



Finding Healing after Trauma

by Dr. Nancy Reeves

After a tragedy, we may have a whole range of overwhelming feelings, such as panic, anger, helplessness, despair, horror and, in our pain, have many questions.

What is a trauma?

Loss occurs any time we feel restricted or diminished. Trauma is a loss that is outside our world view, an experience that brings up feelings of terror, horror and being out of control. An experience will be traumatic for us if it involves injury or death in ways that do not seem to be a natural part of living. Also, events that have a deep personal meaning for us or experiencing a number of losses may move us into feeling overwhelmed.

How do you react to trauma?

When we first are part of or hear about a tragedy, we will react in one of three ways. Most of us will become disoriented and confused and need others to provide support and guidance for a time. Some of us will become leaders "calm, cool and collected" helping ourselves and others. And then some of us will become hysterical and may even do something dangerous or unhelpful. We probably would all like to be in the leaders group and may feel ashamed or embarrassed if we are not. Why are we in the group we're in? There could be many reasons and we may never know for sure. We might be particularly stressed that day, or affected very strongly. We might be hysterical during one crisis and calm in another. It is important not to label ourselves as lacking because of our first reaction to trauma. In the days and weeks after the crisis, those who were confused can start to take charge and invite those who were the leaders to back off and let go into their feelings. Otherwise the leaders will start to 'burn out' as everyone always relies on them for support.

Questioning Beliefs

The way we heal our experience of loss is called the grieving process. The feelings and issues of grief help us to understand what the loss means to us and what we need to be healed. Because we don't just grieve for the fact of a loss, but for the meanings and implications of that loss, spiritual issues always arise in grief. It is normal and healthy to question and explore our beliefs. True beliefs will be strengthened by this process.

Beliefs that are not life-affirming can be changed. For example, we may hold beliefs like "Bad things don't happen to good people" or "A person of faith should be able to accept all loss without pain." In our grief, we come to realize how these beliefs are judgmental and restrict our healing.

Just as our interests, abilities and bodies change and mature during our lifetime, so do our beliefs. As a young child, we may believe "Love is all I need to make a relationship work.." As a teen, the belief changes to "Growing relationships need time, energy and qualities such as patience and compassion" If our earlier belief does not mature, difficulty in a relationship may trigger deep feelings of shame as we view ourselves as failures in love.

A conscious, examined spirituality will similarly mature as we live through life's ups and downs. It will then reflect our true values and provide solace.

Why does God allow pain and suffering?

Grievers frequently ask this question. Most faith traditions that speak of a Creator, describe that Being as loving and compassionate. God does not want us to suffer, yet the only way to prevent suffering is to intervene directly. This would destroy our free will and make us little more than puppets. There would always be the question of how much our lives were being controlled.

Birth and death, growth and decay, loss and gain, health and illness are all aspects of the life cycle. Hurricanes and droughts are consequences of natural forces, although with our human history of plundering the earth, we contribute to a number of "natural disasters."

My friend cannot take away my pain, but knowing he is willing to stand beside me in love and acceptance makes it easier for me to bear my burden. If we change our image of a punitive, judging God to one of a Friend who hurts with us and wants us to live happy, fulfilled lives, we can feel comfort and gain courage to meet life's losses.

Spiritual practices change

Spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, attending worship services, and reading inspirational texts may need to be changed during the grieving process. As our healing needs change some of these practices may take on more or less importance in our lives. Some grievers feel so vulnerable in public for a time, that attending group worship is a chore rather than a source of comfort.

Tim spoke to his minister about his discomfort in the large service. The pastor suggested a smaller prayer service during the week that became a lifeline for him. Marcie spent a few Sunday mornings walking in the woods. "hearing" God speak through nature. As the rain and her tears mingled she felt cleansed of some of her pain.

Some people find their usual way of praying or meditating suddenly feels 'dry' and God seems very far away. If we are open to God, we will often be guided to the type of prayer or meditation we need. Alexa, whose prayer had always been very structured and full of words found that she kept forgetting what she was saying. When she became more present to her experience, she realized sitting in silence gave the sense of being held in a loving Parent's arms. She didn't need to talk about her pain.

Some ways to help yourself and others

Have a range of self-care strategies. Since our whole being is affected by loss, it is important to have self-care strategies to help each part of us. No one way of support will fit all situations so having a number to draw on will be most effective.

- Physical -- When you feel disconnected from your body or when it feels stiff, weak or in pain, something physical is needed. Jogging, dance or some other type of aerobic exercise, massage, snuggling in bed with a hot water bottle, giving and receiving a hug, eating comfort food may help your body.
- Mental -- When your thoughts are spinning in circles or you want to think about something other than the trauma, the following may help: crossword or jigsaw puzzles, reading, doing a craft or watching television.
- Emotional -- When your heart feels broken, your emotions raw, you need help for your feelings. Talking to a trusted friend, journaling, listening to calming or stimulating music, walking in the woods are all ways that can nurture us emotionally.
- Spiritual -- When faith is shaken, when you feel disconnected from God, when you want to throw yourself into the love and peace of the divine, when questions about the meaning of life disturb, sustenance for your spirit is needed. Prayer, meditation, soul supporting music, attending worship or healing services or reading inspirational books may help.

Most strategies will overlap categories. To find the help you most need at any one time, open to your pain and ask yourself what you need to ease it. The message may come immediately or in a few minutes, so try to be patient.

Find a symbol. A symbol is an object, word, place vision etc. that stands for a meaning other than its obvious or usual one. As Christians, we may use thousands of words and still not describe all the meaning that two joined pieces of wood have for us. Also, symbols can change in meaning. Most times I associate a heart shape with love. If a relative is booked for open heart surgery though, the heart shape may speak to me of pain and worry.

Tara came to me for counseling and said her symbol for her grieving process was "beating my head against a brick wall!" We looked at how life-denying that image was, and how it caused her to retreat from her grief. Tara became open to looking for a new symbol. In our next session she said, "The grieving process is like a path through dark woods. The love and support of my family and friends, of God, and of my inner resources are like clothing that protects me from being hurt too deeply by the brambles, the stones and the cold. And I am moving towards the light."

Choose a symbol to help your grieving. It could be a color, a piece of clothing, an object you carry in your pocket or anything that will provide comfort.

Eliminate expensive emotions. During and after a trauma it is natural to feel a whole range of emotions, from sadness, to anger, to fear. We choose how to act on these emotions in either life-affirming or life-denying ways.. I define "expensive emotions" as those that cost a great deal in energy and time. They are life-denying and keep us from healing and growth. Common expensive emotions are: bitterness, envy, jealousy, shame, resentment, vengeance, guilt, despair and powerlessness. We may accept expensive emotions, such as vengeance because it seems to give us power when we are feeling so helpless. But its power is for violence of thought, word or action. It is important to stop others from hurting or otherwise abusing ourselves and others. This can be accomplished by promoting peace as a response to violence, setting limits and working for justice.

Make a difference. "But what can one person do?" God gives each of us gifts of talents and qualities that benefit ourselves and others. Using our gifts is like tossing a pebble into a pool of water. Although the pebble is small, the ripples it creates move out a great distance. By helping where we see an opportunity, we are acting in accordance with the divine urge for love, justice and healing. So even a small act such as saying hello to a Muslim woman in a store may help counteract all the expressions of hate she has endured from others and help build God's Kingdom.

Dr. Nancy Reeves is a clinical psychologist specializing in trauma, grief and loss. She has written "A Path Through Loss: A Guide to Writing Your Healing and Growth" and "I'd Say Yes God, If I Knew What You Wanted."

Copyright © 2001 by Dr. Nancy C. Reeves. Used by permission. To seek permission to reprint this article elsewhere, please contact Dr. Reeves by e-mail at treeves@acts.bc.ca.

<http://www.gbod.org/resources/finding-healing-after-trauma>



Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors.

The people of The United Methodist Church*