



RABBI BRIAN'S



NOTES ABOUT MOURNING

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Rabbi Brian on Mourning

What follows is a collection of the advice that I often give to people when they are facing a loss. These are my “go-to’s.” Take what you like and leave the rest. I hope you find comfort. -rB

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Permission

There is no one correct way to mourn. Really. Honest. There isn't. Please, please, please do not think that you ought to do anything other than what feels appropriate to you. Don't worry about what you think you OUGHT to be doing. (In fact, Judaism permits mourners to violate almost every commandment.) Do not try to do this or that to take care of other people. Take care of yourself. Give yourself the permission to mourn as it feels appropriate to you. This advice will be repeated at the end of this page.

Be

Scream! Cry. Wail. Weep. Be sad. Very sad. Your darling has been taken from you, and you have to stay here. Your pain is in direct proportion to your love. Alas, knowing this gives little solace. To be honest, there is little solace. And there is no hiding from the pain that you are in.

A Law: Comfort In. Dump out.

Imagine circles drawn from the epicenter of the loss. The deceased's spouse, children, parents, caregiver are at the epicenter. Friends in the next circle. Acquaintances the circle outside of that. The rule is: "Comfort in. Dump out." What this means is that those in the center get to dump their sadness on those further out and those further out are to comfort those closer in. At times people break this rule. It doesn't work out well when someone further out tries to make the person further in take care of them.

Waves: Grief & Memories

When you are mourning, emotions and memories come in waves. Much like waves at an ocean, they come and leave of their own accord. You cannot control waves in the ocean; neither can you control emotions or memories when you are mourning. At times, emotions will be overwhelming and take you without warning. You won't be done with them until they are done. You may try to delude yourself that you are in control of them, but you're not. It's the same with memories. Memories you didn't even know you had may arrive, seemingly from nowhere, and, again like waves, you are not in control of them. These waves will come and go according to their own course of time, heavier and harder now, and lighter in the future; but for today, you do not need to look to be anywhere but where you are.



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The list of missed marks

As people in the general public dislike dealing with pain (their own or that of others), they will *attempt* to console mourners. But, one can't really say anything that gives comfort. However, they don't know that. Consequently, the intended words they offer as comfort will often miss the mark. Let's think about it. Even under the best circumstances, kind words and deeds cannot take away the feelings of pain and loss that mourners face.

So, they say something attempting to comfort, you, the mourner. This doesn't produce the desired effect of you being comforted. Now, stuck, they double down and say something else – which is the second thing they were thinking of saying – the thing that they shelved in favor of the first thing that they said.

This is often the stupidest thing you've heard and it borders on or just is offensive.

Here's my suggestion: with the other mourners or a good friend, maintain a list of the five least comforting things you hear while you are mourning. My rationale is that if you make it part of a game while you listen to some ridiculous things that are supposed to pass for comfort, it might take a bit of the sting out.

Walk around the block

Rituals are to move us from one place to another. They help our spirits know that what has happened is real and help us understand the new identity that we are called to in light of our loss (from companion to the one left behind). Many people underestimate the power of rituals. Ripping your clothing, covering mirrors so you don't see how you look, and many others are good rituals. Ask around; people have great ideas to share. Rituals help us move in our sense of identity. Here is one that I always suggest: after a week of mourning (or a week after the death), take a walk around the block by yourself or with loved ones. This ritual is ancient and unbelievably effective. The mourning doesn't end with the walk around the block, but something shifts.



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You are off autopilot

In the movie *Fight Club*, one of the main characters talks about having had a near-life experience. It is after having a brush with death that life, and the quality of life, shifts. I heard Rabbi Arthur talk about it as the moment when you are driving and you almost get hit and you wake up to the fact that you are driving – that somehow you had drifted into a somewhat dreamlike state of consciousness. Facing death knocks us off of auto-pilot, and that paradigm shift is often quite jolting. And as with many paradigm shifts, we can feel shame, like we have wasted time, or as though we are in a dream, wondering if when we were awake, that was the dream. This realization can feel like quite a mind trip.

A short poem

Grief is a dull ache,
Hiding just behind my belly and my brain
Ready to spring.
Tears waiting to spill out with no warning.
Something always absent.
– Lori Turner-Otte

New chapter

When a major figure of your life dies, you enter a new chapter of your life. My friend Rabbi Arthur Rosenberg says it is like starting a new chapter of a book. You don't know what is going to happen – it's a new chapter. Some old characters from previous chapters might start acting differently. Some new characters might be introduced. But, just as you wouldn't pretend to know what will happen when a new chapter of a book starts, you oughtn't expect to understand right now how things will play out.



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Game changer

It is a game changer to lose your (*dad*). [I'm putting dad here, but substitute as necessary.] My friend David puts it like this: “No matter how psychologically deft you are or if you are a freaking Jedi Zen emotional master, when you face the loss of your dad, you aren’t a freaking Jedi Zen emotional master. Nah, you are 10 years old, and you just want your daddy – that man who is your original role model, the real life superhero who is your dad, the best man in the world, your dad. That’s what you lose when your dad dies.”

And that is why years after losing my dad, I cry from time to time.

Distance

When we first are faced with death, it is just that – it is right in front of our faces. We cannot see much else. It is at the forefront of everything. Over time, it moves about a foot away. Still in the forefront, still smack in the center, but a little further away, and we start to see some of the other things in our lives...peripherally. Then, move time again, and it moves even further away. And, then, gradually, it becomes one of the many things we see. Do not criticize yourself for being single focused until enough time has passed.

Decisions

Do not make any major life decisions until the death is no longer the single focus of your life.

Eight-words

Grief is love with no place to go.

Witness lost

Some of what is lost is the WITNESS to our own lives. Of course, we exist outside of other people, but they witness us and give us feedback. And in their absence – when they die – we get lost a little. We lose the person with whom we share those memories. We are left holding the bag. We feel alone, abandoned, isolated, emptied, etc.



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Done crying

Person A: When will I stop crying?

Person B: When you run out of tears.

Mind/Body

The stress of loss does amazing things to our psyches. Your body might react in ways you are not used to: ravenous, no appetite, tremors. You might lose your memory. (I found I couldn't go on a tangent while talking because I couldn't remember why I started talking about whatever it was I was talking about.) This is all normal. Scary at times, but just what happens. Over time, equilibrium will return. Trust your mind/body's process.

Exhaustion

Mourning is exhausting. Please hydrate. And rest.

Idiosyncratic

All mourning is idiosyncratic; that is, you will mourn differently than you expect. Give yourself the permission to mourn as it feels appropriate to you.

With love

Do as much as you can, as well as you can.

With love.

Rabbi Brian