

Toward An Understanding of the "Going Crazy Syndrome"

by Alan D Wolfelt, Ph.D.

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 bad. And you may feel that if you mourn, then you should be ashamed. If you are perceived as "doing well" with your grief, you are considered "strong" and "under control." The message is that the well-controlled person stays rational at all times.

Combined with this message is another one. Society erroneously implies that if you, as a bereaved person, openly express your feelings of grief, you are immature. If your feelings are fairly intense, you may be labeled "overly emotional." If your feelings are extremely intense, you may even be referred to as "crazy" or a "pathological mourner."

This article is to address this frequent question, "Am I crazy?" I have provided information about the normalcy of the disorganization and confusion that often comes when we mourn the death of someone loved.

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

After the death of someone loved, you 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 ability to complete any tasks. A project may get started but go unfinished. Forgetfulness and low-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. Every day pleasures may not seem to matter any more.

You may also experience a restless searching for the person who has died. Yearning and preoccupation with memories can leave you feeling drained.

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 he or she had done so many times in the past. If these experiences are happening to you remember-You are not crazy!

Visual hallucinations occur so frequently they cannot be considered abnormal. I personally prefer the term "memory picture" to hallucination. As part of your searching and yearning when you are bereaved, you may not only experience a sense of the dead person's presences, but you may also have fleeting glimpses of the person across a room. Again, remember those words-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 early morning awakening also are common experiences associated with this dimension of grief.

You might find it helpful to remember that disorganization following loss always comes before any kind of re-orientation. Some people will try to have you bypass any kind of disorganization or confusion. Remember- it simply cannot be done. While it may seem strange, keep in mind that your disorganization and confusion are actually stepping-stones on your path toward healing.

Self-Care Guidelines

If disorganization, confusion, searching and yearning are, or have been a part of your grief journey. Don't worry about the normalcy of your experience. It is critically important to never forget those reassuring words: You are not crazy!

When you feel disorganized, talk to someone who will understand. To heal, grief must be 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 so you may tell your story over and over again as you work to embrace your grief. He or she must be genuinely interested in understanding you. If you are trying to talk about your disorganization, and the person doesn't want to listen, find someone who will meet your needs better.

The thoughts, feelings and behavior of this dimension do not come all at once. They are often experienced in a 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. With the judgment-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.

As C.S. Lewis noted, "Grief is like a long, winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape." As you explore the terrain of your unique grief journey, you may ask yourself, "Am I crazy/" In the first article, information was provided about the normalcy of disorganization and confusion that often comes when we mourn the death of someone loved. In this article, I will address other aspect of grief and mourning that unless normalized, might make you think you are crazy.

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 and do your work of mourning. A vital part of healing in grief is understanding the normalcy of your experience.

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

- Time Distortion
- Obsessive Review of Ruminating

- Search for meaning
- In This Death God's Will?
- Transitional Objects
- Suicidal Thoughts
- Anniversary and Holiday Grief Occasions

Time Distortion

"I don't know what day it is, let alone what time it!" 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 what month it is.

This normal experience of time distortion often plays a part in the "going crazy syndrome." No, you are not crazy. But if you don't know this is normal, you may think you are.

Obsessive Review or Ruminating

Obsessive 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 had died. It's "telling your story" over and over again. 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! 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. Review or rumination is a powerful and necessary part of the hard work 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.

Search For Meaning

Naturally, you try to make sense of why someone you love died. You find yourself asking question like "Why him or her?" 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 our 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 dies should not have died under these circumstances or at this time. Whatever the nature of 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, be certain not to commit "spiritual suicide." 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 in your life.

Be aware that people may try to tell you not to ask questions about your personal search for

meaning in your grief journey. Or worse yet, watch out for people who always try to have answers to your difficult questions. Most bereaved people do not find comfort in pat response; neither will you. The healing occurs in posing the questions in the first place, not just in finding answers.

Find a friend, group or counselor 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 religious and spiritual values, question your philosophy of life, and renew your resources for living!

Is This Death God's Will?

Closely related to the search for meaning is the commonly asked question, "Is this 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: "God loves me, so why take this most precious person from me?" Or you may have been told, "It's 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 drown 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!

Transitional Objects

Transitional objects are belongings of the person in your life who died. They often can give you comfort. Objects such as clothing, books, or prized possessions can help you feel close to someone you miss so much.

For example, during my counseling with a bereaved woman, she shared with me that she found it comforting to take one of her husband's favorite 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 you from belongings such as the shirt described above. This with the tendency in our culture to move away from grief instead of toward it.

Remember-embrace the comfort provided by familiar objects. To do away with them too soon takes away a sense of security 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 year after the death. Creating a shrine, however, only prevents acknowledging the painful reality that someone you love has died. Understanding the difference between transitional objects and creating a shrine is important. The former helps you heal, the latter does not.

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 it 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.

To have these thoughts is normal, however to make plans and take actions to end your life is abnormal. Sometimes your body, mind, and spirit can hurt so much you wonder if you will ever feel alive again. Just remember that in accomplishing the hard work of mourning, you can and will find continued meaning in your life. Let yourself be helped as you have hope in 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 honor 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 Easter, Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas and other special occasions create a heightened sense of loss. At these times, you may likely experience a grief attack or memory embrace.

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 deeply 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, and 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 will 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 journey into grief.