

Surviving Loss and Thriving Again

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Surviving Loss and Thriving Again

By Tina B. Tessina, PhD

None of us wants to think about it, but the standard definition of a totally successful relationship is the old, traditional “til death do us part.” Any time we love, whether it’s a life partner, a dear friend, a child, a sibling, a parent or even a beloved pet, we are risking the loss of that love.

When you're happy with someone, you often don't think about your happiness or even fully realize it. You may take your contentment for granted. You watch couples around you struggle, or even go through your own struggles, and realize you’re lucky to have a successful partnership, but you don’t dwell on it.

Then comes the tragic event, and the world turns upside-down. If it's a long illness, the support system your partner used to be is gone, and you are required to be the support system. All the little things you took for granted become crystal clear in their absence. If the death is sudden (i.e. auto accident, brain aneurism) you go into shock at first, and go through the necessary awfulness -- identifying the body, making funeral arrangements, notifying people, comforting relatives, friends and children and the memorial itself – like a robot, mostly without feeling. Depending on the length of an illness, you may experience some of this during that period, also. It isn't until weeks or months after the burial that you really get to experience.....Grief.

Grief is an organic process, it has its own wisdom, and it needs a witness. An understanding friend can be that witness. There is nothing you can do to make such a tragedy less tragic, so the grief, anger and frustration that you feel are normal reactions to the circumstances. So you go through the stages of grief: shock, anger, seeking, depression and peace. It's normal to feel fear that this might happen again, rage that it happened at all, a need for prayer and comfort, bouts of being overwhelmed and thinking you can't go on, and, finally, acceptance and understanding that this devastating event is a part of the risky life we humans all live. These feelings will come jumbled up, they'll recycle, and come in different order.

Then, as the shock wears off, and the permanence of the loss sets in, some people may feel a bit relieved, some will be angry, some will pray or question God, and others just feel exhausted, disconnected, and overwhelmed . This jumble of feelings includes the anger, seeking and depression phases.

- * If you feel inspired to do something hopeful (for example, setting up a memorial fund, or praying, giving blood, writing letters), do it.
- * If you feel discouraged, just feel it -- it will pass, and it may indicate that you need a rest.
- * If you feel like laughing, don't worry about it -- it's a good way to manage tragedy. It often signifies the beginning of healing.
- * If you feel angry, remember anger is the underside of love -- it's an expression of the value you attach to the life lost, and very appropriate. But it, too, will come and go and fade with time.
- * If you are afraid, of course you are. We are all programmed to want to live, and being so heavily confronted with the fragility of life is terrifying. Yes, it could have been you, but humans are resilient, and the fear, too will pass.
- * If you feel hopeless, it is because you are realizing that life is not in your own control. This is when faith and a belief in a higher purpose to life is very helpful. If you haven't discovered a

belief in higher purpose, then this would be a good time to search. Talk to clergy, read philosophy, meditate, pray, even get your fortune told. All these methods of attempting to understand the ineffable are imperfect, but they all can help.

* If you need support for your own struggle with these issues, gather friends, family and neighbors around you. We never need each other more than at times like this. We need to feel a part of a larger, safer group. Although you may want solitude from time to time, to get your thoughts together, be careful not to get too isolated

* Getting through the grief process will take at least a year, perhaps several. The first year is the hardest, because you encounter special days, birthdays, holidays and anniversaries all around the calendar. Once you've survived each of these once, it gets a little easier.

Eventually you will have survived and healed, and be willing to take another chance. The promise of happiness is strong enough that the risk is worth it. You'll probably experience some guilt, but know that if your former partner loved you, she or he would want you to be happy. This new relationship will feel even more precious than the previous one, because you'll know that it isn't here forever. You'll have a feeling of gratitude toward your previous partner, for the love you shared and what it taught you that makes it possible to have this new love.

To contact me or ask questions, you can visit my website at www.tinatessina.com

Author Bio: Tina B. Tessina, Ph.D. is a licensed psychotherapist in S. California since 1978 with over 40 years' experience in counseling individuals and couples and author of 14 books in 17 languages, including *Dr. Romance's Guide to Finding Love Today; It Ends With You: Grow Up and Out of Dysfunction; The Ten Smartest Decisions a Woman Can Make After Forty; Love Styles: How to Celebrate Your Differences, The Real 13th Step*, *How to Be Happy Partners: Working it Out Together* and *How to Be a Couple and Still Be Free*. She writes the "Dr. Romance" blog, and the "Happiness Tips from Tina" email newsletter. Online, she's known as "Dr. RomanceTM". Dr. Tessina appears frequently on radio, TV, video and podcasts

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