

## **Good Grief – Creating an Enriching Culture of Companionship for Caregivers and Receivers**

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Whether we learn it through training or through actual life experience, each of us is presented with opportunities to support others in times of loss. What first comes to mind when we think of loss is death of a family member or friend. But life is filled with changes that are perceived and processed as loss and are grieved. From the transitions created by death, divorce, job loss, career change, moving, or children leaving, to the losses that are experienced when a friend moves, a promotion does not occur, or there is loss of mobility or independence – we all experience the bereft feelings of grief some time in our lives.

With constant life changes and transition, you would think that there would be some early training for dealing with those losses. Clearly, most of us do these significant changes by the seat of our pants. What is certain is that we all do it differently.

Because of our different approaches and programming with regard to grief, caregivers often encounter surprises when dealing with their care recipient or with others in the caregiving teams during times of loss. Care recipients, too, can be surprised by reactions of their caregiver or others on the team. These startling surprises can become big issues in a team culture if they are not addressed directly. While some of us are trained to stuff any emotional response, some of us have a background of open expressions of loss. Some of us cry, some of us shut down, some of us become angry, some of us become depressed. There are as many responses to loss as there are people who experience loss. Too often, we judge others' responses as inappropriate when they do not match our programming and experience.

In a caregiver team setting, we have a wonderful opportunity to become aware of these differences and to honor and learn from each other. As we do that, we develop tools and skills that help each other become empathic grief companions; we also translate that learning into beneficial tools to help others in their times of loss. To create this companionship philosophy as a core value for yourself and your team will help to establish an open and safe environment for all. And it, in turn, creates a welcoming environment for your others in your life.

The best part of this learning is that there are tools, skills, strategies and techniques that can be effective in companionship each other. All it takes is to be aware, to pay attention, and to apply those tools in a way that honors the grief journey of those we companion.

We first must know that there is no way to go around the pain of grief. Avoidance or 'stuffing it' generally causes the feelings to abate momentarily, but not to lessen. The grief journey is one we must take straight up the middle. There is no prescribed route, there is no prescribed timeframe. The only things common are that we all will experience it, and that we must experience it head-on. If you expect a linear solution or 'cure' for this grief state, you will be disappointed. If you expect to become more aware of grief responses and learn to react in a supportive way in the moment, you will have great success in becoming an effective grief companion and supportive colleague.

The tool box for grief contains many ways in which to help ourselves and others to acknowledge the losses we experience. These tools help us to move from grief, which is an internal expression of the loss, to mourning, which is the external or public expression of the loss. This gradual movement through the process ultimately allows the feelings to lessen. Losses change us forever; this is a certainty. Our quality of life can be affected by how we ultimately choose to integrate these losses into our lives.

What happens when you discover that a family member, a teammate or a friend has experienced a loss? One of the first tools seems obvious to most of us – we listen, of course. But do we really listen? Remember that question we always ask: 'How are you doing?' And remember the answer that we expect (or hope for): 'I'm doing fine.' There are ways to create an environment of active listening – really paying attention – that will elicit a truthful answer. When we are open to the true answer, others will know it. So, how do we let them know that we Really are asking: 'How are you doing?' Consciously create a state of openness – and breathe. Be in a state of awareness when asking. Take a bit of time to get the real answer. Create a situation where the real answer has time and place to be expressed. With the busy-ness of a caregiver's life, this may seem impossible. Consider that even a brief time spent truly paying attention to each other will pay off in amazing ways later. Those few minutes of genuinely paying attention and being a real companion can ease the way through problematic issues later on. Selfish? Not really. When we pay attention, we cannot help but put the other person first. Ultimately, the outcome is best for all concerned.

Then, get in their space. Yes, put yourself into their way of being. This is called mirroring. There is an amazing result to be had in any communication with others when you can put yourself in their shoes. It is important to develop rapport with another person in order for the safe place of truthful communication to emerge. This can be done with simple strategies for matching their body language. Whether we are consciously aware of it or not, we communicate all the time. Through our body language we send nonverbal messages to others that truly express our meaning. In fact, this is a much more effective communication tool than our words. So, if we say 'How are you doing?' and are telegraphing with our body 'Really, I don't care how you are doing. Just tell me you are fine so I don't have to talk to you,' that's what you will get – no talking, no real communication. But if you communicate with your body language that you are paying attention and want the Real Answer, that's what you will get. First, you must be aware and set the intention for a truthful encounter. Then, your body language will communicate your intent. The outcome will be totally different with this approach. You get to choose which outcome you want.

We all know when we are being judged. With the discomfort that this causes us, why do we continue to judge ourselves and others? And where do all these judgments come from? Early in our lives, we embarked on a journey called Programming. Our well-intentioned parents, relatives, and friends all helped to contribute to a lifelong endeavor called our "Rule Book for Living." Each of us has one of these books. There are endless chapters in our books that list our beliefs and our values. And for each of those, there are endless numbers of rules. Because we have been creating these rule books for such a long time (some of us longer than others), often we forget that we create our lives by creating and following these rules. We judge ourselves by adherence to our rules. And we judge others by adherence to our rules. Most of us are not consciously aware that these rules exist or that these programs are running. What happens when our rules do not match the rules of someone else? This is called a Rule Violation. Usually we hang around with people who have many of the same rules for living. But if we encounter someone who 'just doesn't get it' (in our book), when we examine the situation, most often we'll find that there has been a Rule Violation. Their book and my / your book just don't match. It's interesting to note that, to be honest, most of the rules are neither right nor wrong. If that's how they are perceived, then that's how we have given them meaning. What is great about all this is that we have the ability to change our rules for living. First, the awareness that there are rules is important. Then, knowing that we have the choice to Keep or Toss each one is real freedom. It is when we come to these realizations that we can truly shape our present life, which, in turn, shapes our future.

So what does all this have to do with companioning each other in times of loss? Well, just about everything. When we encounter someone who is expressing their loss in a way that seems different or uncomfortable, or even inappropriate – look at your rule book and then at theirs. Do there seem to be differences? Are you feeling that a Rule Violation was committed? How can these differing assumptions and rules be reconciled? First, honest and open communication can start the dialogue and understanding of the differences. Sometimes you will simply, and openly, agree to disagree. Then, ongoing examination and, perhaps, rewriting or reframing of your rule book can begin. Again, you get to choose.

Respect for the lives, rules, and ways of being of others in your practice is paramount. With the use of a few simple tools, communication about living, loss, work, play, family, and your role as a caregiver or care recipient – all the important things – can result. And when it does, we are able to care for ourselves, and for each individual on the caregiving team. That's real success in my book.