

SOS Détresse

Grief after suicide

Gaining hope from this existential crisis and living a different life

In the morning they still said good-bye to each other with a smile. Together, they watched the children on their way to school. Then everybody went about his business. The wife concentrated on her work and, together with her colleagues, was happy about the completion of a project. Back home again, children and homework and small errands are waiting to be dealt with as usual. She prepares dinner and is looking forward to tell her husband about the successful day when the doorbell rings. On the threshold of her house a policeman tells her that her husband has been found dead.

The mother worries much about her youngest son. He has become more withdrawn, sees his friends less and makes a listless impression. There are always arguments between father and son. But he finds this quite normal and does not worry too much about his son. One evening the parents set off to see some friends. Hours later they come home delighted by the good conversations. In the son's room the light is still on. When the father opens the door he sees his son lying lifeless on the floor. The paramedics still want to help but all they can do is to pronounce him dead.

On the table is a letter, next to it a cell phone. The whole evening the husband has been waiting for it to ring. It is not the first time that he is sitting here between hope and worry. While he is waiting the details go through his mind of when his wife had tried to take her life: ambulance, psychiatry, improvement and hope to leave everything behind, depressions, over and over again. Then the phone flashes: "We have found your wife. We're sorry, we could not help her anymore. Please come."

For two years already after her husband's death the 75-year-old woman lives alone in the big house at the edge of the forest. She misses her husband very much and for quite some time, she has been severely physically limited. Without the help of others she cannot leave the house and she misses her extensive walks, visiting cultural events and her independence. At the beginning, after her husband's death, her daughter and her acquaintances still took care of her. This has strongly decreased. She cannot bear it anymore and decides to end her own life. The next morning the nurse finds her in the garden.

For a moment the world stands still - for the wife, the parents, the partner, for the close relatives of the lady living alone. Unable to think clearly, perhaps also petrified,

screaming, crying, angry and bewildered, this message leaves behind those concerned, perhaps also you. Shock and the sense of not being able and not wanting to understand sit deep. Your legs may feel like jelly, your heart will start racing or will seem to stand still, your hands are moist and cold, you feel breathless because you want this one sentence, this message to be unspoken, you want to turn back time.

Why?

From one moment to the other there are two realities: one external reality and the other, inner reality, which you can only perceive in yourself. The next hours and days pass like in a nightmare, and the question of the inconceivable remains: where is the person who was only just there a second ago, whom I have touched and felt? How could this have happened? What didn't I notice? Why did he / she do this? Maybe also, why couldn't I help? Why was I not there at that moment? Did I miss something at our last meeting that would have had to strike me?

You may be asking questions that will be going around in your head in the coming days, weeks, months or even years. Questions to which you will find no answer.

How can I say good-bye to something I do not want to let go of?

One day, two days, three days ago, I still saw him alive, I spoke to her, I saw her laugh - like a mantra these or perhaps similar phrases repeat themselves in your mind.

In the following days, incomprehension and varying emotional states alternate with organizational and official procedures. How is it possible to say farewell? How could unsaid things still be said? What could be the right setting for this?

The wife and her two children would each like to say goodbye, to her husband / to their father, and they write letters they put into the coffin. His wife expresses the desire to see her husband once more and to touch him.

To the father, whose son died, it is important to spend a long time beside the coffin in silent dialogue. The mother has decided that she wants to remember her son as he was when alive. Some of his friends come and give burial objects.

The husband chose the flowered dress that his wife liked to wear so much in her good phases. After the long years of living in darkness, it is important to him that her coffin is surrounded by everything that gives light and makes it beautiful.

The daughter takes leave by going deliberately through the garden her mother loved so much and picking flowers, which she lays on her coffin.

Taking leave of a person is something very individual and personal, even if your own private rituals and desires of saying goodbye may not be comprehensible to others,

even if they might not be fitting in the eyes of others, or you might be expected to act differently. It is right for you if it feels good for you.

You may be afraid to see the deceased again because you do not know what to expect. Perhaps a last look at the deceased may put into perspective the picture that you have imagined.

The husband has left his wife and the children a letter expressing his care. This will be a comfort for the family for the weeks after the passing. The wife is happy that she has touched her husband once more and so takes leave of him physically.

After the passing away, friends of her son bring photos by which were taken shortly before his death. For the parents these last pictures of their son are particularly important.

The husband finds a letter that his wife wrote. He is not yet able to open it and puts it aside for the time being. At the moment, he prefers going to a nice place where they often went together.

The daughter recalls conversations with her mother about death, but also about the fulfilled life that she has lived.

Looking back, you may find and reinterpret, as a mourner, farewell words and gestures that can give you comfort and support. Perhaps there are people who will tell you about their recent encounters with the deceased. This too could be supportive.

Then again, accusing suicide letters, words or unresolved conflicts from shortly before the suicide, can be very disturbing, confusing and furthermore put a strain on you. Maybe there is a way you can become sufficiently detached from this. It is possible to put away such a letter physically or mentally, in order to be able to deal with it bit by bit. However, only if you feel strong enough to do so.

Taboo suicide

Already shortly after the funeral service the wife experiences that neighbors and passersby in the small village avoid eye contact instead of greeting her. The parents of the deceased son are invited to a family party, but the death of their son is painfully avoided and omitted in the conversations. Some friends of the deceased cannot understand why the partner is so cheerful at the death of his wife and do not want to have anything to do with him anymore. In addition to her own reproaches, the daughter has to listen to accusations by the nursing service.

Suicide is often considered a social taboo subject. As a relative, you may have experienced that there is whispering, embarrassed looking away, ignoring, teasing in school, criticizing when a suicide “occurs”. The almost unbearable loss goes hand in hand with social shunning, which in some cases is difficult to bear for members of the family. This can lead to further grievances and thus cause additional suffering for those concerned. Often, the avoidance of the topic is also an expression of

helplessness, since people are uncertain and do not know how to behave toward you.

Perhaps you know these or similar thoughts towards mourners:

- *I'm scared of approaching the mourner. I see the pain, but I cannot handle it.*
- *I'm scared of saying something wrong. I am scared of the tears, the emotions I trigger by what I say.*
- *I have no understanding for what the person has done. I cannot show my compassion.*

Perhaps you, as a mourner, know about these or similar statements:

- *Someone is staring at me again. I do not support this.*
- *Can't you spare your compassion? It gets on my nerves.*
- *He ignores entirely what has happened. I find that very hurtful.*

These or similar feelings or thoughts can cause people to withdraw, misunderstandings to arise or contacts to be broken.

In these cases, it can be helpful to approach one another: for some, it can be easier knowing that helplessness is ok, and for the other that they can talk.

At this point, it is also a question of what can I expect from the other: what can I expect in my helplessness on the one hand and on the other in the grief, which is as it is. If this succeeds, it can be invigorating.

Perhaps you have also experienced that some people have been talking openly with you, have expressed their feelings and have thus supported you very much. Conversations can then be meaningful and far-reaching. Just as a farewell or funeral ceremony and the collective mourning with all its facets can be balm for your soul.

One thing unites you with all grievers: grief after suicide is above all about the grief for the deceased, the grief of the bereaved and not primarily about the manner of death[1].

Feelings of guilt and shame

Could I have prevented it? the wife asks herself over and over again. Would we have had to interpret the signs of our son's withdrawal differently from the start? Should it not have been obvious to me that my otherwise so attentive pupil no longer participated? What have I left untried? What have I failed to do? Should I have been more concerned about my mother?

And maybe also such questions as: did my upbringing lead to my child's suicide? Or: was an unresolved dispute with my partner the cause of his suicide? Did I let my mother feel that I considered her care to be a burden?

Furthermore, accusations can emerge and also be frightening in their force, like:

- *Didn't you think about me and the children when you did this?*
- *You make me impossible towards the other people around me. You drag me down!*
- *You've also destroyed my life!*

They may reach the point to make you feel ashamed and think negative about yourself. These comprehensible moments however can be one of many emotions on your way of mourning.

For weeks and months, perhaps even for years, the bereaved are tormented by these or similar questions. Reflecting on what they could have done differently, what part they might have in the death of the relative or who else might be guilty. It is possible that you can satisfy your need for explanations or give vent to it, so as not to explode in this overstrained situation. Or you find that you may be in a kind of inner bond with the deceased due to the feelings of guilt[2], in the sense of: "I am guilty for your death, and your death has destroyed my life."

It could feel like an inner court of justice where you judge culpability, over and over again. With no solution, no verdict, severe with yourself and with others, unable to free yourself. If this reinforces itself and becomes an integral part of your feelings and actions, it will permanently damage you. It is more helpful if you can replace guilt by responsibility: seeing your own part, but also leaving other parts of the responsibility to others.

In this phase, in which you are already thin-skinned and vulnerable, the feeling of not being able to manage anything that was so easy to deal with before, could also set in. To admit that part of your viability is lost. This could lead you to feel ashamed, to shut yourself off, to disengage from others.

After years of struggle, several suicide attempts, stays at psychiatric institutions, moments between hope and fear for a close person, one feels drained, at the limit of one's own strength! Therefore it is possible that after the suicide one feels relief and relaxation for the first time in a long while. Or one has thoughts like "finally it's over" or "I would not have managed that much longer." These thoughts and emotions may also cause embarrassment. As with other thoughts, it might be helpful to allow this to happen and to let it pass, without evaluating the words and running oneself down. This may be part of your grieving process, it may help you to know that you are not alone with this feeling!

And perhaps it is also helpful to create mental spaces free of guilt, shame and chastisement. Try to find a language that expresses what is important to you without being ashamed or feeling that you have to hide, for example, because you are not suitable and fitting as the one left behind, the survivor of loss. Or to regain trust that you are a valuable human being and recover your abilities as soon as the storm has somewhat subsided.

Anger

In the first few weeks, during which much had to be organized and settled, the wife

also often feels anger along with the question: how could he leave me alone with all this, just going away? She responds with anger and rebuff to her youngest child's question, of when the father will finally come back home. The daughter is silently mad at her mother, because she has no time for her.

The father gets angry at his wife because she can get back so quickly to business as usual. It is not proper wanting to clear out her son's room within a few weeks. At the moment, the mother is very angry at her son for having done this to her and can no longer bear to see his clothes, his room, as he has left it.

The man is furious at the accusations that his companion has formulated in her farewell letter. And in particular, as he did everything he could to help her.

Why did my mother hardly express her needs, the daughter wonders angrily. Yet she also feels anger at herself that she did not pay attention to the alarm signals and words of her mother shortly before her death and that she possibly misinterpreted them. At the same time she is ashamed of her anger.

Anger, like all other feelings, is also part of the mourning process. It is your feelings that no one can or has the right to deny you. Anger can be something very healthy and clarifying if you allow it to be. Like a thundery shower, it can help release pent up feelings.

Facets of mourning[3]

Mourning is your own personal, individual grief at every death or loss you grieve. No one can dictate you how this is to be done, or when mourning starts and stops again. Mourning has many facets. And it is your personal path of grief that you alone feel as you perceive it. This may include the following aspects:

- The pure survival in the face of the traumatic situation,
- accepting and understanding death,
- perceiving and expressing all contradictory feelings,
- adapting to the new events,
- remaining connected with the deceased.

Perhaps you know these or entirely different questions from your personal mourning process e.g.:

- How can I recognize my feelings and take them seriously?
- How do I deal with my own emotions and those of my children, who also mourn, albeit in a totally different way?
- How do I feel close to the deceased? What do I like sharing with him? How do I want to involve the deceased in my decisions?
- What rituals connecting me to the deceased do me good?

I too can't carry on any longer

You may be experiencing long periods of despair, helplessness and numbness. Or also the feeling of "how will I ever make it all by myself" and "would it not also perhaps be better if I were no longer there?" These are hard and exhausting moments that can plunge you into deep despair. And they can be part of your mourning process. In these moments, look for people and / or places that will do you good, look for everything that gives you a break. Maybe there is also something you yourself can give to others. Or something you can allow someone else to take care, to let you know "I'm there for you".

And perhaps it might be important for you to make use of a professional grief counselor, to change experiences in a self-help group, or to take advantage of other options such as a therapy, or taking a cure.

How can life continue to be lived - without...?

And then, after long months, the wife experienced the first morning not waking up and thinking about her husband.

The first day in a long time, when the father did not go to the son's room to open the blinds.

The moment when the husband can weep for his wife.

The first evening, when the daughter did not as usual run through the garden during a conversation with her mother.

It is at this point that you may have thought for the first time without remorse, of yourself, of your children, your friends and acquaintances with whom you have not been in touch for a long time.

You may be ready to see from a distance what has changed after death, what had to change, because nothing was as before. By assuming roles and tasks which the deceased had formerly assumed. By coping with everyday life in spite of all the gravity.

And you are proud of what you have done and how you have managed it. You did not succumb despite new tidal waves arising again and again.

First of all, it was the children who set up a corner for their father with pictures and photos. In the meantime, it is a ritual for everyone to think in their own way about the father and the husband.

The parents of the deceased son now invite their good friends and their son's friends to his birthday to share their memories. These are vibrant moments during which their son is very close to them.

The husband likes to go back to the place where they were frequently together. This

often helps him to think about important decisions which he formerly made with his wife.

The daughter has put together a memory box with her mother's favorites which she takes out from time to time when she misses her mother.

Perhaps it could also be helpful for you to gradually create a living, richly faceted life book with the memories of the deceased. With joyful and painful moments, funny and serious anecdotes, lovely occasions and memories.

It is a turning point that also allows you to let go and to take your own decisions. It is the moment when you give your life a new direction. And you decide when and how the deceased may continue to be present in everyday life. What at first seemed broken and insurmountable may be woven back into life^[4].

Once again knowing that your grief is a very personal path that you actively shape. A path nobody will dictate of how things should be now and in the future.

What may simultaneously be related to this is that you may no longer fit in your former social environment, that you are looking for a new professional challenge, that you have distanced yourself more from family members or that even friendships have (almost) broken up.

Grief as a personal maturation process

After some hesitation, the now single mother accepts the offer to switch to a workplace with a higher responsibility, were she can prove all her skills. She is very pleased about this appreciation and is proud of herself for having successfully mastered these hard times.

Even if is still painful for the couple whose son has died to see how their son's younger friends are growing up, they can live their daily lives and getting involved in a self-help group that helped them very much after the loss of their son.

It was not easy for the husband to deal with the loss, the worry and the accusations that his wife had addressed to him. Therapy and lots of time taken for himself have helped him. He is happy about his new relationship.

Perhaps you can also acknowledge that you and your family have surpassed yourselves. That family structures have changed and that clarifications may have resulted through this death. That you have noticed, which friends you could rely on. And that you can establish new contacts and relationships. That you have recognized resources that you have not known before, or which have developed in the crisis. That you know what you need to feel good and to set limits where you need them.

It is well possible that the challenging way you have walked makes you deal differently with questions about the meaning and the value of life. That you can see things in a different way than before. That some things you have much worried about may seem

futile. Or that you have become more relaxed.

It could be that you know better now than before what priorities you want to set in your life. And that you also find that you have “grown” with your grief, perhaps also feel an increase in strength and empathy for other people in situations of crisis.

Life may have again bright and sunny moments for you, without feeling guilty to live them. The deceased has found his place and fixed meaning in your life. Your view of yourself, your relationships and your environment have changed.

Your life is different, perhaps different from what you have ever imagined. But it is a life that provides new perspectives for you.

*Not getting tired
but holding out one's hand
gently,
to the miracle,
like to a bird.*

Hilde Domin

[1] According to Chris Paul

[2] quoted from: Und wenn niemand schuld wäre? Vom konstruktiven Umgang mit Schuldzuweisungen und Selbstvorwürfen, Chris Paul www.trauerinstitut.de (transl. And if no one were to blame? How to deal constructively with blame and self-recrimination, Chris Paul)

[3] term coined by Chris Paul

[4] Robert A. Neimeyer, Bereavement and the quest for meaning: rewriting stories of loss and grief