Dear Alice,

My father just died. I'm really depressed. I'm not looking for sympathy, so I haven't told any of my friends. I'm not on good terms with my family and that has made the situation all the more difficult. I feel like I need somebody to talk to, but I'm afraid to approach my friends. I know in situations like this people over-compensate by smothering the person with sympathy and attention. What I need is the exact opposite. I need to work this out on my own. Maybe someone that will be there when I want them to be. I'm not looking for the number of a hotline where I will just end up talking to a stranger. Nor do I want to talk to the counselors or any other strangers. You're the first person that I've said anything to about this. Who can I talk to about this?

Signed,
No where to go

Answer

Dear No where to go,

First off, what you’re going through and how you’re feeling is completely normal. That being said, everyone grieves for the loss of a loved one in a different way and on a different timetable. Along those lines, it seems that you’ve thought about what feels right for you. You mention that you want to work this out on your own, and there are definitely some self-care strategies you can employ to help you through this time. Additionally, you also mention that (while you want to deal with this loss on your own) you could potentially benefit from someone that will be there when you want them to be. While those two ideas may seem opposed to one another, it’s worth considering how you can guide your own healing process while also connecting with others how and when you feel you need it. This may be particularly crucial to consider, especially if, over time, you feel that you continue to feel depressed above and beyond typical feelings of grief.

As you continue to decide how to process your feelings and mourn in your own way, taking care of yourself: both your mind and body: can go a long way on the road to healing. Here are a few tips for prioritizing self-care during this time:

- It’s good to face your grief. Pushing away feelings of sadness can actually make the healing process longer. Acknowledging your pain can help you move forward. Doing so is critical, as unresolved grief may result in mental and physical health issues down the
You may benefit from finding an outlet for your feelings. This could take many forms, including journaling, scrapbooking pictures and mementos of your favorite memories, or even getting involved in a cause that was important to your father. Try to find what might work for you.

Prioritizing your physical health can help you through the process as well. When your body feels good, your mind may start to follow. You can do this by getting adequate sleep, managing your stress, eating nutritious foods, and being physically active. Along those lines, prioritizing your health may also include avoiding the use alcohol or drugs as a coping mechanism.

A few other self-care tips can help you bring in others, while you continue to make the choice to grieve as you see fit. First, if and when you do choose to talk to others about your feelings, don’t let anyone tell you how to feel – including yourself. There’s no right or wrong when it comes to your feelings about your loss. Being able to share your feelings without concern about embarrassment or being judged is critical to your healing process. Along those lines, you can also take the lead by identifying times and dates (e.g., holidays or your loved one’s birthday) that might evoke some strong feelings and memories for you. It could be helpful to talk to those around you prior to these events to let them know what they mean to you and to establish expectations. You can also talk with them about ways that they can support you that make you feel comfortable during those times.

Now that the subject has been broached about bringing in others, it’s critical to stress how beneficial the support of people in your social network can be for you as you heal. You mentioned your concern that people tend to overcompensate with their sympathy when this type of loss occurs. Could it be possible that the folks that you anticipate would respond in this way care about you, but just don’t know exactly what you need? It’s absolutely okay to be clear about what you need from your loved ones and to accept offers of support and help. This could just be asking for a shoulder to cry on or requesting assistance with any necessary arrangements connected with your loss. You can also choose who to reach out to and it can be anyone with whom you feel comfortable, such as friends, other family members, resident advisors (RAs), faculty members, or perhaps clergy members. Sometimes, it helps to talk to someone who’s been there – have any of your friends or a person you know lost a parent, or someone close to them? They might also be able to connect with you and understand what you’re going through.

No matter how you decide to process your grief, it’s worth repeating that there’s no one way to do it. Taking care of yourself and accepting the support of others, though, can really set the stage for healing as you move forward. This is also good to keep in mind because you mention feeling depressed. Though the experience of grief can have many of the same symptoms, they are not the same. If you find that your grief does not lessen with time, becomes more intense, or keeps you from day-to-day functioning, it may be time to talk with a mental health professional so that you can get back on track and continue to heal.
How long does mourning last? [4]
Father died, grief grows? How to cope? [5]
Family death five years ago [6]
Friend’s mother has cancer? What should I say or do? [7]
Relationship with a dying person? [8]
Talking about traumatic events [9]

Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [10]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [11]
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