

# Is Lingerin in Grief Right or Wrong?

By Nan Zastrow  
[Wings1@charter.net](mailto:Wings1@charter.net)

Karen's husband, Dan, died suddenly in an accident. They had only been married for a short time, and her dreams were shattered. She grieved inconsolably for over a year, but then family and friends began noticing a difference. Karen seemed to shed her gloom and actually began to live again. She confessed to friends that she would never forget her loving husband, but she didn't want to live in the shadow of grief any longer.

Dan's mother couldn't understand the change in Karen and, frankly, was very upset that Karen seemed able to find peace with her loss in such a short time. Wasn't the death of her husband so devastating that Karen would grieve for years? Why did Dan's mother find she couldn't put the loss of her son behind her as quickly as Karen had? The difference in their response to Dan's death was troubling, and it caused a very strained relationship between Karen and her mother-in-law. It became so troubling that Karen eventually moved to a different city.

In a similar situation, Tom was devastated by the death of his elderly mother from natural causes. Tom had provided caregiving for her for a number of years and over that time developed a deeper understanding of who she really was. Tom's siblings also grieved deeply for awhile, but then were able to move forward in their lives and talk about their mother through their memories and stories. Tom was upset with his siblings; to him, it seemed as though her passing was almost forgotten.

In each of these cases, individuals were responding to grief of the same person in different ways. Each griever seemed to feel that the other was grieving inappropriately.

Most of us are aware that individuals grieve uniquely and differently. We also realize that different factors may affect how we grieve, such as the relationship to the loss and the cause of death. But, even beyond these essential points of grief, there is something else we can observe. There are two ways of responding to each loss and grief experience in our lives. We may "Grieve and Go" or "Grieve and Grow," based on our personal experiences.

I wrote about this in my article, *Chasing the Shadow of Grief* in the April/May/June, 2012 issue of *Grief Digest*, and I received a lot of feedback concerning my thoughts that were based on my observations and the personal losses in my own life. While I've experienced six sudden deaths and numerous other deaths of close family and

friends, each of my responses to each grief situation was different.

## What makes the difference in how we grieve?

How could one grief experience bring me peace in months and another take years? When my mother died suddenly one week before the birth of my first child, I grieved hard, but within the month, I was able to function just fine. When my dad was accidentally run over by a motor vehicle driven by his brother-in-law, I protested against media coverage, but in a short time I was able to put the negativity behind and heal my pain. When my sister-in-law died of breast cancer at a young age, I carried her loss with me for many months, affected by the impact it had on my brother and his children. After my son died as a result of suicide in 1993, I am still grieving today.

The difference in response is an observation I've labeled "Grieve and Go" or "Grieve and Grow." It seems to sum up the dynamics I've seen from families in our support groups and our learning series. They are often faced with the similar dilemmas, and the question inevitably arises...which is right and which is wrong?

Moving forward or remaining suspended in good grief is neither right nor wrong. It just "is." It becomes what it is because of personal experience. How we grieve a loss is not necessarily defined by the circumstances of the death

## "Grieve and Go"

"Grieve and Go" grievers experience their loss emotionally and spiritually just like everyone else. However, they process their experience and then let go of the sorrow and pain more quickly than Grieve and Grow grievers. Thus the duration of observable grief symptoms typically has a shorter duration.

"Go" grievers more readily accept that death is a natural part of life and are grateful for the time they shared with the person who died. They capture their shared memories and experiences in their hearts and minds and can recall them with warmth whenever they wish. Their tears of





love and honor are for who that person was and what that person meant to them. They honor the lessons they have learned, and they will quickly give credit to their benefactor with pride. Sad memories or hurt feelings between them are forgiven and forgotten. “Go” grievors are okay with “going on,” moving forward, telling the stories, and taking their memories with them. Everything about their response is normal and natural.

My mother’s sudden death was a “grieve and go” experience. I was twenty-three when she died. I still remember and repeat her expressions such as, “If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.” I remember how she nurtured me through a life-threatening illness. I remember the baby sweaters and blankets she knitted for my firstborn, though she never got to know her. In honor of her life and death, I mention her name every New Year’s Day. I loved her dearly, and I grieved deeply, but I was able to go forward and take my memories with me. I revisit her connection to my heart on a regular basis.

#### **“Grieve and Grow”**

“Grieve and Grow” grievors may be impacted by death much harder and longer. For whatever reason, the experience has touched their lives in an extraordinary way. They aren’t about to let it go without gleaning every emotion and lesson possible as they search for the meaning behind the loss. This death is literally, life changing. Initially, it is not perceived as natural or normal. It may come with traumatic ramifications such as “senseless,” “justice needs to be served,” revenge, anger or hopelessness. It often speaks loudly with unanswerable questions such as, “Why?”

It sets in motion a period of intense sorrow, unbelievable pain, and maybe even a bit of darkness. It requires looking at the world differently and the feeling of being thrown into a place in the world that is suddenly much larger and

less safe than they ever imagined. It demands humility and “giving in” to their most vulnerable emotions. It creates tears and fears, and, sometimes, traveling into the bottomless pit of despair.

All this comes before the light at the end of the tunnel with the realization that death escapes no man. “Grow” grievers figure out that they can be who they want to be because of their experience. Then, the transformation of grief begins. Those who “grieve and grow” become challenged to make a difference. I’ve seen and read about those who adopt causes, champion survivors, create legacies, accomplish great feats through physical or mental challenges, and/or become successful in careers that require compassion, sensitivity and community.

These actions become their reality for as long as it is satisfying and necessary. Everything about their response is also normal and natural.

Grieve and Go...or Grieve and Grow? Neither response is right nor wrong, it’s just a *way of being* that evolves from experience. And this response may differ from one loss to another. Persons with either type of response begin to understand their journey. Both experience the process of “going through” and “letting go.” Both recall the highs and lows, bumps and valleys, triumphs and tragedies that led them through life. Each chooses his or her way to respond to a particular loss. No one can do their grief work for them.

My journey since 1993 and the death of my son, Chad, is definitely “Grieve and Grow.” I continue to learn and to understand myself and my place in the world more each day.

Both kinds of experiences have the ability to enlighten us in the paths we travel.

Loss makes us human and humble. We can have a spiritual experience, and we have the ability to choose the boundaries of that experience.

### **Enlisting Family and Friends to Understand**

If you are a “Grieve and Grow” person, how can you help your impatient family and friends accept your choice for the need to linger for a time in your grief?

1. Demonstrate that there is some forward movement by going to groups, seminars and other learning events.
2. Acknowledge their support, and explain that you want this death to be meaningful and purposeful in your life.
3. Explain your challenge or desire to make a difference, and describe how you might do that.
4. Enlist their support if you do take up a cause.

5. Show that you are healing, even though you grieve, through the new things that you choose to do that are not related to grief.
6. Participate in healing rituals or programs that give you a new perspective and new outlook on the process you are going through. Share your experiences with your family who care about you.
7. Allow your search for meaning to be a personal enlightenment for you that makes you open to possibilities.
8. Take time to talk to family and friends about the things that deeply hurt (your intimate pain) so they can understand why your response to grief has shaken your life. Most people cannot relate to what it is that hurts unless they have had a similar, life-challenging loss or experience. If they have, you can parallel your experience to theirs.
9. Let family and friends know that you don’t expect them to either enable your grief or trivialize your grief symptoms. You don’t want them to treat you as though you are a victim or a patient with a terminal disease. You want them to treat you as someone recovering from a toxic experience. This may take time and trust.
10. Journal your thoughts and discoveries. This will help you visualize how far you’ve come and confirm that you are not getting stuck.

When you finally come to the end of the road, and you feel satisfied that you did what you needed to do, accomplished the goals that you set, or found peace and meaning in your journey, look back with pride on the spiritual adventure you had. Count your blessings for the special person in your life who, through his or her death, allowed you to get a little glimpse of heaven. Give in to the positive changes in *you*. Grief can be a continuous path to healing.

*Note: “Grief and Go” and “Grieve and Grow” is an opinion and observation by Nan Zastrow. It is not supported by clinical research. Feedback is welcome! Wings1@charter.net*



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