A better way to cope with grief.

By Giuliano Avella

After the passing of my father, I searched for videos and articles to help me get through my loss. I found somethings useful and other things counterproductive. Less than a year later I lost my brother-in-law. What I came to realize is that there is no magic bullet to take the pain away. There is, however, a better way to deal with death, and it took two tragedies in less than a year for me to realize that.

I have been able to combine the best tools from various authors and speakers that I've came across in my journey of grief, as well as the books I've read about various subjects, such as consciousness, spirituality, personal growth, mediation, philosophy, and other subjects that helped me cope with my new reality. This accumulated knowledge helped me to continue to live my life the way it was intended, regardless of tragedies that have been bestowed upon me.

Life is meant to be beautiful, regardless of the circumstances you find yourself in. Everyday truly is a gift. Regrettably, it sometimes takes a tragedy or loss to truly appreciate just how much of a gift it is.

The first days and weeks after loss

When someone you love first dies, the shock and the pain you'll feel is unavoidable. Accept this but remember that it's temporary. The best way I've found to immediately cope is to shorten your time frame. You must focus your attention on just what's in front of you; to just get through the day. You must focus on the daily tasks that must get done, which might be looking for a grave site or planning a funeral. You must try and do your best to stay present and only focus on what needs to be done in the coming hours, because there will be plenty of time after the funeral to sit with your grief. You must try and do your best to not analyze what happened, why it happened, and what's going to happen in the future. It's not about ignoring what happened, it's about maintaining the strength to get done what needs to be done in the present moment, and immediate future. Unfortunately, you learn that life doesn't pause because you've experienced a loss. Hopefully, you'll have people around you to assist with arrangements that need to be made, however, I've found that by being involved in the planning gives you a sense of purpose, which helps distract you from your pain.

I also found that being strong and dependable for my family helped me tremendously to get through the first couple of weeks. By picking yourself up and doing the necessary thing's, it not only helps those around you, but it also awakens the strength inside you that you never knew existed.

It's not about ignoring what happened, it's about dealing with it when you gain the mental fortitude to do so. Keeping yourself busy helps to distract you from the pain long enough to get through the first couple of days. Surrounding yourself with a good support group helps as well. Usually, people close to you will offer help in any way possible. Don't be too proud to accept help when it's offered to you in your time of need.

Acceptance and perspective

You must accept what happened, no matter how tragic or sudden the death may have been. Realize that you have, and never had any control over who lives or dies. The one thing you do have control over is how you perceive the events that occurred, and your emotional reaction to the events.

Although it may sound cold, having the perspective that you don't have control over certain things, and that everyone you know will die at some point, helps with the acceptance process. With death, Its never a matter of "if", but "when".

Something is good or bad only because of the label you append to it. Although losing someone close will always hurt, you can choose how negatively it affects you. If you change your perspective, such as looking for the good in the situation, it makes dealing with loss allot easier. It may sound strange to think anything good could come from death, but in my experience, my losses have given me a better outlook on life because of how I chose to look at it. It allowed me to ask better questions. Instead of asking "why did this have to happen to my family?", or stating things such as "it's not fair that my loved ones were taken from me", I instead try and say, "I'm lucky to have had them in my life for a short while, instead of not having them at all". The more you love someone, the more this rings true. If you had a strained relationship with your father, and he lived to be 100, wouldn't you prefer having a loving father that you had a beautiful relationship who lived to be 50? Basically, if you had a good relationship with the person who passed, focus on being grateful that you had them in your life for a short while, instead of not having them at all.

You begin to realize just how precious time really is. It's the most valuable commodity we have, that almost everyone takes for granted. If you truly mediate on this idea, you begin to realize that you should do your best to never waste even a moment.

The people you lost no longer have any time in the physical world, but you do. Therefore, it becomes imperative to utilize the remaining time you have left in the most productive way possible.

The present moment

Using the concept of the present moment is imperative to coping with grief in a productive way. If you truly live your life in the present moment as much as possible, then the events that occurred, or will occur, truly have no power over you. Since every moment is the present one, living with this mentality allows you to realize that life is meant to be lived moment to moment. If that's true, then technically, you can allow yourself to dissociate from your ego and the story of your life. When you live in the present, and just focus on what's happening in the present, every situation that occurred outside of the present makes no difference. If you're truly present on whatever you're doing, such as taking a walk, playing with your dog, enjoying a laugh with your friend, then what happened in the past doesn't affect the moment you're living. It is when you allow yourself to think of what you lost that brings you out of the moment. Since life is not promised, and we are always living in the present, then you must do your best to have as many good present moment experiences as possible. If you are playing fetch with your dog, and are truly focused on the experience, that experience would be the same whether your loved one was around or not. These moments are available to

us every day, so we must experience happiness in whatever way possible, as much as possible, throughout the day, every day.

Absolving yourself from guilt

We tend to feel guilty when we catch ourselves enjoying the moment. We say to ourselves that we shouldn't be happy because someone we love just died. In the Italian culture, women must wear black for a year. They are not allowed to attend any party's or events and are not allowed to express happiness of any kind. This is supposedly out of respect and honor for the dead, but it's a very flawed view on how to handle grief in my opinion.

By living in a manner where we purposefully avoid happiness and joy, we are dishonoring the person who is no longer alive. They cannot live their life any longer, and have ran out of time in this world, so by purposefully avoiding living life to its fullest, we dishonor them because they would be telling us not to waste any precious time. Every minute of life is a gift. If you spent a year consumed by grief, then you suddenly died, you would have wasted a year of your life. Since life is not promised, and any of us could die at any moment, what's the point of not living it to the fullest every moment that you are alive? Could you imagine how disappointed your loved ones would be if they knew you were wasting your most precious commodity, when they no longer have access to it?

The importance of language

The story we tell ourselves tends to dictate how we feel and live our life. If we tell ourselves that we are not happy, then we won't feel happy. The language we use has a way of changing our behaviors subconsciously. When people say to themselves "It never gets easier" you're telling yourself that the grief will stay with you for the rest of your life. This is the furthest thing from the truth because it can get easier if you tell yourself a different story. A better way to say it would be "although you never forget, it does gets easier to deal with, because you learn to grow around the grief".

If you feel depressed, and someone asks how you're feeling, by telling them how depressed you are, you are subconsciously reaffirming these negative feelings. A better way would be to say that you are not feeling too great, but that you know it will pass, and you will eventually feel better. This isn't to dismiss your feelings. You may very well feel depressed. But the more you tell yourself you are, and the more you verbalize this to other people, you're breathing life and energy into this negative emotion each time you repeat it out loud. This will hinder your progress in getting better. Tell yourself a different story that empowers you, instead of one that reaffirms your negative feelings.

You never truly get over what happens because you're not supposed to. What you're supposed to do is accept that grief

and loss just becomes a part of you, and you learn to grow around it and accept your new reality. Their memory will be with you for the rest of your life, and you learn to live with the reality that they are a part of you in a different way.

Don't play the victim

Everyone experiences loss. For every terrible situation you experience, there is someone who always has it worse than you. Every person will go through suffering at some point in their life. Suffering is inevitable. We make our suffering worse by not accepting it. We do this by playing the victim and saying things like "is not fair that this is happening to me!"

Therefore, it's important to bear your suffering, and to try and make your situation better, because you could always make it worse. If you play the victim, and allow yourself to get lost in grief, you have made your suffering worse instead of taking the steps to help yourself and those around you, which minimizes the suffering.

Gratitude

Thinking about what you're grateful for is one of the most transformative things you can do. When we spend time in gratitude, we immediately feel the benefits, and we can't help but to feel good when we experience grateful emotions. If you think hard enough, you can always find things to be grateful

for. Utilizing gratitude throughout the day will help put you in a better place mentally and can be used as a quick way to change your state anytime you're feeling down.

Your morning ritual:

The mornings are critical. How you start your day will usually dictate how the rest of it will go. If you could develop a positive morning routine, you'll have a much better chance of having a good day.

When you wake up feeling bad, you will most likely stay in bed and dwell on the negative thoughts running through your mind. If you don't break your negative thought patterns first thing in the morning, then these thoughts will compound, and carry throughout your day. When you're grieving, you'll have the tendency to not want to get out of bed. You'll continue to hit the snooze button, and dwell on the negative events that occurred, so that by the time you drag yourself out of bed, you'll feel miserable.

Every time you hit the snooze button you trick your body into thinking you're going back to sleep. When you finally get out of bed, your body thinks you began a new sleep cycle because you fell asleep for another 10 minutes. This causes what's called sleep inertia, which will make you feel groggy and have brain fog that could last for hours. On top of the negative effects of hitting the snooze button, you compound these effects with

negative thoughts as you lay in your bed in a half-asleep state. When you eventually get your day going, you feel hopeless and depressed; not wanting to face the day.

Try and keep your phone or alarm out of reach, so that you must jump out of bed to shut off the alarm.

If you're having trouble getting out of bed, try the 5 second rule. As soon as the alarm goes off, immediately count down from 5, so that when you get to 1, you jump out of bed before you have a chance to think of anything else. This method allows you to stop your brain from focusing on something negative, because you occupied it with a countdown, which interrupts your normal thought pattern.

Once you're out of bed, try moving your body around by either doing some light exercises, such as pushups, squats, jumping jacks or anything else to get your body in motion.

Once you've woken your body up, find a quiet place to sit, close your eyes and begin to focus on your breath for a few minutes. After a few minutes of focusing on your breath, try and think of at least 3-4 things that you're grateful for. The important part of this is not just say what your grateful for, but to truly mediate on what you are grateful for, and feel the emotions associated with them. Try and do this for at least 15 minutes. When you feel the emotions of gratitude, it is almost impossible not to smile.

Staring your day in this manner will help you be more successful in having a good day.

Having bad moments instead of bad days.

There will be times when your emotions overwhelm you. You can do your best to avoid thinking of things, but there will be moments when a thought pops up in your head that will instantly make you feel sad, or something you'll see will remind you of your loss. In the beginning, your loss will always be hovering in your mind. Try your best to keep your thoughts as surface level thoughts that pop up and try to avoid them from becoming deep level thoughts. If you completely ignored what happened, you will begin to experience what's called complicated grief. This is unhealthy because what happened must be dealt with, otherwise it will hit you very hard in the future. You must accept what happened, and as I said before, not completely ignore it, but deal with it when you have the mental fortitude to do so. When the moment of sadness pops up, allow yourself to feel the emotions. The key to this is to not let these emotions take over completely. This can be done by allowing yourself 5-10 minutes of feeling sad; to explore the thoughts you're feeling. Anything more than 10 minutes can turn into hours, which then could then ruin your entire day.

You cannot avoid bad moments, but you could, and should, avoid turning a bad moment into a bad day.

After you've allowed yourself to dwell on the feelings and thoughts of sadness for a short time, do your best to break the thought pattern by distracting yourself. This can be done by either busying yourself with an activity, or just putting all your focus on the present moment by analyzing your surroundings.

It could be difficult sometimes to think of a positive thought to distract you from your sadness, or to have an activity to immediately draw your attention to, but present moment awareness is always available to you.

When you're feeling anxious from your thoughts, a good exercise to practice is to turn your attention to your surroundings. Focus on the details of the items in front of you. For example, if you're in a room with a wooden floor, try and pay attention to all the details of the wood grain. Follow the patterns. Bring your full attention to what you're staring at. Do this until you feel the anxiety of your thoughts dissipate, then go about your day once the feeling has passed.

As more time progresses, and you become mentally stronger, it will be easier to think about what you've lost, and the thoughts will not become overwhelming. Once you've gained the metal

fortitude, you can then spend more than 10 minutes thinking about your loved one without it ruining your day.

Watch your thoughts

Always be diligent with monitoring your thoughts. Pay attention to what you're paying attention to. Try and watch your thoughts by taking a step back in your mind and pretend like your thoughts are a movie. If you feel anxious or sad in anyway, bring attention to what you're thinking about in that moment. If you're feeling sad, its most likely because you're thinking about the past, and if you're feeling anxious, then your thoughts are most likely in the future. Ask yourself the question "how is this thought serving me right now?" "Am I engaged in an activity that's actually requiring me to think about the past?" "Am I currently trying to plan my day, which would actually require me to think about the future?" Most of the times the answer to these questions are no. By just recognizing that you're having a thought breaks the unconscious thought pattern your having, which allows yourself to settle your mind and regulate your emotions.

Anytime you are lost in thought, you are allowing your mind to control and dictate how you are feeling. By paying attention to

your thoughts, you are not allowing your mind to control you; you are controlling your mind.

Don't invent memories that don't exist

After experiencing a loss, you will tend to imagine situations that could have been.

When you think back on memories with your loved ones, they could make you sad, but also happy because these events took place, and you can feel grateful to have experienced those events which created memories to cherish forever.

When you're engaging in something that you wish they were a part of, or you're imagining what it would be like if the person you lost was physically next to you in your present moment, then you will most likely only feel sadness. Inventing memories tend to make you feel sad, because they don't have the positive emotions associated with events that actual took place.

The best way to honor those that are no longer here

Think of the best qualities and virtues that your loved one possessed. The kind of qualities that you wish you could embody. Now do your best to try and incorporate these qualities into your life. Each time you embody their best qualities, you're giving your loved one a way to carry on in the present with you, through your virtuous actions in their name.

Always keep their memory alive by asking yourself, “am I honoring them by my actions?”.

As you go about your day, and a thought of them pops into your mind, allowing yourself to think the thought or memory, and feel the emotion associated with your thought in that moment is a way of honoring them. Smiling when thinking about a pleasant memory or just thinking about them in general in a positive way is honoring their memory. However, when that though begins to snowball, you owe it to them to cut the negative thought pattern for fear that it can ruin your day. The wasted day doesn’t honor their memory because they no longer have days to live, so you owe it to them to do your best not waste this gift that they no longer have.

Try not to spend time thinking of “what if’s” or inventing memories that did not exist, such as imagining them being at a current event, then feeling bad because reality sinks in. Remembering positive events that occurred, which make you smile, honors their memory because it’s making you happy, and at the end of the day, they would always want us to be happy

Try and do your best

Navigating through grief is never an easy thing, but you always have a choice on how hard you want to make it for yourself. At the end of the day, you must do your best to try and minimize your suffering, and the suffering of those around you. You

must do your best to not get consumed by your grief and make a sad situation that much worse. Of course, this is always going to be easier said than done. There is no magic bullet to take away the pain, and you will have your day's where you try your best to implement all your tools to cope, but still feel overwhelmed by grief. Just know that this is normal. You will have your bad moment's, but it's imperative to say to yourself that this moment will pass, and I will not let this bad moment turn into a bad day.

Lastly, try and live your life in a way that would make your loved ones proud. Live a life of integrity and live it for them, but more importantly, live a good life for yourself, because you only get one.