

The Four Stages of Facing Loss, by Frank Ostaseski

Facing Loss

Loss is the first period of grief, and it's visceral. It's like being punched in the belly. It takes your breath away. Even when death is expected, our bodies and minds can't seem to take it in right away. We don't want to accept the reality of this loss; we don't want to believe that the person we love has died. And at the same time, acceptance is the task in this period. Shock and disbelief usually give way to guilt and regret. We judge ourselves mercilessly: "I should have taken her to the hospital sooner. We could have tried other treatments. I wish I'd spent more time with her. I wanted to be there at the moment she died." Our capacity to be cruel to ourselves never ceases to amaze me. At our time of greatest vulnerability, when we most need our own kindness, we club ourselves with self-judgment. If we could only just stop for a moment and listen to the sound of our voice, surely our hearts would open to embrace this pain.

Mourning

Grief may be the greatest healing experience of a lifetime. It's certainly one of the hottest fires we will encounter. It penetrates the hard layers of our self-protection, plunges us into the sadness, fear, and despair we have tried so hard to avoid. Grief is unpredictable, uncontrollable. There are no shortcuts around grief. The only way is right through the middle. Some say time heals, but that's a half-truth. Time alone doesn't heal. Time and attention heal. In grief we access parts of ourselves that were somehow unavailable to us in the past. With awareness, the journey through grief becomes a path to wholeness. Grief can lead us to a profound understanding that reaches beyond our individual loss. It opens us to the most essential truth of our lives: the truth of impermanence, the causes of suffering, and the illusion of separateness. When we meet these experiences with mercy and awareness, we begin to appreciate that we are more than the grief. We are what the grief is moving through. In the end, we may still fear death, but we don't fear living nearly as much. In surrendering to grief, we learn to give ourselves more fully to life.

Letting Go

This is the painful period that goes on for some time, months, even years. When someone we love dies, it's not a single event. We keep on losing that person. At holidays, times of difficult decisions, or in those little personal moments we want to share, we are painfully confronted with the absence of the person we love. We see clearly the roles that person has played in our life, and we grieve for those also. We don't just lose our wife when she dies. She's the person who worked out all the battles with our kids, or made the money, or the one who touched our body with love and tenderness. When our parents die, we may find ourselves feeling fragile. They were the buffer between us and death, and suddenly we are more aware of our own mortality. This is the period when we feel most alone. Friends drop away in exhaustion. Others tell us to keep busy or to get on with our life. This is the individual's fear of pain and our cultural predisposition toward avoiding anything unpleasant. Advice doesn't help. Listening does.

Moving On

Grief is like a stream running through our life, and it's important to understand that it doesn't go away. Our grief lasts a lifetime, but our relationship to it changes. Moving on is the period in which the knot of your grief is untied. It's the time of renewal. Not a return to life as it was before the death you experienced—you can't go back, you're a different person now, changed by the journey through grief. But you can begin to embrace life again, feel alive again. The intensity of emotions has subsided some. You can remember the loss without being caught in the clutches of terrible pain. The armoring around our hearts begins to melt, and in this period of moving on, the energy that had been consumed by resistance is now available for living. Now we move forward, but we're not abandoning the one we love. We understand that even when someone dies, the relationship continues. It's that the person is no longer located outside of us. We are developing what we could call an internal relationship with this person, and that allows us to reinvest in our life. If we follow the path through grief to wholeness, we discover undying love.