

When Other People Think You Should Be Doing Better By Now

You do not owe someone continued suffering as evidence that you loved them well.



At first, people understand. They call. Bring food. Send cards. Ask how you are. They expect you to be distracted. Tired. Sad. They know birthdays and holidays may be difficult.

Then time passes. The calls become less frequent. Other people's lives return to normal. And eventually you may sense a subtle change. They are no longer asking how you are.

They are wondering why you aren't better.

Other People's Grief Clocks Often Run Faster

The person who died was part of your everyday life. For someone else, the death may have been an event. A significant event. A sad event. But still an event.

For you, the loss may have changed the structure of daily life. Who you talk to. Where you live. How you spend evenings. How holidays work. Who you are in the family. What you expected the future to contain.

Other people return to their lives. You are learning how to live in a life that changed.

Those are not the same task.

"It's Been a Year"

Or two years. Or five. Sometimes people say this directly. More often, the message arrives indirectly.

"Are you still going to grief group?" "Have you thought about dating?" "Don't you think she would want you to be happy?" "You need to get out more." "You can't dwell on it forever."

Perhaps the most impressive:

"You need to move on."

As though grief were an inconvenient houseguest who has somehow missed several increasingly obvious social cues. Time matters.

Grief changes over time.

But the calendar does not issue recovery deadlines.

People Often Want to Help

This is worth acknowledging. Not every awkward comment is cruel. Most people are uncomfortable watching someone they care about hurt. They want to do something. Fix something. Offer something. So they reach for



advice. Take a trip. Join a club. Stay busy. Get rid of the belongings. Keep the belongings. Date. Don't date yet. Move. Don't make any major decisions. Volunteer. Exercise. Get a hobby.

You may receive enough contradictory advice to realize that nobody actually has the official grief handbook.

Often what the person means is:

I wish I knew how to make this easier for you.

That intention can be loving. The advice can still be unhelpful.

Some People Need You to Be Better for Their Own Comfort

This happens too. Your grief may remind someone of mortality. Or of a loss they have never fully faced. Perhaps your sadness makes gatherings uncomfortable. Perhaps they miss the version of you who was more available to them. Perhaps they simply do not know how to remain present with something they cannot solve. Then your recovery can begin feeling urgent to them.

That urgency does not necessarily belong to you.

You are allowed to distinguish between:

I am concerned about how you are doing.

and:

I need you to stop making me aware that you are grieving.

They are not the same message.

Comparison Is Almost Never Helpful

Someone else lost her husband and was dating within a year. Someone's father died and she went back to work three days later. Your sister seems fine. Your brother doesn't talk about it. A friend lost both parents and "handled it beautifully."

None of this tells you how you should be grieving. Relationships differ. Circumstances differ. People differ. The loss of a ninety-five-year-old mother after a long decline is not the same experience as the sudden death of a forty-year-old spouse.

And even two people grieving the same person may experience the loss very differently.

Grief is not a competitive event.

There are no points for speed.

You May Begin Comparing Yourself to Yourself

This can be more subtle.

I was doing so well. Why am I crying again? I thought I was past this.

Perhaps you had several good weeks. Then something happened. A birthday. A song. A dream. A difficult day. Suddenly the grief feels close again.

That does not necessarily mean you have gone backward. Grief is not a staircase where every step must permanently place you higher than the one before. Sometimes something simply touches the loss.

And it hurts.

"Doing Better" Needs a Better Definition

If doing better means:

Never crying. Never missing them. Never feeling angry. Never being caught off guard by a memory. Never wishing they were still here.

Then perhaps doing better is not a particularly useful goal.

What if we asked different questions? Are you increasingly able to participate in your life? Can you experience something good without immediately feeling guilty? Are there moments when your attention belongs fully to what is happening now? Can you remember the person without every memory becoming unbearable? Can grief visit without taking over everything? Can you imagine things you still want?

These changes may be quieter than "moving on."

They may also tell us much more.

Pain Is Not Proof of Love



This can be difficult to recognize. If suffering begins to lessen, you may wonder whether you are leaving the person behind. Perhaps crying feels like connection.

Perhaps a painful anniversary reassures you:

See? They still matter.

Of course they matter. But pain does not have to keep proving it. You do not need to remain miserable in order to demonstrate that someone was important. Love existed before the death. It can continue having meaning even as the sharpest grief changes.

You do not owe someone continued suffering as evidence that you loved them well.

Nor Do You Have to Perform Recovery

There is another temptation. To make everyone comfortable.

Say:

"I'm doing great."

Smile. Stop mentioning the person. Avoid crying in public. Make sure nobody worries. Perhaps sometimes you genuinely do not want to talk about grief. That's different.

But you do not have to hide your actual experience simply because someone else thinks enough time has passed. Recovery does not need an audience. And it does not require applause.

You Can Become More Selective About Who Gets the Truth

Not everyone needs the complete answer to:

"How are you?"

Sometimes:

"I'm okay."

is enough.

There may be a few people with whom you can say:

"This week has been hard."

Or:

"I really miss her today."

Or:

"I'm actually doing well, and that feels strange."

Those relationships matter. People who do not rush you. Do not turn your grief into a problem to solve. Do not need you to reassure them. Do not compare. They simply allow what is true to be true. You do not need everyone to understand your grief.

But having someone who does can make the experience considerably less lonely.

There Is a Difference Between Grieving and Becoming Organized Around Grief

This distinction matters too. Respecting grief does not mean every pattern should continue indefinitely without examination. Sometimes loss gradually becomes the organizing center of life. Every invitation is declined. Every future plan feels disloyal. Every conversation returns to the death. Every source of pleasure produces guilt.

The world becomes smaller and smaller around the absence. If that is happening, noticing it is not betrayal. And it is not the same as accepting someone else's timetable.

The question is not:

Shouldn't I be over this by now?

A better question might be:

Is grief still making room for my life?

There is no predetermined date when the answer should change. But the question is worth asking.

You Are Allowed to Need Help

Sometimes time alone does not resolve what remains unfinished. There may be words that were never said.

Regrets. Anger. Guilt. Questions. Memories that continue to carry enormous emotional weight. Seeking help does not mean you have grieved incorrectly.



It does not mean you should have figured this out already. It means something remains worthy of attention. There is a difference between being pressured to “get over it” and choosing to work with grief because you want more freedom to participate in your life.

That choice belongs to you.

You Can Miss Someone and Still Be Well

Perhaps this is where other people's expectations and our own expectations both become confused. We imagine that wellness after loss means absence no longer hurts. But perhaps a person can be well and still occasionally cry. Be well and miss her mother. Be well and wish her husband were beside her. Be well and feel the anniversary approaching. Be well and have an afternoon when grief unexpectedly arrives.

A life does not have to become grief-free in order to become full again.

Your Life Can Grow Around What Remains

The person still matters. The relationship still matters. There may always be an empty place. But gradually, other things can begin occupying more space too. Relationships. Work. Curiosity. Pleasure. Responsibility. Rest. Plans. Ordinary days. Things you have not experienced yet.

The loss does not have to become smaller for your life to become larger. And perhaps that is a better measure than whether you are “over it.”

Not:

Does this still hurt?

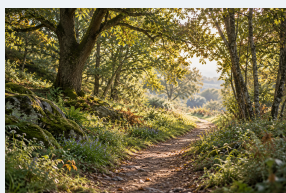
But:

How much life is becoming possible alongside what still hurts?

You do not have to recover on someone else's schedule. You do not have to remain in pain to prove the relationship mattered. You do not have to perform wellness. You can grieve honestly. Receive help when you want it. Let pain change when it changes. And continue becoming more available to the life that is still here.

You don't have to stop grieving in order to be living. And living does not mean you have stopped loving.

CONTINUE THE SERIES



Next: Who Are You When Someone Important to Your Life Is Gone?

Death can remove more than a person. It can also change a role you occupied for years: wife, daughter, sister, caregiver, best friend. Next, we'll look at what happens when part of your identity was formed in relationship to someone who is no longer here - and how to discover what remains without erasing who you were together.