

The Blindside Wipeout of Grief

A Sudden Temporary Upsurge of Grief

By Jackson Rainer

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On an ordinary afternoon walking through Wal-Mart in search of those affordable staples everyone finds at big-box stores, I passed a family having typical squabbles with each other — teens arguing with their parents, a young child begging for a sugary snack — all tense and irritated. I nodded, agreeing with myself that I was glad to be past that age and stage of life, acknowledging that this is what families normally do when they get in each other's hair.

Then it hit:

A wall of abject pain slammed into me, full of loss, longing, loneliness, and heartache.

The sense of agony was stunningly electric. I felt attacked. I could neither think nor talk. In terror and horror, I abandoned my shopping cart, staggered to the parking lot and managed to fall into my car, all while struggling to catch my breath. After about 20 minutes (which seemed like 20 years), the sensation receded, leaving me agitated by the vestiges and residuals of a hyper-aroused mind, body, and spirit. I had been hit with a blindside wipeout of grief, known as a STUG.

A STUG is an unwelcome, unexpected tsunami to the natural tidal rhythms of grief.

Researchers call what I experienced a Sudden Temporary Upsurge of Grief, a term defined by grief expert Dr. Therese Rando in the early '90s. It is an intense, unexpected wave of emotionality that comes on occasion to someone who has experienced the loss of a loved intimate, sometimes long after the person's death.

As a psychologist with many years of clinical practice, I have held others through similar experiences. Because of my professional life, I smugly didn't expect to have this awful reality in

my orbit. Silly me, thinking that I was sufficiently removed from my wife Karen's death in 2016 to be immune from this kind of event.

Quite Alarming and Frightening

For each of us, an ordinary day is characterized by a mental scaffolding called the *assumptive world*, defined as the personal organization held of the way the world works. The assumptive world is a psychological structure, containing everything a person assumes to be true about the world, the self and others. It is our automatic, unconscious and generalized body of knowledge, learned through cumulative experience and history.

A STUG is outside of this scaffolding and comes as a threatening invasion. It happens unexpectedly and without warning when someone is fine and in the rhythm of a typical, ordinary day. There may be a trigger to the attack — or not. Innocuous memories or sensory experiences, such as a smell or a sound, can evoke this wave of juicy, raw emotions. After a substantive time has passed following the death, and the acute pain of grief subsides, the dramatic and unwelcome experience of a STUG can be quite alarming and frightening.

The Roadmap of Grief

The process of grief involves the survivor's new search and acquisition of experiences to live a healthy and full life in the new world without the loved one's physical presence. Grief helps a person to resolve — i.e., re-solve — the way the world works, requiring adoption of new ways of being in that world and reinvesting in it to compensate and adapt for the loved one's absence.

Grief guides a person toward revising the assumptive world and the way markers of self-identification are discerned and employed. A STUG is an unwelcome, unexpected tsunami to the natural tidal rhythms of grief.

'Sometimes When We Touch'

A fellow came to therapy, asking for help with a deeply personal narrative:

"I like listening to oldies music stations. Nearly ten years after my wife died, as I was driving down the interstate, I heard the Dan Hill song from 1994 'Sometimes When We Touch.' She and I used to sing it to each other in funny, pseudo-romantic ecstasy. Well, it came on the radio and I started singing it automatically, just like we had always done. I got through the first verse before my throat closed and I started crying tears as big as light bulbs. I thought I would die. I pulled over to the side of the road and thought, 'Now what?' I shook like a wet dog and nearly vomited.

Eventually it passed, but I don't know what in the world happened to me. There weren't any thoughts that went with the feeling. I believed I had managed to make sense out of her death; it was so long ago. What do you think is the matter with me? Was it a panic attack? Do I have to live with the possibility of this happening again? I was driving and could have been hurt."

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This gentleman was slammed by a STUG that profoundly and dramatically untied a psychological connection to his deceased wife, one that he did not even realize he continued to hold. The STUG, traumatic as the experience felt, ultimately brought deeper and more personal meaning to his marital relationship — in life and death.

After the discharge of such intense emotionality, he was quickly able to gain context by attributing meaning to the trigger of the song. With a bit of perspective, he revisited one of the more pleasurable memories found in the history of his marriage.

Surviving a STUG

What can you do after a STUG? Here are a few suggestions:

- Identifying the experience for what it is and calling it by name can help you stay in charge, even when feeling out of control.
- Remember that a STUG is a temporary, transitional experience. No one ever dies from a STUG, though many feel like the experience is deadly. The painful feelings will pass. The most effective strategy in the presence of a STUG is to ride it out. Find a safe place, as private as possible, breathe deeply and lean into it. Allow the pain until it passes. During a STUG, a person's body goes on hyper-alert, releasing endorphins because of the fight-flight response manifest in the perception of danger. After the STUG passes, a body needs several hours to absorb the hormones and brain chemicals and return to baseline.
- Sleep on it. The day following a STUG, cognitive capacities return to normal, allowing more thoughtful consideration of the meaning of what triggered the memory. Take it as a matter of truth that the STUG signaled a reconsideration of a loving experience in the history of the relationship.

Finally, remember that the word “closure” is never relevant in the loss of a loved one. If we have loved another intimately, grief does not lead us to forget. Rather, the process facilitates resolution, clarity and meaning, even in the presence of a blindside wipeout.

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