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THRIVING

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Address the
difficulties
of work
and life

The Journey from Loss to Healing

There is one hard and fast rule when it comes to coping with the death of someone you love: there are no rules.

Every death is different, and every relationship is different, so the way each of us experiences loss and grief will be different. Grief is a journey, and when someone dies, those of us who mourn will take that journey in a unique way. It's a journey through some of the most emotionally intense and painful passages of life, and sometimes it will seem as if nothing and no one can help. However, there are some common guidelines that can be an anchor to anyone who is suffering through loss.

"Grief will take as long as it takes," writes Rusty Berkus in *To Heal Again: Towards Serenity and the Resolution of Grief*. "There is no right way to grieve—there is just your way."

Death: Part of the Fabric of Life

For centuries, death was woven into the fabric of life. People were born at home and died at home, and families and cultures developed rituals to help them deal with the loss. However, in the past century, as death moved into hospitals and mortuaries, people became more removed from death. For many people, this made the process of grieving and healing much more difficult.

But we are coming back around to understanding. Books, grief counseling, the growth of the hospice movement and personal rituals all attest to the ways we are confronting death in new ways.

Guidelines for Grieving

On a personal level, losing someone we love can leave us lost and unsure of what to do next. Although there

are no rules to the grieving process, there are guidelines that can make the journey easier. Grief falls into roughly four stages: shock and numbness; searching and yearning; disorientation and disorganization, and reorganization (or healing). During any of these stages:

- **Do not expect too much of yourself**, at least not for awhile.
- **Be gentle with yourself** and let go of ideas of the "right" thing to do or the "right" way to behave.
- **Seek support.** Ask friends to help you—with practical details, as well as just by sitting and listening.
- **Don't be afraid to talk about your loss** and about the person who has died. This is an important part of the grieving process. When it comes to death, silence is not always golden. If a friend is uncomfortable with your stories, find friends who can be there.
- **Don't be afraid to seek help** if your pain or depression becomes more than you can bear. Sometimes our friends can't give us the help and support we need.
- **Remember that a person dies, but a relationship doesn't.** Although the person you loved is gone, he or she lives on in you.

In his book, *Awakening from Grief: Finding the Way Back to Joy*, John Welshons calls death a great teacher for the living and a gift to help us live deeper lives.

"Nothing inspires us to want to find true happiness more effectively than thinking about our own mortality, and nothing else can communicate the urgency with which we need to pursue deeper levels of love and the sense of being fully alive." *

10 Barriers to Connection

When people come to us with a problem, it's easy to lapse into behaviors that—although usually well-meaning—block us from hearing the other person's experience. We'd be better off following the words of one Buddhist saying: "Don't just do something; stand there"...and try not to:

- 1. Counsel.** Seek not to advise solutions (until asked) but to listen and reflect back the person's experience.
- 2. Defend.** When you explain, justify or rationalize, you invalidate the other's experience. You can create a time to offer your experience, but for now, just listen.
- 3. Shut down.** Common phrases are: "It's not that bad" or "Don't worry!"
- 4. One-up.** Saying, "Oh, that's nothing! Listen to what happened to me!" gives the message, "Your experience doesn't count."
- 5. Reassure.** It's healthy to feel our feelings. Consoling ("It's not your fault; you did the best you could."), takes people out of their feelings.
- 6. Pity.** Sympathy and pity ("You poor thing!") don't serve; empathy does.
- 7. Commiserate.** Sharing stories of your own similar experiences is not showing empathy; it turns the focus away from the person with the problem.
- 8. Correct.** First listen. After the other person feels fully understood, then see about correcting any misunderstandings or inaccurate impressions.
- 9. Enlighten.** Don't attempt to educate unless your opinion is asked.
- 10. Interrogate.** Too many questions distract from the feelings at hand. *

A Letter From Bradley Brenner, PhD



As a psychologist in Washington, DC, I am often asked what I see as one of the biggest challenges faced by people in their daily lives. My response is the struggle to connect to themselves, to others around them or to an activity that gives them purpose in life, whether that be work or something else. This issue of *Thriving* focuses attention on many aspects of connection, ranging from barriers to connection, to being overly invested in pleasing others, and finally the pain and grief of losing a loved one.

Another comment that I often make when discussing my role as a therapist is that I am constantly struck by people's ability to muster the strength to effectively deal with seemingly insurmountable difficulties. Truly, being able to bounce back provides a wealth of opportunity to learn about ourselves, and to develop confidence in our capacity to deal with future challenges. Of course, much of our ability to effectively move forward is based on our capability to slow down and notice when something is not working well. That is, notice the red flags in life, name them for what they are, and devise some sort of plan for addressing them.

It is my hope that this issue of *Thriving* will provide you with many opportunities to reflect on some of the common difficulties that people face.

Enjoy this issue and please contact me if you would like to discuss any concern. I am here to help you address the challenges of work and life.

Do You Have the People-Pleasing Syndrome?

Pleasing other people—who could find fault with that? Isn't it a good thing to consider the needs of others, to be gracious, to be nice? By all means! But for many, the desire to please becomes an addictive need to please others, even at the expense of their own health and happiness. It takes a toll on health, relationships and quality of life, and it drowns out the inner voice that may be trying to protect us from overdoing it. "As a people-pleaser, you feel controlled by your need to please others and addicted to their approval," writes Harriet B. Braiker, Ph.D., in *The Disease to Please*. "At the same time, you feel out of control over the pressures and demands on your life that these needs have created." Take this quiz to see whether you can benefit from learning to say no to others more often—and yes to yourself.



True False

- 1. I put others' needs before my own, even when the cost to me and my own happiness is great.
- 2. If someone needs my help, I can't say no. In fact, I often find it difficult to say no. And when I do, I feel guilty.
- 3. To avoid reactions I'm afraid of, I often try to be who others want me to be, to agree with them, to fit in.
- 4. I keep my own needs and problems to myself; I don't want to burden others with them.
- 5. It's my job to make sure everyone else is happy.
- 6. I always have a smile on my face and an upbeat attitude, even if I feel sad or angry or hurt.
- 7. I go out of my way to avoid conflict and confrontation; it's better just to keep the peace.
- 8. I am often on the go, rushing to get things done. When I take a moment for myself, I feel selfish, indulgent and guilty.
- 9. I should always be nice and never hurt others' feelings.
- 10. I'll do whatever it takes to get someone to stop being mad at me.
- 11. I hold back from saying what I really think or from asking for what I want if I think someone will be upset with me for it.
- 12. I want everyone to like me...all the time.
- 13. I feel like a failure if I've displeased someone.
- 14. If I don't make others happy, I worry that I'll be alone and unloved forever.
- 15. I spend a lot of time doing things for others, but almost never ask anyone to do things for me.
- 16. If I ask people for help and they agree, I'm sure they must be giving out of obligation; if they really wanted to help, they would have offered without my asking.
- 17. It's difficult for me to express my feelings when they are different from those of someone I'm close to.

The motivations for being a people pleaser are varied and usually quite unconscious. Transforming these patterns requires that we understand our pleasing behaviors and motivations, and heal the childhood wounds that usually underlie people-pleasing. Please don't hesitate to call if you would like to explore this or any other issue. ✨

Bounce Back! Developing Emotional Resilience

Major disruptions are a “gotcha” we all experience at one time or another in our lives. For some, these hard times come frequently – the impact is overwhelming and recovery, if it comes at all, can be painfully slow. Others show resilience and are admirably able to glide through these times fairly easily, bouncing back to a normal life again quickly. Resilience—the strength required to adapt to change—acts as our internal compass so we can resourcefully navigate an upset.

When unexpected events turn life upside down, it’s the degree to which our resiliency comes into play that gives these “make-or-break” situations the opportunity for growth. The good news is that each of us has the capacity to reorganize our lives after a disruption and to achieve new levels of strength and meaningfulness. In fact, life disruptions are not necessarily a bad thing because they help us grow and meet future challenges in our lives.

It’s easy to feel vulnerable in the midst of chaos because of not knowing what lies ahead. But learning how to adapt during chaos strengthens your ability to meet stresses in the future. It’s a lot like a bone that was once fragile or broken, and is now strong from being used.

So how can you learn to become more resilient? Learning how to put closure to previous life experiences is often key for bouncing back. In addition, developing resilience depends on many factors. Let’s take a look at 7 key characteristics of people who demonstrate resilience during life’s curve balls.

A Sense of Hope and Trust in the World

Resilient people rely on their belief in the basic goodness of the world and trust that things will turn out all right in the end. This positive attitude allows them to weather times when everything seems bleak and to look for and accept the support that is out there. This approach toward the world gives them the ability to hope for a better future.

Interpreting Experiences in a New Light

The ability to look at a situation in a new way (a skill called “reframing”) can minimize the impact of a difficult situation. Resilient people take a creative approach toward solving a problem, and don’t always use an old definition for a new challenge.

A Meaningful System of Support

One of the best ways to endure a crisis is to have the support of another person who can listen and validate

your feelings. Knowing that others care and will come to your support lessens feeling isolated, especially when tackling a problem alone. It’s important to choose people you trust. Don’t be surprised if it takes several friends, each of whom can provide different kinds of support. Resilient people aren’t stoic loners. They know the value of expressing their fears and frustrations, as well as receiving support, coaching, or guidance from friends, family or a professional.

Mastery and Control Over Your Destiny

You may not be able to predict the future, but you can tackle a problem instead of feeling at the mercy of forces outside of your control. Resilient people know that ultimately their survival and the integrity of their life values depend on their ability to take action rather than remain passive. Tough times call for you

to tap into your own sense of personal responsibility.

Self-Reflection and Insight

Life’s experiences provide fertile ground for learning. Asking yourself questions that invite introspection can open a door to new understanding and appreciation of who you are and what you stand for. Giving voice to your thoughts and feelings can invite insight and help transform the meaning of a problem into something useful. Resilient people learn from life situations, and they do not succumb to punishing themselves because of decisions made in the past.

A Wide Range of Interests

People who show resilience in the face of adversity are those who have a diversity of interests in their lives. They’re open to new experiences and ideas. Because their lives are rich, they can use their variety of experiences to find relief from the single-mindedness and worry which often accompanies a crisis.

Sense of Humor

Have you ever had a wry laugh during a difficult situation? The ability to see the absurdity, irony, or genuine humor in a situation stimulates your sense of hope and possibility. Humor has both psychological and physical benefits in relieving stress because it encourages a swift change in your perception of your circumstances—and when your thoughts change, your mood follows. *



Learning to Pay Attention to "Red Flags"

Susan's partner is everything she's ever wanted in a relationship. He's funny, warm, a good listener and he puts her first. Sure, he also has a problem with his temper—but nobody's perfect, right? At least he's taking his anger out on the furniture and not on her, she reassures herself.

Tom has had a rough year. His mother died, leaving him with the care of his elderly father. He was promoted at his company, but the price tag was high: more stress with not much more pay. His teenage daughter has been angry and sullen, often coming home late at night. Tom thinks he can handle it all, but he's not sleeping well, and every so often, he finds himself shaking for no reason.

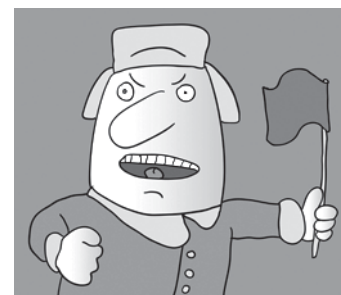
Red flags are waved in front of bulls to get their attention. We humans are equipped with our own red flags—and it's up to us to pay attention. Unfortunately, too often we ignore these early warning signs that something is wrong, and by the time we sit up and take notice, the problems have multiplied.

We've all experienced these

warning signs that something's not right in our lives. These are emergency "flares" set off by something deep and rich found in all of us—our intuition. If we learn to pay attention to this inner wisdom, we can gain extraordinary guidance, especially when it comes to our relationships.

"No matter how many facts we gather, if we cling to logic, we're using only a small percentage of our capacity to know," writes Penney Peirce in her book, *The Intuitive Way: The Definitive Guide to Increasing Your Awareness*. "Intuition, I'm convinced, is where the other 90 percent of our brainpower lies. Through intuition we get the big picture."

Most relationships—especially romantic ones—exist in a world of overpowering emotions and hidden expectations, many of them mysterious and unconscious. We want something so badly, we don't listen to our inner voice that tells us something is wrong. As well, we live in a culture that rewards facts and proof, and downplays what we cannot see or touch. But, like love



and faith, our intuition is something we all possess and can learn to use to make our lives richer and more satisfying.

"Intuition isn't mystical. It's a sort of background sense of how things should work," writes bestselling author Laura Day, who calls herself an "intuitive." In her books, *Practical Intuition* and *Dynamic Intuition: Creating a Joyous and Successful Life*, Day offers guidelines on ways to access this important faculty.

In the cases above, if Susan and Tom were listening to their intuition's red flags—rather than their fears—they would move quickly to deal with their problems before they got out of control. Like them, we can also tap into our intuition to help guide us in making healthy and effective decisions in relationships and life. *

Dr. Brad Brenner is a psychologist in private practice in Washington, DC. In addition to addressing general life concerns, such as anxiety, depression, relationships and stress, he specializes in work and career difficulties, bringing focus to an often overlooked aspect of building a thriving life. Dr. Brenner has published research in prestigious journals and continues to teach as an adjunct professor.

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