



gratitude thinking & grief

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“Whether you think you can, or you think you can’t – you’re right.” Henry Ford

“...there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” Shakespeare

“Be careful how you think. Your life is shaped by your thoughts.” Proverbs



What do all these quotes have in common? And what do they mean when we’re talking about grief? Whether it’s Henry Ford, Shakespeare or the Bible, the message here is loud and clear – our thinking has a strong bearing on how we perceive what’s going on in our lives. This in turn, can influence our expectations, decision making and other behaviours.

When you’re grieving it’s common to have negative or unhelpful thoughts about your future, your ability to cope, inner doubts and fears, things that should have been said or done ... the list goes on.

Enter the idea of ‘gratitude thinking’ – a concept that could be a useful antidote to counter the effects of unhelpful thoughts. In 2003, Michael McCullough and Robert Emmons conducted a study* where participants were asked to keep a weekly journal for nine weeks. The participants were randomly placed into three different diary groups; in the first group participants were asked to record up to five things they were grateful or thankful for, in the second group participants were asked to think back on the day and record at least five hassles that occurred in their lives, finally the third group was asked to just record the day’s events. Despite journaling only once a week, participants in the grateful group reported increased well-being, better health, they exercised more, felt life was better, and had increased optimism.

So what can we learn from this to help us when we are grieving?

What if you try keeping a gratitude diary ... at the end of every day, write 3 things that you are grateful for. When you start to do this, you could be surprised what you find out. Keep it simple – you don’t have to look for major items, it might just be that you noticed the sun was shining today, it might be a chat you had with your neighbour, it might be picking up a bargain at the shops, it might be that you managed to do a task that you’d been putting off or you noticed your appetite or concentration were improving.

Remember the grateful group in the 2003 study. They reported everything from better health to increased optimism – when you’re grieving, anything that increases your wellbeing is worth a try.

(* Counting Blessings Versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-being in Daily Life)

Doris Zagdanski is the Convenor of MyGriefAssist website. She 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. She has written several books in this genre and they are available at www.allaboutgrief.com