

Helping People through Grief

Today's topic and we welcome you to our CLI course for pastoral practice, practical ministry, and this is particularly one put together by myself. I'm Pastor Ken Dignan and I also share as assistant pastor at Eagle Rock community church under the support assistant to Pastor Henry Reyenga who is also the president CLI which is a great online Bible college, university institute so to speak. So this is a course that's entitled Helping People through Grief. And it's a very important course to be able to walk people through it.

There are various types of grief and no one grieves that same way. Grief is a mysterious experience due to the fact of one doesn't know exactly how they will handle the grief until it comes. And when it comes, people say, "Well what is good about grief?" It is a healthy thing. It is a natural thing. It is a normal thing in life. Death hits every single person. Somebody says, what is a couple sure things in life? Well, the sure things in life will be death and taxes as much always here.

But obviously we can say as believers, there is heaven. A Heaven to gain and a hell to shun. But we want to help people to overcome grief and to deal with pain and the hurt of loss and the hurt of separation. One other course in this particular series for CLI deals with survivors of suicide. That's a unique grief in itself, that I myself have been leading and directing a suicide support group called SOS, survivors of the suicide support group. My wife and I have been dealing with that. We have met monthly, bimonthly, many different times. But regularly, it's been recently, the third Friday of the month at Eagle Rock community church.

We've been ministering to and helping. I think through when we started it four years or so, since then, we've ministered to over fifty-five families in the Southwestern suburbs of Chicago. And people have come from many different walks of life who have lost someone in their family to suicide. It's a very powerful support group but a very needed support group that we would like to encourage many of you pastors to get involved in.

But today's going to cover the whole topic of grief through whether death from cancer or an accident or old age or many other kind of complications that can come. So this is a general teaching on helping people through grief. Your notes ready? Let's prepare to take off for our flight. We'll be in air five, four, three, two, and one. Okay. Our mission is to normalize grief in our society and to create resilient communities. That's our goal with any type of grief. And this is a particular understanding of what's been called good grief. And that's the kind of what I studied under and what I believe is very helpful where children coping with loss growing up emotionally health and able to lead meaningful and productive lives.

This is done through a one year round peer group support center and educational workshops that are available for churches to use and for you as pastor to study and to get a hold of. And that is really a helpful thing. What I believe that grief is a natural reaction to loss. And that we all have that within us that natural capacity to heal after a loss. And the duration and intensity of that grief are unique to each

individual which is understandable. We have to have caring and acceptance and they both assist us. Caring and acceptance assist us in both the grieving and the healing process. So as you understand that, you want to get that caring in your heart.

When you minister to somebody, you just don't want to fake it or put it on or act like this what you're called to do as a pastor so you're just doing it like perfunctory with all your heart. You've got to have that caring spirit and you have to have that acceptance in your attitude as you accept them where they are. And in your practice as a minister and in your ministry, you need to accept and affirm all of the person's feelings in your support circle whether you're doing pastoral counseling one on one in your office or you're having a support group that would be involved with good grief, the circle of grief or whatever.

As you provide the caring support and serve as companions on each of the individuals unique journeys through their loss, you want to be an empathetic listener and a compassionate witness. You want to witness with your heart and your eyes and your ears. Put yourself into it. Be there with them and be prepared to minister to them. We believe, and you should believe, every person has the right to be heard and understood. So say, no feelings are wrong feelings so to speak. There can be feelings that are not helpful, but we're not going to say that it's wrong because it's you. Whatever you're going through is important to you.

As that has been said, there's no such things as a bad question because if it's a question to you, it's important. So you want to gather in your meeting or your church to reach out to people who've lost someone you want to consider that a grieving community. So if the community is grieving, the Bible says that if one member suffers, they all suffer. And you want to honor each others' stories because each person's story is important. And you want to hold on to hope in that presence of suffering.

So that's important that, that would be a part of your ministry, a part of your practice that you would care for yourselves, those around you, those in your group, those in your church and those who come to you for at your church, in a compassionate, understanding way so that you might do the same for others. Jesus did tell us that we should do unto others as you'd want them and hope them to do to you.

Now, back in 2004, there was a woman named Mary Robinson and she put together a core ministry called Good Grief. And there's some writings on it and they used that many different churches to help train people and to help teach people. It's kind of like a foundational understanding and a foundational outreach. Even as Elizabeth Kubler-Ross wrote the book *The Five Stages of Grief* which has been a classic. This is a classic take off from those five stages of grief to make it understood that it's good grief.

And she's founded that in 2004 with helping sixty people, children, I don't know it's mixed, get together and get some help. They came to a course that was taught for three straight days to help develop this ministry for their future vision of a world where they could help children and adults. People get the care and support they needed when they had lost a loved one especially children. And it was born in her heart.

Thirty years prior to that, even when she as a fourteen year old daughter, the girl lost her father. And when her father died, a women friend of their family gave her a little note. And I want to read that note to you that's really ministered to her and really touch her as me as I read the note again too. And it said that:

Dear Mary,

I'm sorry for your great loss. I always think of you. Unhappy times are the hardest for young people to bear. But I think that they have a way of making one grow up with a lot more compassion. The thing that helps me feel better when I'm sad is to think that nothing, feelings or situations, good or bad, lasts forever. That's a good truth. That nothing will last forever and negative things don't have to last forever. Take care.

Sincerely

And she gave her name. So it helped her and she put this into practice in her own heart to think that nothing of these bad feelings you're feeling right now lasts forever. So that really helped her. And she was on this. "This was the only sympathy card I received from an adult for my father's death." But she said, "It is the only one I kept." And it's yellowed and well-read. She says, "I held on to it like a lifeline" for it gave her hope for something good could come out of this incomprehensible and painful experience.

Years later when she heard that this woman who gave her the note was in a coma and dying of cancer herself, she gave this copy of this note to her daughter who was maintaining a bedside vigil for this woman and she said, her mother could not speak but Karen, who was the founder of this. She said this, "You should be able to hear your mother's voice in compassion through this note that she wrote to me twenty years ago to comfort me," she said. So it became a comfort to this young daughter enough for her mother.

And that's kind of a very important thing that can happen. How a powerful simple act by an adult can be an example in a ministry and a life-changing experience in a child in grief. It's like a ripple effect. And your loss matters and your sadness won't last forever. Two very important concepts and two important keys to remember. Your loss matters and your sadness won't last forever. We discover that when we deal with people who have lost a loved one to suicide.

It has a very unique grief that is involved in recovering that because one can always say, "If only" or "Why does it have to happen" or "Why couldn't I have seen it going, happening this way? What kept my eye on it closed or why couldn't have I done this so they wouldn't have taken life and they didn't have to die. And why did they die?" And the anger that they died. "Didn't they love me? Didn't they know all this would hurt me?" Then you deal with all these different emotions. It's just a large plethora of emotions and feelings that can happen.

So it's important to understand that there are different truths that we read about what's grief and that grieving children need to have different messages sent to them from adults. I know that parents,

teachers, and adults often ask me, "Pastor, what shall I say or what shall I do when we see a child who has lost a significant adult in their life?" whether a parent or a teacher, relative, grandma, grandpa, whatever. "What do I say who to a child has experienced the painful loss of death and separation? And how do I show them love?"

You've got to show them love. You've got to give them time. You've have to give them your attention. Look them in the eye. Be very reassuring with them and give them your optimism that they will get through this. Reassuring them constantly, you're going to be okay. And say "Follow me. I'll lead the way with you. I'll be with you. And. I'll show you what you need day by day, little by little." And let them know that you're just going to help them for just a day or two after the death or at the wake or the funeral and never talk to them and we see them again. Become a part of their lives so that they can have someone that they walk with through their time of grief.

This woman Karen who founded the Good Grief ministry or outreach, she said "The day my father died, I was shopping for a get-well for him with two of my friends. Though I have been told by my mother that it would take a miracle for daddy to come home from the hospital, I never doubted I would get that miracle. Until recently," she said, "I thought of this as an example of being in denial. But as my mother's sense pointed out, it was also an example of hope of all our hopes that daddy would come home. And with our hope, none of us could go on in the face of world's sufferings."

So you need to have hope. Now if they don't come home, and they don't get out of the hospital or if they don't recover, they do can come home to the Lord or to Heaven. So as a believer and a Christian, as a spiritual-minded person, you can look at this in a much different way. So you have more hope. She goes on to encourage adults. I do on a regular basis myself. And it's your job to help younger people or children navigate life's painful losses and to create loving, supportive communities in which children can mourn their losses in healthy ways. And that was Mary Robinson's goal with the organization called Good Grief. They developed that network for these truths to be lived out. And it has been a very effective way for them to do that.

Now in the Bible in 1 Peter 4:1, there's a scripture that says, "Think of your sufferings as a weaning from that old sinful habit of always expecting to get your own way." But that's an important scripture. Suffering kind of weans us off of the sinful nature that keeps thinking that we've got our own way. This is not right. Shouldn't have happened. I'm angry. I've got to take it out on somebody. Somebody's got to pay for it. Even if you think God did it you, you get mad at God and you want to curse God and die. Just like Job's wife said, "Why don't you curse God and die then?" People can really go through those deep, and intense feelings.

But 1 Peter told us there, suffering's an opportunity to help us get weaned or taken away from all old sinful habit. That's a bad habit. You always expect that you're going to get your own way. In life, suffering shows you you don't get your own way. And you better get used to it. Because the more and more times you don't get what you want. There's an old rock and roll song by the Rolling Stones and it says, "You can't always get what you want." And that's what life's all about. You can rarely get what you

want. You've got that accept that. If you don't, it's going to be a lot harder when you experience a death of a loved one there.

I remember that's the country song. "I beg your pardon I never promised you a rose garden. Along with sunshine, there's got to come a little rain sometime." Now, there's times when Jesus picks up a trusted six strings, and so to speak and belts that song out from the clouds of glory. And that's what we can understand. There's a lot of Christians who'd think they got to be a naming, claiming, gabbing, grabbing Christian. But you've got to be careful of that. And you can say, "hallelujah" which means praise the Lord when things are going great. That's something else.

You can always just say "Oh praise the Lord" when things are going good. Because more times things go not so good, as they go good. You have more problems, challenges, bad things happen to you in life than good things. Now truly in a way, unless you look at all the bad things, that's how good can come out of it. But you're going to have a lot more downs and ups in life so to speak. You're going to have a lot more days when you're going to be riding high in emotion. Everything's going great. Fantastic. Wonderful. You're going to have a lot more trials and testings than you're going to have blessings and great experiences.

So enjoy those times when there's a blessing. Enjoy those great, unbelievable, euphoric feelings because those are sometimes feelings far between in life. You're not always going to have the stock market up. You're not going to always buy a lottery ticket. It's not going to be times of increasing in joy every single day. There's not going to be blessings abounding in every part of life. No problems, no worries, no setbacks, no struggles, no grief. Nah, it's going to be there. To God be the glory that in the highest returns on your investments, they're going to be in Heaven, not here on this Earth. So now you can understand that.

Jesus said in John 16:33, "In the world, you will have tribulation." In the world, you will have trouble. But He also said, "Be of good cheer that I have overcome the world." So He said in the world you're going to have a lot of trouble. So sometimes, the Lord did say though that "I'll be with you through it." The book of Psalms has many scriptures that say, "I won't keep you from trouble. I won't stop trouble from happening to you." But He doesn't say that it's not going to happen. In other words, you can expect trouble but be of good cheer. Hold on, understand that He says, "Be of good cheer, I will be with you."

So the key is realizing that He's there when you're not feeling good. When a little baby's got a fever or they're sick, who does the baby want by him? Mommy. My grand daughter, I don't care how cool I could be as a pop or as papa or grandpa, I don't care how good my wife can be as mimi or grandma. When our grand daughter is two and a half year old and sick, she doesn't want to have anything to do with us, but if mommy's there, she'll be okay. Now, when mommy walks in the door, she goes right to her and she holds her and she'll play squeeze to each other. The presence of the mommy gives the baby or the child that feeling "It's going to be okay."

"In the world, you will have tribulation but be of good cheer. I am with you. I will stay with you. I will be with you. I will come again to be with you," Jesus says. So, sometimes as the Lord opens the back

door on your happiest days and all sorts of things that are going wrong. And it's at that moment that we discover where our faith and our affections really stand. Sometimes, grief is a good thing. And it's genius of the good grief that is that. It trims away the fat and the fluff, pretentious and superficial living. We become more able to live on our days free to pursue what God wants instead of being tyrannized by what we thought that we wanted.

So what are the stages of grief? Here they are. There are five stage of grief. And if we get stuck and in one stage or the other, the process of grieving is not complete and cannot be complete. So thus there will be no healing. And there won't be stages of survival or healing. A person must go through all five stages and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross who put these together, that it will be... You've got to go through them all in order to experience the proper healing process. How long it takes? What it takes in the process of it? That's up to each person. But they must go through the five stages to be well to heal again.

Not everyone goes through the stages at the same time. It's different for each person. You can't force a person through each stage. They have to go through it at their own pace. And you miss one step forward, and that's two steps backward maybe in this experience. But it's all part of the process. I keep reminding people of that in our SOS ministry. And individual, each person, it's all part of that process. But as stressed, all five stages must be completed for healing to occur. So don't forget that. All five stages.

Stage number one is called denial. This thing can't be happening to me. You're looking for your spouse in familiar places. And in death there, you might still be setting the table for the person. Or right thing as if they're still living here. Maybe they're on vacation, you're thinking into your mind. One woman in our SOS the other day told us, "I still keep thinking that my son who died from suicide is just on vacation. Now, I'm expecting him to come back from vacation any day now." They hadn't brought themselves yet to even work through the idea that their son died and that he is no longer here in this Earth.

So she says, "I'm not ready for that." She's blanking it all, blanking it all as much as she can out of her mind. Not crying, so to speak. Not even accepting or even acknowledging the loss. That's denial. So you've got to get over that experience of denying that it actually happened. Some people can have a brain shock and almost get an amnesia. And just right now, amnesia of the fact that their loved one died and just not even be able to do that in their brain. They can't even accept it. So that's very dangerous though. Now, that could hinder you from being in reality.

Stage number two or like they say they don't have to sequential here. But another part of the five stages. One stage in these five is anger. When it happens, before, middle or after, all three parts or all five stages have a little bit of anger in it, I don't know. But we go into the why me? I'm very upset. You want to fight back or get even with someone. Some of you may have offended your loved one or maybe you could've even had a harsh thing to do or say before or after the death.

There's a lot of anger there. And you want to get even with the spouse of divorce for death, anger at the deceased. Blaming them for leaving. Anger with a doctor, anger with a medication, anger with someone who didn't do more, anger at God, anger at life, anger at the devil. Anger, anger, anger, anger.

And a lot of people are still filled with anger. Let go of it. Get over it or you're going to be in big trouble. So watch out for the devastation of anger.

Watch out for the devastation of bargaining. Bargaining often takes place before the loss. They make deals when the spouse is leaving or attempting to make deals with God to stop or change the loss. Begging, wishing, praying for them to come back or not being in the place that they're at. So you're kind of going through the time of bargaining. You know, what can I do you?

People will go to the wake or the funeral and watch the coffin and expect like a Bible time miracle when God was actually in the Earth personally and in person with Jesus. Five great miracles happened then so to speak. We look at the casket and want the body to come right and sit up on the casket. And its bargain, the whole wake and the whole funeral. That's a challenging thing. To have to live and thinking you have to keep bargaining to get your loved one back. It won't happen. You have to go on accepting but bargaining's part of the process.

Depression, this is the big one. And this one can last for a long time. And it can be sporadically filled in and out of your life if you don't get the proper help you need. And if you get involved in this, it brings out a chemical unbalanced and it can really affect you. And they can go to mood disorders. So there will be overwhelming feelings of hopelessness and frustration and bitterness and self-pity and mourning, loss of the person as well as the hopes and dreams and plans for the future. You'll feel a lack of control. You'll feel, lots of times, numbness. You'll sometimes feel suicidal.

We experienced this in our survivor suicide support group recently where a mother lost her twenty year old son. It was a very tragic suicide and had showed up for a long time and had his parents went through and he had problems of his own and difficulties and struggles with depressions. Sadly enough, jumped off a tall building in downtown Chicago and The Tribune got a hold of that and it had a bit a lot of people who saw it happened and there was really death defining for them to see the remains of someone who jumped off a tall building.

The Tribune really hurt her because it just talked about the grotesque, sickening experience of people who were on the ground and who saw the aftermath of this death of this loved one and their own personal struggles they've had. A lot of bad things that were written in the article that really offended his mother. And his mother just couldn't get over it anyway that their child would have to die from that kind of a gruesome death.

So she was just not well. And we tried to get her. We have a faith based organization ministry called SOS, survivors of suicide support group. But I realized as a pastor and as professional that there are times when someone might need definitely a doctor, a medical doctor and a psychological doctor or a psychiatrist. A psychologist is someone who can treat through counseling and therapy and but they're not able to give medicines or to see how medicine can help someone in their mental, emotional problems in their state of their mind. But psychiatrists can do that. They're medical doctors plus a psychologist together. But either a psychologist can just either counsel you and can help you but can know what drug you need but they can't write you drug prescription so to speak. But be careful of

depression. It's dangerous and it can become something that could really affect your life in a negative way.

And the last portion of grief, the last stage that people go through is acceptance. This would have to be the last one, the one that you can maintain. And there's a difference between resignation and acceptance. You have to accept the loss, not just to try to bury it quietly. You must have a realization that it takes two to break a marriage. So in death it is very important to realize that the person is gone. And death is not their fault. They didn't leave you on purpose.

Even in the case of suicide, we see that often as the deceased person is not in their right mind at the time that they took their own life. They weren't in the right frame of mind at all. And it's a healthy process to accept and look for the good that can come out of pain of loss. And in turn, to find comfort and healing, that's your goal and in turn towards personal growth. Work hard at focusing on fond memories of that person regularly. That's what I tell people when we meet together every month.

You've got to work hard at focusing on fond memories of the person regularly. Always think about the fun times, the good times, the fun things you love about your partner or friend or best friend or brother, sister, mother, father, grandmother, aunt, uncle, grandfather, co-worker or just a friend. So it's important for you to be able to do that and I know you can. And I trust that you as a minister can learn through this experience here.

You can have a long term ministry in this. Help people get the help and encourage them that you will get help, you will survive, you will heal. Even if you can't believe that right now, just know that in time, you will be better. It will get better. To feel the pain after loss is normal. It proves you're alive. It proves you're human. But we can't stop. You can't stop living. You have to become stronger and not shutting off your feelings for the hope of one day finding healing and finding joy. You will. You will have love and you will have peace or happiness again.

That's what you want to do. You want to help others through something that you've experienced personally. It's a wonderful way to facilitate your healing and bring good out of something tragic. There is always such thing as good grief. And, a lot of different things will happen. It takes time. Some can make great progress quickly. They take up the ability to see the good that can come out of it. Others, it takes, I've seen years and years and years. Some have gone for a really long time. And still others are even five to ten to fifteen years afterward the loss of a loved one, they just still can't get over with. And it's very troublesome. So you can help them with these five stages of grief and do whatever process it take.

So please experience this in your ministry. Be open to the Lord. Realize that God is with you and the Shepherd of your souls is there. Get into the scriptures and be a support for those around you. God bless you and thank you for being a part of this class. I'm again Pastor Ken Dignan and be sure to get your assignments completed and continue to grow in your ministry and in your calling and desire to become a stronger Christian. God bless you. And thanks again.