

Toward An Understanding Of The Going Crazy Syndrome:

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Part One

In the beautiful book, *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis wrote about his experience after the death of his wife. He stated, "An odd by-product of my loss is that I'm aware of being an embarrassment to everyone I meet . . . Perhaps the bereaved ought to be isolated in special settlements like lepers."

As he so appropriately teaches from this experience, society often tends to make the bereaved feel intense shame and embarrassment about feelings of grief. I'm not surprised that the most often-asked question I get from bereaved persons is, "Am I going crazy?"

Shame can be described as the feeling that something you are doing is wrong. And you may feel if you mourn, then you should be ashamed. If you are perceived as "doing well" with your grief, you are non-emotional. If your feelings are fairly intense, you may be labelled "overly-emotional." or viewed as though there is something wrong with you or a "pathological mourner."

It is my hope that this article can help address this frequent question, "Am I going crazy?" I have provided information about the normalcy of the disorganization and confusion that often comes when we mourn the death of someone loved. In the follow-up article I will address other aspects of grief and mourning, which unless normalized, might make you think you are crazy.

Disorganization, Confusion, Searching, Yearning

Perhaps the most isolating and frightening part of your grief journey is the sense of disorganization, confusion, searching and yearning that often comes with the loss. These experiences frequently come when you begin to be confronted with the reality of the death. As one bereaved person said, "I felt as if I were a lonely traveler with no companion, and worse yet, no destination. I couldn't find myself or anybody else."

This dimension of grief may cause the "going crazy syndrome." In grief, thoughts and behaviours are different from what you normally experience. It's only natural that you may not know if your thoughts, feelings, and behaviours are normal or abnormal. The experiences described below are common after death of someone loved. A major goal of this article is to simply validate these experiences so you will know you are not crazy!

After the death of someone loved, you may feel a sense of restlessness, agitation, impatience and ongoing confusion. It's like being in the middle of a wild, rushing river where you can't get a grasp on anything. Disconnected thoughts race through your mind, and strong emotions may be overwhelming.

You may express disorganization and confusion in your inability to complete tasks. A project may get started but go unfinished. Forgetfulness and low-key work effectiveness are commonplace for many people experiencing this dimension of grief. Early morning and late at night are times when you may feel most disoriented and confused. These feelings are often accompanied by fatigue and lack of initiative and motivation. Everyday pleasures may not seem to matter anymore.

You may also experience a restless searching for the person who has died. Yearning and preoccupation with memories can leave you feeling drained, mourning is draining. It often leaves you feeling wiped out.

You might even experience a shift in perception; other people may begin to look like the person in your life who died. You might be at a shopping mall, look down a hallway and think you see the person you loved so much. Or see a car go past that was like the person's who died and find yourself following the car. Sometimes you might hear the garage door open and the person entering the house as he or she had done so many times in the past. If these experiences are happening to you, remember – You are not crazy!

Other common experiences during this time include difficulties with eating and sleeping. You may experience a loss of appetite, or find yourself overeating. Even when you do eat, you may be unable to taste the food. Difficulty in going to sleep and waking up through the night or sleeping longer than usual not wanting to get out of bed are also common experiences associated with this dimension of grief. While it may seem strange, keep in mind that your disorganization and confusion are actually normal as your brain comes to terms with what has happened.

Self-Care Guidelines

If disorganization, confusion, searching, and yearning are, or have been, a part of your grief, don't worry about the normalcy of your experience. When you feel disoriented; talk to someone who will understand. To heal, grief is better shared outside of yourself. I hope you have at least one person who you feel understands and will not judge you. That person must be patient and attentive for you may tell your story over and over again as you work to come to terms with what has taken place. He or she must be genuinely interested in understanding you. If you are trying to talk about your disorganization and confusion, and the person doesn't want to listen, find someone who will meet your needs better.

The thoughts, feelings and behaviours of this dimension do not come all at once. They are often experienced in wave-like fashion. Hopefully, you will have someone to support you through each wave. You may need to talk and cry for long periods of time. At other times, you may just need to be alone.

Don't try to interpret what you think and feel. Just experience it. Sometimes when you talk you may not think you make much sense. And you may not. But talking it out can still be self-clarifying at a level of experience you may not even be aware of.

During this time, discourage yourself from making any critical decisions like selling the house and moving to another community. With the judgement-making difficulties that naturally come with this part of the grief experience, ill-timed decisions might result in more losses. Go slow and be patient with yourself.

Part two

As C.S. Lewis noted, “Grief is like a long, winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape.”

This article is the second in a three part series to address this frequent question, am I crazy? In this article, I will address other aspects of grief and mourning that unless normalized, might make you feel that way.

My intent is not to prescribe what should be happening to you. Instead, I encourage you to become familiar with what you may encounter while you grieve. A vital part of healing in grief understands the normalcy of your experience.

Here are the potential aspects of your grief:

- Time Distortion
- Constant Replay, Reviewing Or Ruminating
- Is This Death God’s Will?
- Search For Meaning
- Transitional Objects
- Suicidal Thoughts
- Anniversary and Holiday Grief Occasions

Time Distortion

“I don’t know what day it is, let alone what time it is!” This kind of comment is not unusual when you are mourning. Sometimes, time moves so quickly; at other times, it merely crawls. Your sense of past and future may also seem to be frozen in place. You may lose track of what day or even month it is, this is a normal experience when grieving.

Constant Replay, Review or Ruminating

Constant replay, review or ruminating are the psychological terms used for describing how you may repeat the circumstances about the death or stories about the person who has died. In your grief journey, you may often review events of the death and memories of the person who died over and over.

This normal process helps bring your head and your heart together! The replaying or ruminating is your brains struggle of trying to come to terms with the fact that the death has occurred. We can know it on a cognitive level but it is something very different when the feelings sink in to this knowing and that is the purpose of the replay or ruminating. Allow yourself to do this. Blocking it out won’t help you heal. Don’t be angry with yourself if you can’t seem to stop wanting to repeat your story. Replay, review or rumination is a powerful and necessary part of mourning.

Yes, it hurts to constantly think and talk about the person you loved so much. But, remember – all grief wounds get worse before they get better. Be compassionate with yourself. Try to surround yourself with people who allow and encourage you to repeat whatever you need to tell again.

Is This Death God’s Will?

A commonly asked question, “Is this death God’s will?” If you have a perception of an all-powerful God or Higher Power, you probably find this question particularly difficult.

Sometimes you may reason: “If God is loving, why would he allow something so painful?” Or you may feel like you are being punished. You may have been told, “It is God’s will and you should just accept it and go on.” If you, however, internalize this message, you may repress your grief and ignore your human need to mourn.

Repressing your grief because you need to “just accept it and go on” can be self-destructive. If you don’t ask questions and if you don’t express feelings, you may ultimately struggle in despair. If your soul does not ask, your body will probably protest. Repressing and denying heart-felt questions can, and often does, keep your wounds from healing. Listen to your questions they need to be explored!

Search for Meaning

Naturally, you try to make sense of why someone you love died. You may find yourself asking questions like “Why him or her?” “Why now?” Or “Why this way?” Yes, you have questions. You are human and are simply trying to understand your experience. No, answers won’t always be, and often aren’t, specific to your questions. Yet, you still need to give yourself permission to ask them.

As you wrestle with “why?” you may be outraged at your God or Higher Power. You may feel a stagnation or disillusionment with your spiritual life as you embrace your pain. On the other hand, you may feel closer than ever before. You can only be where you are. You may be able to come up with dozens of reasons why the person who died should not have died under these circumstances or at this time. Whatever the nature or number of your questions, asking them is a normal part of your grief journey.

As you explore the meaning of this experience through your questions do not prohibit yourself from asking the questions you know are within you. If you do, you may shut down your capacity to give and receive love during this vulnerable period of your life. Healing occurs in posing the questions in the first place, not just in finding answers. Find a friend, group, or counsellor who will understand your need to search for meaning and be supportive without attempting to offer answers. Companionship and responsive listening can help you explore your spiritual values; question your philosophy for living!

Memory Item

Memory items are belongings of the person in your life who died. They often can give you comfort. Items such as clothing, books, or prized possessions can help you feel close to someone you miss so much. For example, one woman shared with me that she found it comforting to take one of her husband’s favourite shirts to bed with her. She said, “As I clutched his shirt close to me, I didn’t feel so alone. But as I worked with my grief, my need for the shirt dwindled over time.’

Some people may try to distance you from belongings such as the shirt described above. This behaviour fits with the tendency in our culture to move away from grief instead of toward it. Remember – embrace the comfort provided by familiar items. To do away with them too soon takes away a sense of security and comfort these belongings provide. Once you have moved toward reconciliation, you will probably be better able to decide what to do with them. Some things, however, you may want to keep forever. That’s all right too. Simply giving away the belongings of the person you loved does not equate with healing in your grief. Nor does keeping some belongings mean you have “created a shrine.” This phrase is used when someone keeps everything just as it was for years after the death.

Suicidal Thoughts

Thoughts that come and go about questioning if you want to go on living can be a normal part of your grief and mourning. You might say or think, “I’m not sure I’d mind if I didn’t wake up in the morning.” Often this thought is not so much an active wish to kill yourself as it is a wish to ease your pain or a longing to be with the person you lost.

To have these thoughts is normal; however to make plans and take action to end your life is not. Sometimes your body, mind, and spirit can hurt so much you wonder if you will ever feel alive again. Just remember you can and will find continued meaning in your life. Let yourself be helped and you will gain hope for your healing. If thoughts of suicide take on planning and structure, make certain that you get help immediately. Sometimes tunnel vision can prevent you from seeing choices. Please choose to go on living as you honour the memory of the person in your life who has died.

Anniversary and Holiday Grief Occasions

Naturally, anniversary and holiday occasions can bring about “pangs” of grief. Birthdays; wedding dates; holidays such as Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas; and other special occasions create a heightened sense of loss. At these times, you may likely experience what is known as a grief attack.

Your “pangs” of grief may also occur in response to circumstances that bring about reminders of the painful absence of someone in your life. For many families, certain times have special meaning related to family togetherness, and the person who died is more deeply missed at those times. For example, the beginning of spring, the first snowfall, an annual Fourth of July party, or anytime when activities were shared as a couple or a family. Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that these reactions are natural. Sometimes the anticipation of an anniversary or holiday actually turns out to be worse than the day itself.

Interestingly enough, sometimes your internal clock will alert you to an anniversary date you may have forgotten. If you notice you are feeling down or experiencing “pangs” of grief, you may be having an anniversary response. Keep in mind that it is normal. Plan ahead when you know some naturally painful times are coming for you. Unfortunately, some bereaved people will not mention anniversaries, holidays or special occasions to anyone. As a result they suffer in silence, and their feelings of isolation increase. Don’t let this happen to you. Recognize you may need support and map out how to get it!

The aspects of grief outlined above are in no way an all-inclusive list of potential experiences that might relate to the question “Am I crazy?” However, my hope is that this information helps you better understand the normalcy of your unique grief.

Part Three

This is the final article in a three part series to address the frequent question, “Am I crazy?” As previously noted, my intent is not to prescribe what should be happening to you. Instead, I encourage you to become familiar with what you may encounter as you grieve and do your work of mourning.

The potential aspects of your journey I will explore here are as follows:

- Grief Attacks
- Sudden Changes in Mood
- Identification Symptoms of Physical Illness
- Powerlessness and Helplessness

- Dreams
- Mystical Experiences
- Self-Focus

Grief Attacks

“I was just sailing along feeling pretty good, when out of nowhere came this overwhelming feeling of grief.” This comment often reflects what is commonly called a “grief attack.” A grief attack is a period of time when you may have intense anxiety and sharp pain. You may think that long periods of deep depression are the most common part of grief and mourning. Actually, you may more frequently encounter acute and episodic “pangs” or “waves” of grief. That’s why they are called grief attacks. They sometimes “attack” you out of nowhere.

You may feel an overwhelming sense of missing the person you loved and find yourself openly crying, or perhaps even sobbing. As one woman reflected, “I’ll be busy for awhile, and sometimes even forget he has died. Then I’ll see his picture or think of his favourite food, and I’ll just feel like I can’t even move.”

Grief attacks are normal. When and if one happens to you be compassionate with yourself. You have every right to miss the person who has died and to feel temporary paralysis. Whatever you do, don’t try to deny a grief attack when you experience it. I like to think of grief attacks as a reflection of how those we love are determined not to be forgotten. Although the pain of a grief attack hurts so deeply, embrace it.

Sudden Changes in Mood

When someone loved dies, you may feel like you are surviving fairly well one minute and in the depths of despair the next. Sudden changes in your mood are a difficult, yet a natural, part of your grief journey. These mood changes can be small or very dramatic. They can be triggered by driving past a familiar place, a song, an insensitive comment, or even changes in the weather.

Mood changes cause confusion because your self-expectation may be that you should follow a pattern of continually feeling better. You probably also have some people around you who share this expectation. Challenge this inappropriate expectation and be self-nurturing as you embrace the ebbs and flows of mood changes.

If you have these ups and downs, don’t be hard on yourself. Be patient with yourself. As you move toward healing, the periods of hopelessness will be replaced by periods of hopefulness. During these times, you can also benefit from a support system that understands these mood changes are normal.

Identification Symptoms of Physical Illness

When you care deeply about someone and they die, it can be common for some people to relate to the physical symptoms of the person who died. For example, if she died from a brain tumour you may feel you have more frequent headaches. If he died from a heart attack, you may believe you have chest pains. You might be experiencing identification symptoms of physical illness. Bereaved people have shared with me these examples:

“She had awful pain in her stomach, and after she died I began to have them, too. It kind of made me feel close to her. After awhile the stomach pain went away and I felt some sense of loss. As I have healed, I’ve been able to let go of the stomach pain.” Don’t be shocked if you have a few physical symptoms like the person who died. Your body is responding to the loss over time these symptoms should go away.

If not, find someone who will listen to you and help you understand what is happening. Not everyone will experience these symptoms. Of course, whenever you have questions or concerns about physical symptoms, it is wise to consult a trusted physician.

Powerlessness and Helplessness

Your grief can at times leave you feeling powerless. You may think or say, “What am I going to do? I feel so completely helpless.” While part of you realizes you had no control over what happened, another part feels a sense of powerlessness at not having been able to prevent it. You would like to have your life back to the way it was, but you can’t. You may think, hope, wish, and pray the death could be reversed, but know it is not possible.

Also, you may wonder if you had somehow acted differently or been more assertive, you could have prevented the death. Your “if only’s” and “what if’s” are often expressions of wishing you could have been more powerful or control something you could not. Lack of control is a difficult reality to accept. Yet, it is a reality that over time you must encounter. These feelings of helplessness and powerlessness in the face of this painful reality are normal and natural. Almost paradoxically, by acknowledging and allowing for temporary feelings of helplessness, you ultimately become helpful to yourself. When you try to ‘stay strong’ you often get yourself into trouble. Share your feelings with caring people around you.

Dreams

Dreaming about the person in your life who has died may be a part of your grief journey. If it is, remember no one is a better expert than you are in understanding what your dreams mean to you. Dreams are one of the ways the work of mourning takes place. They may or may not play an important part in your experience. A dream, for example, may reflect a searching for the person who has died. Dreams also provide opportunities – to feel close to someone loved who died, to embrace the reality of the death, to gently confront the depth of the loss, to renew memories, or to develop a new self-identity. Dreams may also help you search for meaning in life and death or explore unfinished business. Finally, dreams can show you hope for the future.

On the other hand, you may experience nightmares, particularly after traumatic, violent deaths. These dreams can be very frightening. If your dreams are distressing, talk about them to someone who can support and understand you.

The content of your dreams often reflects changes in your experience with mourning. So if dreams are part of your journey, make use of them to better understand where you have been, where you are, and where you are going. Also, find a skilled listener who won’t interpret your dreams for you, but who will listen with you!

Mystical Experience

When someone loved dies, you may have experiences that are not always rationally explainable. However, that doesn’t mean something is wrong with these experiences. The sad reality is if you share these experiences with others, you may not be believed. In fact, you are actually mystically sensitive.

The primary form of mystical experience that bereaved people have taught me about is communicating with the person who died. Some people find the experience hard to believe and try to explain it away in a rational manner: “I must have been dreaming,” or “I was probably half-asleep.” Others try to distance themselves from the experience because they are taught that such things are impossible:

“A rational mind just doesn’t experience those kinds of things.” So, if you want to be considered “rational” or “sane,” what would make sense is for you to feel compelled to distance yourself from this kind of experience.

Types of mystical experiences vary. A mother, whose daughter had died, woke up one summer morning. She looked out the window and saw it snowing in her yard only. The snow lasted for 15 minutes and then stopped. The mother understood this as a communication telling her that her daughter was all right and not to worry so much. In another instance, a man, whose wife had died, saw her laying on the couch in his living room. “It’s like she came to me, and wrapped me in her arms. I felt warm and happy I experienced her presence.”

I have listened and learned from hundreds of people who have experienced seeing, hearing, and feeling the presence of someone who has died. I am a scientist and supposed to be “rational.” I can only tell you to remain open to experiences in this realm. Don’t judge yourself or others who have these mystical experiences. Or if you don’t have any mystical experiences, don’t think that something is wrong with you.

Self-Focus

The very nature of your grief requires a self-focus or a turning inward. This temporary self-focus is necessary for your long-term survival. Turning inward helps you feel protected from an outside world that may be frightening right now.

Some people may try to “take your grief away from you” by preventing you from any kind of self-focus. They may want you to quickly re-enter the outside world without understanding your need for a temporary retreat. If turning inward is part of your experience, be assured you are normal.

The word ‘temporary’ in relationship to this self-focus, is important. You may move back and forth between needing time alone and time with other people. Be aware, however, if you stay only in a self-focused, inward mode, you may risk developing of a pattern of not sharing your grief. Which may slow your healing process.

When you are in pain following the death of someone loved, the turning inward and the need for self-focus is analogous to what occurs when you have a physical wound. You cover a physical wound with a bandage for a period of time. Then you expose the wound to the open air which helps with healing but also risks contamination. The emotional, physical, and spiritual pain of grief certainly demands the same kind of protection.

A Final Word

The aspects of grief outlined above are in no way an all-inclusive list of potential experiences that might relate to the question “Am I going crazy?” However, my hope is that this information helps you better understand the normalcy of your unique journey into grief.

Reference: Lewis, C.S., A Grief Observed, 1963, Seabury Press, New York, NY
