

Time for Suffering

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Have you ever been having an OK day when the memory of some trauma just comes up and whacks you on the side of the head? Have you ever been unexpectedly crumpled by seeing someone or something that reminds you of a bad event from your past?

Getting “triggered” by something is a universal human experience after a divorce, death or other trauma. Thankfully, the frequency of those unexpected, punched-in-the-gut memories typically begins to subside after a few years. But in the meantime, most people are vulnerable to being broadsided by emotions on the road to recovery. They never know when they will next be debilitated by a painful and unexpected episode of anguish. It can happen at work, while driving, while trying to tend a loved one – any time and anywhere.

It doesn't have to be like this.

The common response is to try to push it aside and get back to whatever you were doing. That just postpones it, though. So how do you manage these memory episodes? How do you function in the world and not bottle all that up forever? One of the most important things you can do for yourself is this: schedule your grief. Find a time to allow yourself to “officially” suffer, and you'll find the surprise episodes happen less and less.

When both my young children died in a car accident in 1991, I was certain if I fully gave in to my emotions I would never stop crying. I'd just cry and cry for the rest of my life. My friend Lora, who had lost her son to SIDS just a few months before my children died, told me her best advice for beginning to control the uncontrollable: schedule the grief. She said, “Dare yourself to go thirty seconds without crying.” Since I was lying in a hospital bed in serious pain physically and emotionally, I had little else to do but stare at the slow-moving hands of the clock. I took the dare.

After a few days, I was able to go thirty seconds. After a few weeks, I could go five minutes. A year later, I could go a few hours straight on occasion.

People sometimes say, “Oh, what's happened to me is not as traumatic as what happened to you!” But the truth is, if you are suffering at all that's proof then your pain is as painful for you as my pain was for me. Pain cannot be counted or measured or compared. If you're hurting, and if unexpected recurrences of pain are disrupting your ability to function, sleep, love or live, then you really must learn to schedule your grief.

People who successfully manage their emotions allow them to be fully expressed – sometimes. They don't deny them but neither are they victims to their whimsical comings and goings. For instance, many men have been acculturated to believe that showing emotion is a sign of weakness. For them in particular, and for women, too,

learning to schedule grief can be a quantum leap in recovery. The emotions are getting processed but they are no longer in control. They are not being suppressed, they are being directed.

So how does one “schedule grief?” It’s a trick of the mind and the calendar, really. You tell yourself, “I am going to be free, alone and available to really feel what I’m feeling next Saturday afternoon between 4 PM and 6 PM. I choose to suffer, grieve and express rage, anger, tears, fury, sadness, deep depression – whatever it is – during that time.” Then, whenever incidents happen that trigger your emotional reaction, you just catch yourself before it engulfs you and say, “I choose to feel this pain on Saturday from 4-6 PM, not now. I need/want to function in my life now.”

When the appointed time to suffer arises, go ahead and feel it fully. Cry, use a whole box of tissues, beat up the pillow, scream, do whatever you need to do. Allow yourself to exorcise your pain fully. You’ll know when it’s been used up. Think of the triggers that made you want to break down. Perhaps you saw a happy old couple holding hands, or a mother kissing her child’s forehead. Perhaps a friend told you about a call she got from her loving, healthy parent or someone at work got the big promotion you thought would be yours. Let yourself reflect, wallow and succumb. Be fully there. When your time is up or your pain is emptied, whichever comes first, get up. Change your physiology: take a shower, wash your face, go for a brisk walk, get around other people – whatever you need to do to “close” this session. And take a moment to schedule the next.

By learning to “compartmentalize” your pain, you begin to recognize that your mind is in charge of your emotional reactions. With practice, the skill of scheduling your grief fosters a sense of confidence that you are not at the mercy of the triggers outside you. You train yourself that emotions are a normal, healthy, human response to suffering, and that you can determine when to experience them.

One word of caution: there will still be times when you are blindsided by pain. Sometimes, especially when you are tired or overwhelmed, something will trigger a memory and your heart, mind and mood will spiral downward faster than you can catch them. This doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong or that you’ve somehow failed. It’s just life. But if you do not have the next grief session scheduled, even if it is six months away, you will find that you have a harder time catching yourself and stabilizing again.

By learning to schedule your grief, you force yourself out of the victim mode and begin to take positive, strong, healthy steps toward incorporating your pain into your life, learning its lessons and moving forward into joy and peace again.

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