

May 3, 2021

*The Denial Dance*

Dear Friends,

Today's entry in *Grief One Day at a Time*, by Alan Wolfelt, talks about the role that denial plays in grief:

“Denial is one of the most misunderstood aspects of the grief journey. Temporarily, denial, like shock and numbness, is a great gift. It helps us survive the early days and weeks after the death of someone loved. As we begin to confront the reality of the death and embrace the pain in doses, though, our denial should begin to break down. And when that happens, we often feel even worse for some period of time. That's hard to take, but avoiding or 'stuffing' our true thoughts and feelings is even more terrible because it inevitably leads to stagnation, depression, anxiety, addictive behaviors, and other life-smothering symptoms. If we're afraid to feel, we can end up feeling worse. So let's all do the denial dance. Deny, confront, deny, confront. I sometimes call it evade-encounter. This healthy back and forth doses us with reality then gives us a much-needed break.”

I wanted to talk about denial today because I think it has taken a bad rap. Many people see it as a negative experience or label it as dysfunction, but as Dr. Wolfelt accurately points out, it plays a very important role in early grief. Denial is our brain's ability to protect us from the overwhelming pain of our loss. This 'protection,' or avoidance of our feelings actually helps us in the short-term to plow through the first days of shock and trauma and to make the extremely difficult decisions about final arrangements or hosting guests and even perhaps having to interact with them. The loss is so monumental that we couldn't function without the protection of denial for a while.

I think it is important to know, as Dr. Wolfelt points out, that when denial begins to lift, the pain can get much more intense. This can be a particularly difficult time for people who have suffered loss. We may begin to think that something is wrong, and that we are going backwards;

we may begin to lose hope. But this experience of an increase in pain's intensity is quite common and a very 'normal' part of grief, for lack of a better word. This comes up a lot in groups and sometimes I can actually see the relief on someone's face when they realize that it is a part of grief and they are not regressing or going crazy. In grief, unlike most other things, we need to go backward before we can go forward. If our brain keeps going back, it is because we need to fully grasp what happened and slowly digest it. This takes time and it induces pain, which is why most of us try to avoid it or run from it in some way. In the beginning, the pain is so overwhelming and unbearable that quite often our brains kick into denial mode.

When you think about it, denial makes sense, as our loss is something which we find unacceptable. If something is unacceptable, it is going to take some painful effort and a lot of time to come to terms with it. Denial is simply one of the ways our brains and bodies deal with painful loss. This is why I prefer the term 'avoidance' to denial, as denial can have a somewhat negative connotation in our culture, but avoidance makes perfect sense.

It can get tricky and even dangerous for us, however, if we use denial and avoidance as a long-term solution in dealing with our grief. Experts agree that staying in a state of denial can prevent us from healing and moving ahead with life in a healthy way. But a little denial can go a long way. Sometimes we may mistakenly think that if we continue to make efforts to avoid our feelings for long enough, they will eventually go away, but these attempts to suppress our grief can make our pain more intense and interfere with our lives. The fear of our grief and emotions can begin to limit us in the other roles we need to fill in our lives, and it can impede us from healing and becoming. "A mother who's no longer willing to sing to her child, a father who's afraid to teach his son to drive, a widow who's afraid to fall in love again, a daughter living in a house full of her parent's things, and a son hesitant to face sleep without the help of a bottle of wine – these grievers are stranded, abandoned, intoxicated, and absent and their inability to live in the present keeps them forever stuck in the past." (Eleanor Haley, *Coping with Grief*)

Like all the other crappy aspects of grief, it is good to talk about all of them, and as I've mentioned so many times, in order to gain understanding, perspective and tolerance for the pain of grief, we need to allow ourselves to actually feel it, face it, and be present with it in the

moment and in the future. I like Dr. Wolfelt's advice when he says, "let's all do the denial dance."

Sincerely Yours, Kevin