

Lessons learned through grief

My dad had cancer when I was eighteen. I'm a few years older now, so I thought I would write a bit about my experience, in the hope that it might help you with what you're dealing with. I've had some time to put things into perspective now, but at the time I had no idea how to deal with the knowledge of my dad's illness. So, I've included some of my thoughts here that I hope you find useful.

Dan's story

When my parents sat me down to talk about my dad's cancer, they told me that it was likely terminal. The doctors estimated that he had another four or so months, which turned out to be pretty accurate. Even so, during my dad's treatment no one really acted like he was going to die. In that environment I could distance myself from the situation by focusing on school and my social life; so much so that it didn't sink in what it meant that my dad was in palliative care.

When my mom told me he had passed away I felt a slight shock, but it was fairly insubstantial compared to what I had gone through leading up to that point. Maybe the most distressing thing was how little I felt. I didn't know what to do; I went for a walk, met up with some friends, ate dinner. Soon, though, I discovered the strange, unpredictable process of grieving.

I struggled with the idea of him being gone permanently. Sometimes I would dream that his cancer was just a joke, and he was alive after all. I felt guilty for different reasons; it could be because I wasn't sad enough, or because I felt I was using my dad's death to get pity from my friends. Sometimes I just missed him. These feelings could come all at once, one at a time, or not at all. It became difficult to predict how I'd feel from one day to the next. There were times when trivial things got wrapped up in my grieving; I would become extremely anxious about school, or my social life. I got in the habit of stopping myself at these times and wondering "is this really about my dad's death?" And the answer was usually "yes".

There were some fleeting thoughts in my mind about how long I was 'supposed' to feel sad for, and when I could go back to being my normal self. For a while it felt appropriate to be sad, and I thought I should just let my feelings run their course. I got sick of that pretty quick, though, and then I just wanted to feel happy again. That's when I realized I didn't have as much of a choice as I thought; I began the uphill battle of overcoming my grief.

I tried many things to make myself feel better. When my mind would stray to thoughts about my dad I would say "stop", and try to change the subject. At other times I would vent my feelings physically; once I hit an old rotten fence behind my house with a baseball bat. I also partied with my friends (a little too much) as a way of distraction. With these methods I achieved varying amounts of success, but my relief was only ever temporary.

My advice is to be careful about the ways in which you cope. You might feel like shutting everything out by isolating yourself, or turning to alcohol or other drugs. Like the methods described above, these are only temporary solutions, and they have negative physical and mental effects that can make things worse. I believe the best way to overcome grief is through a process of self-reflection

and acceptance. This will take time, though, and you'll have to first understand that a period of pain is unavoidable. Just remember that you are your best friend in all of this; you are the only one who can figure out what it is that will help. At times like this, it's okay to be selfish and do what's in your best interest, so long as it puts you on the right track toward feeling better.

That doesn't mean you shouldn't try to be there for your family though. It can be hard to be supportive for your siblings or parents when you're going through so much yourself. Remember, though, that they're going through the same things you are. This goes both ways too; since you're there for them, allow yourself to use them for support. Don't try to spare them from your sadness, because they want to know how you feel. Next to yourself, your family members will be your best allies in getting through your grief.

The biggest question I had, and the one I want to answer for you, is "how long will this last?" My answer is that, for me, it never exactly went away; it just changed. The sadness faded, things felt normal again, and I became, for the most part, happy; yet even years later I would sometimes get upset. In fact, it wasn't until over a year after that I was really able to cry about it. You'll come to understand what it means for this person to be gone, and that will be difficult. There are experiences that my dad and I will never share, and there are many times since his death that I've wanted his guidance. There's nothing to do but continue on, and accept this as part of who you are, as a challenge you have to overcome.

As you grow older you'll realize that many people encounter tragedy at some point, and people differ in how well they navigate that tragedy. Some people let it define who they are for the rest of their lives. Understand that your loss might change you, and, rather than regret this, grow and draw strength from it. Take time to grieve, but always keep your own wellbeing ahead of you as a goal. Perhaps before you're ready, people will expect you to "move on", and your grief won't be an excuse not to perform well in school or be social. That first step toward going back to your regular self will probably seem scary, and you can't do it all at once, but little by little, you have to try. Your life has taken a different course than you thought it would; this is something that will always affect you. However, with a bit of time and perspective, things will get better.