

Professionally Speaking...

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Grief is a Handicap

Nora McInerny writes in her book, *No Happy Endings*, that there can be new beginnings following a devastating loss. The author suffered a miscarriage, followed by the loss of her young husband to brain cancer. As a grief therapist, I was particularly struck by the chapter that she called “Armless.”

After the death of her husband, Nora dreamed that she was walking through the world completely armless. She noted that the people in her dream life fell into two camps: those who pretended not to notice her armlessness, and those who were irritated by what they felt was her obsession with it. This may have been her dream, but it was also her reality. I suspect that many grieving people can relate to this.

I bookmarked this page because I knew that this metaphor symbolized how many parents feel after losing a baby. Imagine going about your day with no arms! You’d feel broken and helpless, and unable to perform the tasks that you would otherwise be able to accomplish. Grief can be immobilizing, causing you to feel armless.

Losing a baby affects you physically and mentally, often leaving you to feel disabled. You often have no desire to even leave your house! Attending parties or events with family and friends is the last thing that you want to do because you’ll be faced with triggers in the form of pregnant people, babies, or well-meaning people who say the wrong things. You will encounter people who either don’t know that you’ve lost a baby, or people who do know, but are too uncomfortable to acknowledge your loss. You are hurt by the people who do not notice or recognize your armlessness.

You identify as a handicapped person, and while you'd like to be treated like a normal person, there is a part of you that certainly wants to be recognized as someone who is grieving, and in need of special care. Your grief, and everything that goes with it, is your handicap. Family and friends want you to be back to normal very quickly, while you are secretly identifying as a handicapped person. And that's ok. You are grieving.

The other group of people are the ones who are irritated by what they believe is your obsession with your loss. Well-meaning people in your life want you to "get over" the loss, so that it makes everyone else feel better. Family and friends give people a few months, or as little as a few weeks to grieve, then expect you to be back to normal. Employers may give mothers only a few days to grieve. People have a very difficult time acknowledging miscarriage and stillbirth. It's much easier to offer condolences to someone that has lost an elderly grandparent than a precious baby. You hold onto your grief because you want people to know how much this loss has hurt you. In a subconscious way, you believe that if you stop feeling the pain of your loss, then you are forgetting about your baby. If you continue to talk about your baby and replay the story of your loss, people sometimes think that you are obsessed with your grief, and they don't know how to respectfully honor your feelings.

Getting back to Nora McInerny's dream ~ she recalls one of the people in her dream shouting at her at the dinner table when she cried that she couldn't eat the soup because she had no arms. They said, "Use your FEET!" She spent a year drinking soup with her feet. Not literally, but she was trying to unpack the psychological obviousness of this dream and draw some parallels. The message here is to do the best that you can. You will feel handicapped for perhaps a long time. You will learn to "fake it till you make it" on many occasions. You will learn to accommodate and improvise when situations feel challenging. Only you know that you have no arms.

You may also feel like you have no eyes or ears. Grief may make you blind to the beauty of your world, and the people in it. Grief may prevent you from hearing the loving and supportive things that people are saying to you. It's normal to feel handicapped. Take the time that you need to submerge yourself in the pain of your baby's death, and honor your baby in any way that you can. However, I encourage you to realize that you are not actually without arms ~ so hold those people who you love. You are not without eyes ~ so behold the beauty of this world in which you live. You are not without ears ~ so hear the kind words of love and support from the people who care about you.

Look forward to the new beginnings following your loss.

