

3 myths about grief

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August 17, 2015



Richard Niebuhr uses the metaphor of a shipwreck to describe those life experiences where what we thought would hold comes apart. A marriage ends, a career collapses, an illness shatters plans, a loved one dies. Pastors and congregations can be a lifeline.

Our culture, however, is mourning avoidant—and too often, faith communities reflect the broader culture's misconceptions surrounding grief.

Such grief illiteracy was at the heart of what parents were reacting to in their [criticism of Joel Osteen's revision of his book *Your Best Life Now*](#). Osteen describes a couple who lost their only son years ago as wallowing in self-pity. The fact that they still tear up when their son is mentioned means they “don’t want to get well.” He admonishes, “If you really want to get well you need to move on with your life.” He assumes “they like the attention too much” and castigates their failure to respond to others “trying to lift them up.” Then he insists that “unless you let go of the old, God will not bring the new.”

Osteen's work is marked by a relentless emphasis on avoiding negativity. But one need not share this to inadvertently fuel some common myths about grief.

Myth #1: Everyone grieves the same way. This myth holds that we will go through the “Five Stages of Grief,” an orderly progression of denial, anger,

bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Professionals in bereavement counseling now recognize that grief is messier and more complicated than this, as do many clergy. But this concept of stages, initially adapted from Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying*, remains prevalent. "That model is still deeply and rigidly embedded in our cultural consciousness and psychological language," [writes psychotherapist](#) Patrick O'Malley. "It inspires much self-diagnosis and self-criticism among the aggrieved."

Many grief therapists say grief is as unique as a fingerprint. And rather than a progression of stages, it often takes a more circular shape, with grief bursts coming years later even as people are living full lives.

Myth #2: Closure is the goal in healthy healing. [Nancy Berns, a sociology professor, discovered that](#) closure is a relatively new term in America, that it's a made-up emotional state. Yet it is so common that it comes up in sitcoms and detective shows. [What I see and hear](#) instead, in my interviews with those who have lost a loved one, is the idea of "continuing bonds." As one widow said, "I lost the love of my life, but I didn't lose my love and remembrance of him." In closure, we are left bereft. In remembrance, love continues.

Myth #3: Moving on is essential. The number one lament I hear from bereaved people is their pain over friends and family urging them to move on. Kay Warren, co-founder of Saddleback Church, expressed this vividly as she and her husband neared the first anniversary of their son Matthew's death to suicide after years of struggling with mental illness. Her anger emerged in a Facebook missive. "I have to tell you—the old Rick and Kay are gone," she wrote. "I'm saying 'don't push me to move on faster than I can go.'"

Clergy and faith communities are in a unique position to address grief myths. I have seen this in our congregation, which offers insightful and sensitive grief classes to all in our community. We can also learn from the grief experts who have responded to Osteen with advice on a better approach.

[Joanne Cacciatore](#), a social work professor at Arizona State, [writes](#), "Allowing mourners to be in their pain, without trying to make them change how they feel (often to make yourself and said others feel better), would actually be a more compassionate and more Christlike response."

Sue Wintz, who edits a journal for chaplains, [observes that](#) if we give mourners space, their grief will slowly change. Without letting go of “the old” reminders of a loved one’s life, there are “moments of hope and joy that will softly come again.”

In my own pilgrimage with loss, I find inspiration in the courage and creativity of bereaved people who weave sorrow and faith into their new normal. As Jan Skaggs expresses it,

Eventually grief became a tool God used to redecorate and remodel my life, a wrecking crew that led to reconstruction. Grief knocked out walls of assumptions, prejudice, and quick judgment and has rebuilt a much bigger room now . . . more grace filled, more welcoming to others, filled with a lighter heart.

It’s like Richard Niebuhr's observation about transformation after life’s shipwrecks. When we do wash up on a new shore, there is gladness in the discovery that life continues to unfold with meaning, with connections of significance and delight.