

# *Professionally Speaking...*

by Denise M. Paul MA, CT, CPLC

## **The Juggling Act of Grief**

***“God gave us two hands.....one to hold our joy, and one to hold our sorrow.”***

Many years ago, when I first started my ministry of helping people navigate the very difficult journey of grief, a chaplain shared this thought with me. I have used this phrase hundreds of times as a tool to help mourners visualize how important it is to allow oneself to feel both joy and sorrow at the same time. Following the death of a baby or any loved one, people often need permission to find, even the smallest amount of joy, while at the same time, needing to feel the sadness of a life lost.

In a support group last week, I asked one of the participants how she managed to celebrate her recent achievement of a graduate degree, while mourning the loss of her precious baby, who had died halfway through her pregnancy only two weeks earlier. I had prepared her prior to her graduation day, suggesting that she think about holding her joy in one hand and her sorrow in the other hand. I was giving her permission to celebrate her well-earned accomplishment. I even suggested that she spend a little time in the morning of her graduation day to remember her baby in some way. Days later, in our support group, she described that special day as feeling more like a “juggling act” than simply holding her joy in one hand, and her sorrow in the other.

The image of a juggler trying to hold up several objects at the same time felt even more appropriate than my image of someone gracefully holding their joy and their sorrow at the same time. This mom described her day as oscillating back and forth between her joy and her sorrow. One minute she felt happy, and the next minute she felt sad, as she oscillated between pride she felt in her scholastic accomplishments, and the sadness that she felt for her baby’s death. It was impossible to be happy and sad at the same time.

In a perfect grief world, a mourner would hold these opposing feelings at the same time and go about their day honoring all their feelings. However, this mom taught me that it doesn’t always work that way. The happiness that she felt in receiving her diploma was quickly shattered when she turned her attention to the fact that she expected to be pregnant with her first baby on this momentous occasion. Her dream

was that her baby would be part of the day's celebrations. I can picture her juggling the moment when she received her diploma, followed by a griefburst, as she thought about her baby. The ceremony was probably followed by a celebratory meal, at which time she oscillated between the joy of the moment with her family, and the memory of her baby. I can imagine how every day is like a juggling act. There is nothing graceful about it. A trip to the ice cream store for a simple pleasure might be sabotaged by a pregnant woman in line. The list goes on and on. One learns to navigate the grief journey with much trepidation, not knowing when a land mine might erupt in the form of a newborn baby or the diaper aisle in a grocery store.

One cannot prepare for a sudden griefburst, which often happens at the most inopportune time. But it is helpful to know that they exist, and that they are a normal part of the grieving process. Bursts of grief remind us that our heart aches for our precious baby, and rightfully so! At first, griefbursts may be plentiful, but as the weeks and months go by, the sudden surges of grief will soften and lessen in frequency. However, don't be surprised if a griefburst happens spontaneously, when you least expect it to. A sight, or a sound may bring you right back to your intense pain, only to remind you that your baby will never be forgotten.

Imagine a juggler tossing several balls in the air at the same time. Let's name these balls: joy, sorrow, anger, guilt, lonely, shock. On another day, the juggler may be tossing balls that say: joy, vulnerable, hopeless, ashamed, and isolated. The goal is to navigate the day while keeping all of the balls in the air. It is a very difficult task to accomplish, while trying to look and act like a normal person. (grieving people have a "new normal")

Whether you carefully hold your joy in one hand and your sorrow in the other, or you skillfully juggle many feelings throughout the day, know that you are strong. This is not easy. Honor all of your feelings, but try to make time for a little bit of joy.