'.

Doris Zagdanski is a leading figure in modern day grief and loss education. Her seminars are included in vocational qualifications in Allied Health, Counselling and Funeral Directing. Her books and free factsheets are available at www.allaboutgrief.com