

Oh Just Get Over It! ...as if

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My work as a life transition coach brings me into regular contact with folks who are trying to get over something: the loss of a job, the death of a spouse, parent, child or pet, the end of a marriage, the end of a career, the realization that life has passed them by. It doesn't really matter what the precipitator of their deciding to seek out coaching is. What is the same for every one of them is that they are grieving the loss of something important and meaningful in their lives.

Some have been stuck in their grief for a very long time and no longer even recognize it as grief. All they know is that they feel incredible sadness, a sense of not being connected to anything and a deep shame that they haven't been able to get a grip, to buck up and get on with life. Many have been labeled as clinically depressed and told that they'll be on medication for the rest of their lives. Others are in the throes of the initial pain and anguish of their loss, filled with fear that if they engage the tidal waves of emotion that are moving through them they'll drown in them; paralyzed because they can't accept the pain of the loss and yet are unable to focus on anything other than their pain.

And these are the lucky ones, believe it or not. These are the brave folks who do face their situations, perhaps only a little bit at a time, but they do face them. Then there are the legions who crawl into the bottle, do a line of something, screw around, shop their brains out, overwork or engage the myriad other ways our culture has that help us numb the anguish of our lives.

One of the reasons that unresolved, unmetabolized grief is so rampant in our culture is that we have become afraid of grief because it can be such an intense experience. Grief invites intense responses in people who likely have previously been quite placid and 'together' in how they move through life. Those of us dealing with loss (and let's face it, who among us hasn't experienced some kind of loss in our lives) behave in ways that may seem irrational. We laugh too loud and often at the wrong things. We may take up swearing. We cry or become emotional at odd or 'inappropriate' things. We insist on talking about our emotions (or stubbornly refuse to even acknowledge that we have emotions) in all the wrong places, to all the wrong people, at all the wrong times. We frequently insist on talking incessantly about the person, job or pet we've lost. In short, we tend to behave in ways that make those around us feel uncomfortable. We seem irrational and unpredictable.

Our culture has pushed death into a little tiny corner of our lives and has developed a 'professional' approach to dealing with. Die in a hospital, have the undertaker take the

body away and make it pretty before we have to see it (if at all). Cry and carry on for 2 weeks and then get your act together and get on with life is pretty much how grieving is dealt with these days. If you can't get your act together after a few weeks, then you'd better get to the doctor and get something for it.

Yet we know from earlier times that it was assumed and accepted that grieving took a while. A hundred years ago we had formal mourning periods where you withdrew from actively participating in society for a lengthy period (1-3 years!) in order to process your grief. Because the Victorians believed wholeheartedly in maintaining emotional aloofness in all social encounters, you really needed to remain hidden while you were in an emotionally fragile state. But at least it was recognized that it took time!

In today's world, we still carry forward those old Victorian notions of insisting on the need for emotions to be processed alone and out of sight. But today we doubly punish those who are grieving by expecting that their grief will be processed in an awfully big hurry, as well as out of our line of sight.

I write this with a mixture of anger, sadness and respect for my dear friend Lisette who recently had to face the sudden death of her life partner. My anger comes from seeing how quickly it was suggested that she required anti-depressants in order to cope better with life. When, after a few short weeks of sleepless nights and days filled with tears and anguish, her doctor felt the best course of action was to deaden her pain and invite her to move through life numb from medication. No one apparently noticing that grieving is an awkward time for all, but that it must be gone through otherwise it is merely postponed until medication no longer dulls the pain of it.

My sadness comes from a first-hand awareness that I have so very little to offer to Lisette to ease the pain of her loss and help her make sense of this huge tragedy in her life. Having grieved the loss of a spouse, I am only too aware that all others can do is linger close by, waiting and being willing to be available in the occasional moments when the person lost in grief surfaces so that they can be nurtured and supported.

My respect is based in the courage that Lisette has shown to be willing to face her pain head on, to search in her own way for the meaning this experience carries for her, and to have found so soon in her journey an awareness that this experience includes a gift she wishes to share with others.

I wish I could say that Lisette is the only person in my life who is suffering in this way. But there is Laurie too, a woman whose long-time pet died an agonizingly slow, wasting death and who feels his loss as much as if it were a child she'd lost. There is Madeleine whose husband sustained a brain injury and who has lost her life's companion and acquired a young child in a grown man's body that she must now find a way to support. She is like another person I know, Bill, whose wife is also brain injured and who is grieving a kind of 'living death', one where the person he knew is gone while her body and some new person who doesn't really relate to him is left behind and must be cared for. And there is Elsie whose mother died in a horrendous accident.

I could cite a few more folks who are grieving major losses in their lives, but I think what feels most important about each of their experiences is their painful recognition that in our society there is almost no space, understanding or acceptance of the pain they are experiencing or the amount of time it will take them to move beyond the disruption loss has created in their lives.

As I've thought about each of these brave folks I've been reminded about why I do what I do. If my own experiences of loss can be harnessed in any way to help make their journey easier, I know that my investment of time and energy in coaching, facilitating workshops, writing articles and books is well worth it. When I have those moments of thinking what else I can 'do' to help, I realize that I don't have to 'do' anything. I just simply have to 'be': be willing to stay in touch, be willing to acknowledge their hurt and pain, be willing to know that just sitting with another person while they cry can be helpful. Mostly I know that if I can remember to not try to talk them out of anything, to not offer helpful suggestions or to issue endless platitudes then my very presence as a witness to their experience will be what will make a difference.

The gift that all these grieving people are to me is that they invite me to move away from seeing my value as based in something that I do and to rediscover that my real value, like yours, is that *I am*. My presence alone, my acceptance of my impotence, my recognition that there is absolutely nothing to be done, my willingness to simply "be" present to another human being who is suffering is what is most useful. And it is a reminder to me, like you, to move away from getting busy and simply being present. ...now there's something that seems to demand some getting over!

Gwen McCauley - coach, educator, writer and veteran of the 'employee to entrepreneur' transformation process, Gwen brings wit, wisdom and worldly experience to the process of self-discovery. Whether she is working with clients in a coaching or workshop setting, Gwen weaves practical approaches with provocative thinking for those exploring career or life transition, leadership potential, increased personal effectiveness or expanded creativity. Her qualifications include being a WEL-Systems® Educator, a certified CODE Model Coach™, and Quantum TLC™ Facilitator. Gwen holds a BA in Anthropology and an MA in Human Systems Intervention.

Gwen's first book *"The Alchemy of Energy – Exploring The CODE Model™"* was published in 2004. She co-authored "Sekhmet Rising: the restlessness of women's genius" in 2006 and is currently writing two more books: one for beginning artists and the other for new entrepreneurs.