

Navigating Loss with Honesty

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Soon after my daughter's birth, one of my friends remarked, "You start letting your kids go as soon as they are born." I didn't understand it at the time, but after watching my little one take her first steps, use her own spoon, and excitedly venture off to daycare, I'm becoming aware that the more she is able to do, the less she needs me to do for her. This brings a confusing mix of celebration and sadness as I learn to let go of how things had been in order to be available to her in the present.

Over the last few weeks, I have watched a dear friend of mine experience a painful progression towards the end of his life caused by the cancer that lives in his bones. Although his spirit and faith remain strong, we both know that there will come a time to say goodbye. Once again, I have been reminded of how hard it is to accept change and the associated feelings of loss as they both cause me to reevaluate my expectations of how tomorrow should unfold.

Loss comes to us in many forms and at different seasons of our lives: the loss of a loved one, an unexpected layoff at work, a startling diagnosis, the end of a marriage, or even the death of a much loved pet. Each time we transition from one reality into another, it is perfectly natural – and ultimately healing – to acknowledge and experience the emotions associated with the loss of how things used to be.

Losses and grief can impact our moods, our sleep, our ability to concentrate. They can change our appetite, our sexual interest and performance, and our sense of safety and self-confidence. Losses can cause us to question beliefs we once held confident truths. Loss can leave us confused about who we are and how we fit into the world around us. And because the emotions that often come with times of loss can be very uncomfortable and overwhelming, sometimes it's tempting to try to ignore them or pretend that we have everything under control when we know that we are struggling. I've recently been reflecting on how the grief and loss process is influenced by our ability to be honest – and how well-meaning people around us can make us feel pressured to move through our experience of loss very quickly.

"You'll find another job soon. You have so much to offer."

"You can always get another cat. There are lots at the SPCA looking for homes."

"What's important is to remain positive."

"You are better off without him."

Sometimes the desire to avoid the pain of our loss gets fuelled by the desire of our friends and family to see us appear strong and resilient. The result can be a form of emotional collusion where we subtly agree with those around us that we are better off sidestepping the hard work of

grieving. And in the process, the strong emotions that we are really feeling can get stuffed, bottled up, denied, or closeted away with the assumption that we will deal with them later – and we rarely do.

It is in these times of change that talking with a counsellor can be a valuable addition to the support offered by friends, family, clergy, or coworkers. Counsellors offer a caring, nonjudgmental environment where feelings that seem too large for us to handle on our own can be acknowledged, encountered, and honored. Instead of feeling isolated behind a mask that pretends, “I’m doing just fine”, a trusted counsellor will provide support so you can be honest about how things really are.

In matters of loss, change, transition, or grief, counselling demonstrates its power as a way to encourage truth telling - and it’s in telling our truth that we are able to walk towards healing. And while counsellors don’t have the secret formula for avoiding the upset and discomfort associated with change and loss, they are able to provide compassionate support and care during seasons of transition and the exploration of new hopes and goals for the future.