

Some wisdom (hopefully) on life trauma and the loss of a person we love
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I believe in trauma theory. Trauma is defined as when something very bad happens, it is not your fault, and you had no control over the event or situation. In trauma, one's brain is flooded with fight or flight chemicals (cortisol and norepinephrine), and panic can ensue. If the trauma is severe and long lasting, the flood of chemicals changes the brain and makes the brain more susceptible to the effects of trauma. Brain scans can literally show the changes in the brain. When we say we are changed forever by a major loss, it can literally be true.

We know enough about trauma that we have solid information on patterns. First, when the loss occurs, it literally hurts. The body and brain reel from the flood of chemicals in the brain. This stimulation is constant, and most people think about their departed spouse or loved one every few seconds or minutes during waking hours. They often dream about their departed spouse or loved one at night.

In early weeks, constant triggering of trauma may occur. Well-meaning comments (for example, "He/she is in a better place"); repeated offers of help ("Call me if I can help"); shared self-help books; all can serve as triggers. Out of that triggering often comes crying, gasping, dizziness, muscle weakness and a feeling of being lost.

People who have lots of support from people who love them do the best during this time. People who handle this with resilience have connections to sources of inner strength – nature, music, prayer. These connections don't necessarily fix anything, but they may help add positive brain chemicals into the toxic trauma chemical mix. Literally, love helps. At my brother-in-law's funeral, my sister had a brother on either side of her; she has reported that this helped her a great deal.

In later months, when the brain is not constantly flooded by fight or flight chemicals, people may go 2 to 10 minutes in a row without thinking of their departed spouse. However, people in this time frame are still very susceptible to triggers. Seeing a certain picture, hearing a song, something someone says, a memory. This can create a situation where the brain is once again flooded in a burst, lasting 15 to 60 minutes, and the person is left shaky, and realizing that these triggers are no fun. This is a very vulnerable time and can be a dangerous time. Depression is often building during this time, as the person recognizes that the loss is permanent.

Humans naturally want to avoid pain. With the pain of trauma, this can lead to bad decisions such as dating too soon, substance abuse, bad business decisions, hasty relocation, and even rebound marriages (over 90% of re-marriages within 18 months of the loss of spouse fail), anything to mute the pain. Often, these behaviors do, in fact, mute the pain, but the decisions around them often lead to even more pain, and it is often replacing pain with pain. When I

have seen this occur over the years of being a psychologist or friend, I am saddened primarily because muting pain may stop the person from going into new levels of healing.

In the next stage, the triggers themselves became less potent. They still occur, but the brain no longer releases the major flood of toxic chemicals, just small amounts over 5 to 20 seconds. Eventually, in about 2 to 3 years post-loss, the brain begins to reframe the triggers into positive memories and recollections that can even make one smile. This is healing. Because it is either much less painful or may even cause positive remembrances, the person often goes longer and longer periods without thinking of the departed spouse. They don't forget them; they simply begin to have more peaceful times where other life happens. An example of this is when my mom Vivian died. At first, remembrances were often painful, but now over a decade later, I think about her fondly and with inner peace.

At this stage, the persons can make good decisions about having other people come into their lives; even though initially they could not imagine that happening, it really can occur. Persons who have experienced major loss can eventually shape their experience to be able to move on into a highly positive life. Trauma may happen, but our brains can adapt, we persevere, we live, and we can thrive.

End note. I believe we can train our brains to “get hooked” on positive brain chemicals and help ourselves heal from trauma, or simply have more joyful lives. Positive brain chemicals include dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin, and endorphins. An example of brain training is in one of my life beliefs, which is to actively notice moments of joy. In a true moment of joy, positive brain chemicals flood our brains.

For example, think about what happens in your brain when you see something you love to see, or smell a pleasant smell. My brother loves collectible older Ford Broncos. I guarantee when he sees one, a rush of excitement comes over his body. My sister feels this joy when she is at the ocean. My wife Janene, an artist, experiences this when she is in her studio completing a new print or painting. For me, I get that warm and positive sensation each time I take homemade bread out of the oven. I open the oven and the smell washes over me. In these joyful moments, we are experiencing positive brain chemicals. We can get good at noting these moments and increasing them.

Yesterday, a first moment of joy was when my dog, Joe, vocalized his good morning sounds at 5 am. The next was standing at the living room window and watching the sunrise. The next was making coffee for my wife, something she loves. By 9 a.m., I had clocked three moments of joy. Not bad!

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