

When there is no right answer

When loss begets more loss

• DR. BATYA L. LUDMAN

The loss of a loved one is extremely difficult. Even when the loss is expected and you think that you are prepared, there is likely to be some shock accompanying your sadness. With time, you move on. You never ever forget your loved one who had, and continues to have, a special place in your heart. Nonetheless, you may be surprised and troubled when, years later, some event, sound or even smell, reminds you of your loved one, in a way that brings the sadness back almost as clearly as the day you first learned of the loss. There's no set time period in which one moves forward when dealing with a loss, although society definitely expects that it should be sooner than what most people experience. For many, it seems to be an insurmountable amount of time that passes ever so slowly.

Each situation differs and depends on the age of the deceased, your relationship, the circumstances, whether it was sudden or unexpected, and so many other variables. Sometimes too, when you least expect it, and think you're in an okay place, you get that punch in the gut – the punch that comes when someone says or does something that from their perspective is totally harmless but from your vantage point once again triggers such sadness and pain that it brings you back to your new reality – that years later, and perhaps forever, you will still on some level be dealing with your loss.

For example, how often as an adult have you asked someone you barely know in passing conversation the seemingly innocent question, “How many children do you have?” or perhaps to a child, “How many brothers and sisters do you have?” For those who have not lost a child or a sibling or have not struggled with years of infertility or miscarriages and have been able to have a child, the answer is quickly forthcoming. However, for someone who has experienced these losses, there is no right answer and the person being asked is suddenly awash with pain and confusion.

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Does she tell this “stranger” about such an important personal loss: of the death of a beloved child or sibling or of the years of trying to conceive? If so, how? It is suddenly encroaching on such a private place. Once the words are out, it will likely be a conversation stopper, and having shared such an intimate secret one will often be put in the paradoxical position of then trying to make the person who asked the question feel better. (Remember that awkward silence you may have experienced as a child if asked, “What is Santa bringing you for Christmas?” Now multiply that mix of emotion a hundredfold and you still can't come close to the potential discomfort). If instead, when asked the question, one chooses not to include the deceased in the count so fewer questions then follow, does it feel as if one is pretending that the person never existed, that a lifetime was never shared together, and that their existence was meaningless? That, too, feels awful.

These are heavy issues for an adult and even heavier for a child. The answer may depend on who asks the question and when, and how strong you feel on any given day. It is never a simple roll-off-the-tongue answer and often feels like a lose-lose situation with no right answer being forthcoming and providing comfort.

Dealing with difficult questions – whether you are the one asking or the one being asked – is never easy and requires great sensitivity and caring. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Ask yourself if you are being intrusive or too personal before you speak and recognize that the most innocent question may open a Pandora's Box.

2. Don't be afraid to say that you don't know what to say. This allows the listener to know that you have asked from a place of caring. There are times when you simply have no words and that is okay. Just being present far surpasses words. Making eye contact or reaching out are gestures that communicate that you are there for someone and may be less intrusive.
3. Try to suspend passing judgment. We don't ever really walk in another person's shoes and no one's situation is exactly like someone else's.
4. People should always have the choice as to when and with whom they wish to share information. Children especially need to feel safe.
5. Often, children feel very alone and very different. Most of their friends have not experienced a similar loss. Teach your children to be sensitive in this regard. Making an art project for family day, for instance, when someone has lost their mom, may touch a very vulnerable spot.

WHILE EXPERIENCING the initial loss may be difficult, the unanticipated and at times recurrent aftershocks may leave someone interpreting a situation very differently from how you might see it. One lovely woman pointed out that being placed next to her hostess at a Friday night dinner, now that she was a widow, felt like she was being singled out in a negative way, one suggestive of pity. She described feeling almost a sense of punishment, always knowing where her seat would be and it felt uncomfortable. As a hostess, someone else may have felt she was putting this woman in “the guest of honor seat,” next to her, as a way of ensuring inclusion in the conversation. In making up a seating plan for an event, many have thought they were putting a single person, a widow or divorcée in a “good” spot, when in reality, their placement was wrong for them and only highlighted their loss.

When in doubt in a sensitive situation, try to anticipate how someone else may be feeling, or better yet, ask them ahead of time what seating arrangement would be best for them or if there is someone they would like to be seated with. Sometimes you will get it right, sometimes you will get it wrong, but usually your gesture will be appreciated and you'll have the opportunity to learn. Expressing a sincere wish to try to be there for the other person when we may not understand their issues or their pain is a true gift of sensitivity in itself.

Finally, I would like to thank Gina Junger and my classmates at Matan for our discussions on the importance of having difficult conversations. It was truly an eye-opener for all of us. ■

*The writer is a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice in Ra'anana and author of *Life's Journey: Exploring Relationships – Resolving Conflicts*. She has written about psychology in *The Jerusalem Post* since 2000. ludman@netvision.net.il; www.drbatyaludman.com*



'RECOGNIZE THAT the most innocent question may open a Pandora's Box.' (Based on a work by F. S. Church; Wikimedia Commons)