

## The Secret Life of Grief

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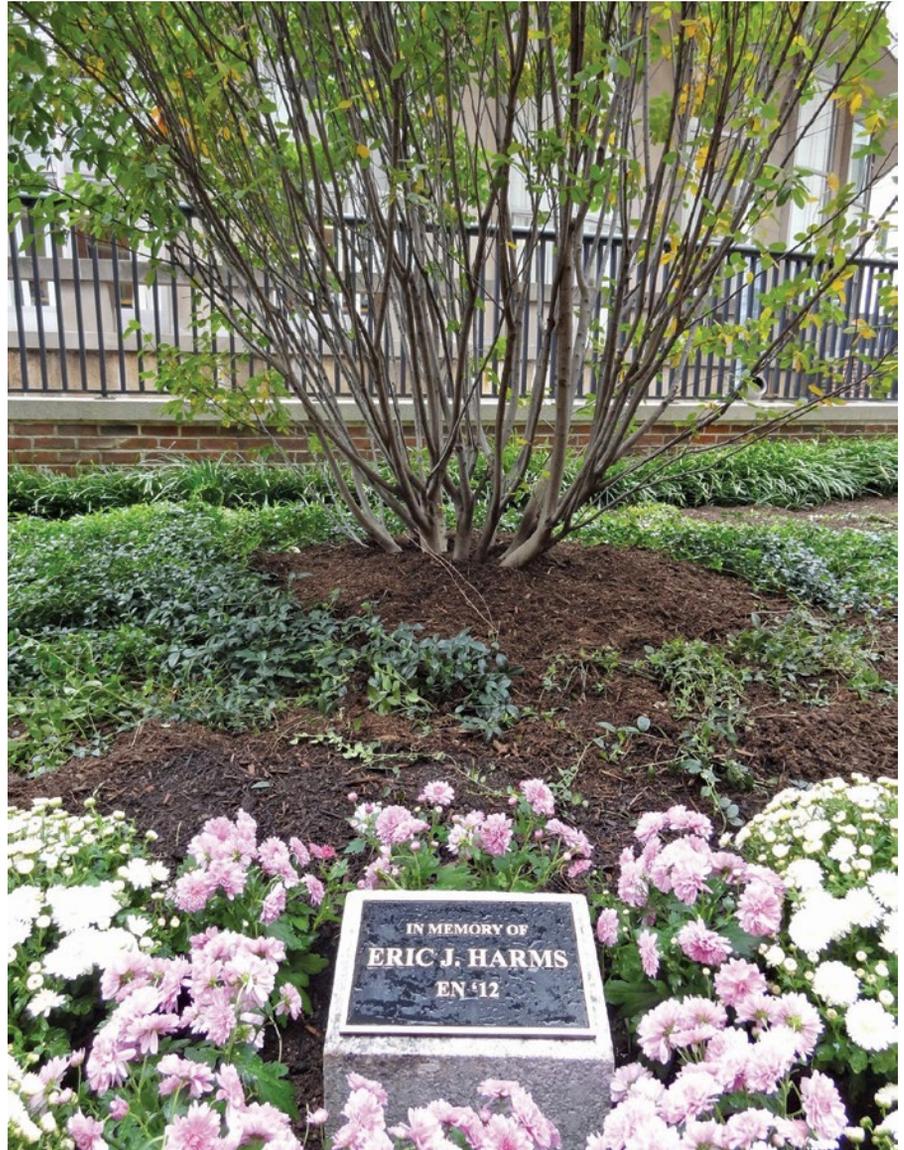
Death, divorce, job loss. Hurricanes, flooding. Political unrest, economic difficulties. Health issues. All are part of life. And any of these catastrophes can affect a dental office staff and patients. Those affected by loss are left in shock and grief, frequently wondering how they can cope with the world in general, and more specifically with their own personal and professional lives. Unfortunately, in dentistry our professional lives are very public, and expressions of grief do not work easily into a relationship where drilling is involved! Our patients expect their dentists to smile and focus on the task at hand with no distractions. In the dental office, grief for any loss is frequently expressed in secret.

Unfortunately, suppressing emotional pain is not a healthy option. Repressed grief can cause depression, sleeplessness, alcohol and substance abuse, as well as cardiovascular disease. Grappling with grief and managing its side effects are skills dentists need to understand.

If you live in a third world country or a country experiencing war or unrest, you learn about loss and grief early. But if you live in a country at peace, with a high life expectancy, you get very little training in managing grief, particularly catastrophic grief. Expecting a good life, as we typically do in the U.S., can make the management of loss and the expression of grief even more difficult.

### It's Always Personal

In the fall of 2007, my brother Mike died of a heart attack. Three months later my husband Jim was diagnosed with liver cancer and given a 5% survival rate. Six months after that, Jim was saved by a liver transplant. We celebrated, but only temporarily. In



*Among many talents, the author's son Eric was a gifted jazz pianist. It was jazz great Louis Armstrong who said, "The memory of things gone is important to a jazz musician", an idea that works on many, many levels in this discussion.*

another six months our world would explode.

On January 31, 2009, our only son, Eric, just 19 years old, died by suicide. Eric was a freshman at Columbia University in New York. He was an amazing young man. He had a beautiful heart, he was thoughtful, kind, and always looked for the person who needed help. He had a beautiful

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mind; he was a National Merit Scholar, on the Dean's List and Student Council at Columbia University, and he was a gifted jazz pianist. When Eric came home for Christmas his freshman year, he was, to our eyes, on top of the world. Two weeks after returning to his beloved Columbia, and just 45 minutes after a break-up with his girlfriend, he was gone.

Eric was the victim of a trifecta of what I can only call demons, as unscientific and non-objective as that sounds suicidal depression, his natural impulsive energy that made him such a good musician, and a brain that was not yet fully developed in managing emotional turmoil.

### **And Then There Were Two**

When Eric died, I felt as if my heart had splintered into a million pieces. I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't *think*, and I felt for a while as if I couldn't continue. Every morning I woke up hoping it was all a nightmare, only to face the horrible reality that it was not. I also found that for an extended period I could no longer enjoy my hobbies, or even read. I couldn't listen or watch anything controversial or violent. I could enjoy nothing.

I felt as if a big fishing net was strangling my heart and pulling me under. Emotionally I was drowning. And yet, for the next six months I had to face my dental patients at work. Most of them had known Eric, and attempted to express their sorrow to me. It was very difficult.

I resigned from my outside activities.

A year later I was diagnosed with permanent nerve damage to my

drilling fingers, and my clinical career in dentistry was over in one day. I asked God, "Really? Haven't I suffered enough? Why me?" At the same time, however, I realized that losing my career wasn't the worst thing that had happened to me. Losing Eric put everything into perspective.

### **Making the Resilience/Joy Connection**

Resilience is the ability to bounce back. When Eric died, I thought that I would never have a minute of joy in my life again. I soon realized, however, that succumbing to that scenario would negatively affect not only my life, but the lives of my family and friends.

One evening after work, Jim and I talked to a cousin. He had lost his brother at age 17 to alcohol poisoning, and his parents never recovered. He reminded us that we had two other children and that we should not ever let them feel that they were not enough for us. He said that the loss of their brother would hit them hard, and it was our responsibility

to ensure that they would not lose their parents to grief as he had. Those words hit me hard, and I resolved to immediately begin the daunting work of climbing out of my personal pit of despair and to begin my search for the ultimate goal of finding peace and joy in life again.

Getting your entire life into perspective and focusing on the people currently in your life is difficult, but completely necessary for healing. It is important to remember that some of us have more experience or personal skills in managing grief and therefore may be better able to recover. The

grief experience is unique to every individual, and it is managed differently even by those who have similar life experiences. It is also imperative not to judge others or expect certain time limitations in managing grief. Some are able to cope faster or more easily. We can only focus on managing our own personal losses.

I can't remember much about the first year after Eric died. The next few years I remember putting on a smiling face but still struggling with that fishing net pulling my heart under. The net loosened up over the next few years until one day, it was gone. The net returns occasionally still, on certain days, but it no longer controls my life. The smile on my face now matches the one in my heart.

### **Tasks of Mourning**

Grief and mourning are different things. Grief is the personal experience of the loss, and mourning is the process that occurs after the loss. There are even tasks of mourning. Being the typical Type A dentist, breaking mourning down into tasks with definitive goals at the end was extremely helpful!

The first task of mourning is to accept the reality of the loss. This may seem a simple thing, but when something unexpected and catastrophic occurs, it is sometimes difficult for the mind to adjust to reality.

The second task is processing the pain of grief. Keeping busy, crying, talking, seeking therapy, finding a support group or a cause, are all ways to process the pain. This task is highly individualized, and it is important to make sure to work through the pain and not avoid it. Avoiding the pain can cause a person to get stuck in this task. Who wants to get stuck in permanent pain?

The third task of mourning is to adjust to the world that exists

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after the loss. New financial or social circumstances associated with the loss may be hard to face. It is sometimes helpful to develop new interests, or even move to new surroundings. Before Eric died, I was passionate about photography (especially involving my children). After Eric died, I was unable to take pictures for a long time. Instead, I started to paint on porcelain, which was very therapeutic. The arrival of grandchildren (one of them named Eric) was immensely helpful.

The fourth and final task of mourning is to develop a lasting connection to your loss in a way that does not interfere with the process of embarking on your new life. This task involves living your present life without letting your past life interfere. It is a difficult task for most, but extremely important. Many experience survivor's guilt, particularly after losing a loved one, and feel that being happy somehow betrays the love they felt. It is a false guilt. For me, establishing Rwandan libraries in Eric's name helped with this task. Eric loved to read.

## Gender Differences

Men and women frequently handle loss differently, which can cause a serious strain on relationships. The important thing to remember is to not judge each other, and to respect those differences. Trying to figure out "why" something happened can frequently lead you down a wormhole. Why did Eric die? Why do hurricanes happen? Why did your assistant get cancer? Why did your spouse leave you? There are frequently no answers, and healing requires acceptance even without understanding the "why".

Men may find it more difficult to admit they are depressed. After Eric's death, I accepted that I was suffering from depression, and was treated. My husband would not accept that he was depressed, and was therefore not

treated. However, a year after Eric died, and two years after his heart checked out as healthy, Jim required major heart surgery. Stress from grief and depression can have devastating effects on our cardiovascular system.

There is a stigma to being diagnosed with depression in our profession. Why? The only side effect I have from being treated for depression is that I am happier. My husband's valve replacement and quadruple bypass, followed by another valve replacement six years later, was much more traumatic and life threatening. Let's rethink this depression stigma!

## People Experiencing Grief Frequently Have Post Traumatic Stress

Frequently, perhaps only for a while, sometimes for an entire life, survivors of loss are bombarded by waves of grief at unexpected moments. Occasionally waves become tsunamis. For me, those waves came without warning, and were frequently triggered by certain words, jazz music, or a time of year. The two most frequent triggers for me were any mention of New York or Columbia. It is amazing how many times we hear the words New York in a day. Columbia is even worse! Columbia the University; Columbia Sportswear; Columbia, South Carolina; Columbia, Missouri; Columbia, Maryland; Columbia the country; Columbia River; Columbia Ice Field; the space shuttle Columbia - there is even an asteroid named Columbia! You can't get through the day without hearing about New York or Columbia numerous times. Fortunately for me, most of those triggers have dissipated.

A word to the wise herein, then: In your office you may find a staff person or patient struggling with grief who unexpectedly needs some extra time and patience to cope with a trigger of post-traumatic stress.

## Social Anxiety is Common After a Catastrophic Loss

Going out in public after a loss can be difficult. The post-loss world looks very different from the pre-loss world. For me, just seeing, let alone watching, people enjoying life was hard. I remember the horrible

feeling I would have when I saw a family with three children, because I no longer had three children. It was a very strange and embarrassing feeling. It also took about five years before I could go through an entire wedding without crying from despair instead of joy. Funerals were also hard. In a post-loss world, it is important to understand that you

will have crazy thoughts for a while, and pace yourself. Give yourself time to heal, and realize that you don't have to show up at every event. On the other hand, work hard not to isolate yourself too much. The first time at a family event or funeral might be hard, but typically it gets easier. In my case, it took several years, but I no longer have any loss-related social anxiety, and I no longer count children.

## Forgiveness is Important

One of the most important things you can do to promote emotional healing is to forgive. You need to forgive everyone, including yourself. Forgiveness sets your heart free. After Eric died, I went to Rwanda to bring libraries in his name and learn about grief recovery. While there,

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I learned that the Rwandans were also forgiveness experts. Through forgiveness, they rebuilt their country. In 1994, Rwanda suffered the greatest loss of life per day in history, with almost a million people killed by their neighbors in 100 days. Most schools and major institutions were also destroyed. Because the survivors chose to focus on forgiveness rather than revenge, Rwanda is now considered one of the safest, happiest, and fastest growing countries in Africa. It is an unbelievable story with unbelievable people. Our country could learn a lot from Rwanda.

### **What Do We Do to Provide Comfort?**

After Eric's death, we were blessed by numerous family members and friends. Some took care of us in our home by bringing food and helping us clean. My sister-in-law moved in with us for a week and cooked for us.

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Linden Dungy, a neighboring dentist, shared wisdom from his brother Tony Dungy, who had lost his 19-year-old son under very similar circumstances.

We met every week for lunch. Others helped me write thank you letters, took us out to basketball games, invited us out to dinner ... I can't tell you how grateful I am for these wise and caring friends.

One of the most important things you can say to someone who has suffered a catastrophic loss is that you are sorry for their loss, give them a hug, help them with errands or food, and don't forget about them after the funeral. I frequently wished that I could just go to sleep for about 10 years, hoping to wake up healed. But it doesn't work like that after a loss. We all have to go through the mourning process. We all have to learn that the life we knew no longer exists, and we have to build a new life based upon what we have left. If

you are lucky, it takes months, but in many cases it takes years to truly redirect your life to a point where you are no longer overwhelmed by your past or worried about your future. The key is to live in the moment and experience the simple peace and joys that are right in front of you. I am 62 years old, and I can tell you that the greatest accomplishment in my life outside my faith and my family is that I can now do that. I can 100% enjoy weddings and holidays with my family. I can 100% enjoy spending an entire day with my grandchildren, and I can 100% enjoy giving them back to their parents tired and full of sugar. Life is good!

In reality, we can't control bad things happening to us, but we can control how hard we work to recover. Grappling with grief takes a lot of hard work, and it takes time. It may even take more time in dentistry because of the unique nature of our professional life and the stigma and secrecy we encounter. In my experience, however, the hard work and the faking of smiles until the real ones emerge are totally worth it! ■

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“Given so much time, the ‘impossible’ becomes possible, the possible probable, and the probable virtually certain.

One has only to wait: Time itself performs miracles.”

George Wald