

How to Live with the Pain of Loss Without Going Numb

People often try to deny their feelings, but that doesn't work. Here are some healthier techniques.

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What is the best way to deal with a loss?

Loss is one of life's most excruciating emotions, because it involves pain that to some degree will never go away—what you have lost will never come back. Often, people try to suppress their feelings, or close themselves off to situations that could lead to loss again. That doesn't work.

Psychologist Steven C. Hayes, a professor at the University of Nevada, Reno, researches how language and thought lead to human suffering and is the author of “Get Out of Your Mind & Into Your Life,” a workbook that helps people transform their emotional pain into something helpful. He is the co-creator of a widely used and researched therapeutic approach called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which helps people focus on mindfulness, acceptance and values. One technique: Instead of saying, “I will never be able to find another partner like the one I lost,” ask, “How can I put those qualities of that person in my behavior?”

I spoke with Dr. Hayes about dealing with loss. Here are edited excerpts of the conversation.

What exactly is loss, and why is it so difficult to handle?

Dr. Hayes: Loss is a state of “missing what once was.”

Some losses we can't prevent: A lover decides we are no longer the special one. A loved one dies. Some are deliberate. A divorce that needs to happen; a friendship that needs to end; a job that needs to be abandoned. And many are gradual: Children head off to school or move away. Our physical and mental capacities gradually wane with time. Even wonderful moments contain a sense of loss. We cry at weddings and glance at each other as vows are being exchanged, knowing full well that pain is ahead.

What we are left with inside profound loss is a pain that to some degree cannot go away. We know what is missing won't come back. And it is the combination of this pain and the seeming inability to resolve it that makes loss so difficult.

What is a typical response to this pain?

Dr. Hayes: We go into a problem-solving mode of mind, to try and fix the loss by denying, diminishing, closing down, suppressing. We'll do things like putting away all the pictures or leaving the bedroom of a loved one who has died exactly the same. We may suppress thoughts or memories, not just the painful ones but the joyful ones, too.

After the loss of a betrayal or a divorce, we may try to protect ourselves, by refusing to open up and be vulnerable again. "Vuln" comes from the Latin word for wound. "I will never be so woundable again" is a common mental order we give ourselves going forward from betrayal.

But suppression doesn't work, does it?

Dr. Hayes: No. We think we will create safety by avoidance. But what we create is a deadening, walled-off version of safety. It is like dropping a delicious plate of food into the dirt and solving the distress that accident produced by forever swearing off tasty food. This is the opposite of what we want. We want to live a full and vital life.

We can't suppress our thoughts. Every time we have the thought to suppress the pain, we are building a new cognitive connection in our brain to that thing we are trying to run from. Suppression creates a feedback loop from hell.

Here is an example: When I went through a divorce, I picked bluegrass music to listen to that would help me suppress the pain. In about two days, whenever I heard that music, I started crying. Now that bluegrass music reminded me of the loss that I used the music to help me forget.

How can we approach loss in a healthier way?

Dr. Hayes: We can practice psychological flexibility. This is the opposite of being closed off. Psychological flexibility begins with an embrace of the moment. It is the ability to feel and think with openness and curiosity and to move our life in directions that are deeply important to us, building habits that allow us to live life in accordance with our values and aspirations. It's about learning not to turn away from what is painful, instead turning toward our suffering in a way that is open, curious, and kind in order to live a life full of meaning and purpose.

How do we do this?

Dr. Hayes: By replacing our problem-solving mode with a sunset mode of mind. Sunset mode is a mind-set that is observant and open to emotion. It allows us to take it all in, the way you would a sunset. A sunset is impermanent and will never happen again the same way once it is over. There is a bittersweet quality in that. But a sunset also brings joy and a sense of awe. We appreciate it, and see possibilities in it.

How do you bring a sunset mode of thinking to loss?

Dr. Hayes: You look at the wholeness of the loss, the joy that was there as well as the pain for what is now missing. Think of the healthy rituals we have when people die. We get together and we cry, and five minutes later we are laughing about the time our loved one put a funny hat on. We get to the whole of it. And that is exactly what you have to do with loss. It isn't just the tears that need to happen. It is also the laughter. It is also honoring. In sunset mode, you are appreciating all of it, the awe and awful of it.

This can help you grow?

Dr. Hayes: Yes. Appreciating what you lost will help you put that into your life again, to write your next chapter with the theme you choose.

Let's say you get divorced because your spouse didn't have qualities you needed. You were yearning for emotional connection and you married a refrigerator. You can look at those qualities and ask yourself: "How would I have to be in the world so my next relationship is not with a refrigerator?"

Or if you lost someone you loved deeply, appreciating what you had will empower you to put that in your life again. If you think about the good qualities of the person and internalize them, you will draw people to you who see and want those qualities and maybe will help give them to you.

Can you give an example?

Dr. Hayes: My birthday is the same day as my father's. He died an early death due to health complications from his alcoholism. A sweet, kind, loving man who also modeled emotional avoidance. He could not face the loss of his dream of being a professional baseball player.

When I think of my dad I smile. He loved children, especially little ones. I have a picture of him holding my eldest daughter's hand while at the zoo. He loved being silly and telling jokes. And I admire the courage he showed in facing his demons and entering into recovery from addiction.

My problem-solving mind can list out his flaws in great detail. But when I adopt a sunset mode of mind, I see something else. The pain I feel from his death is directly linked to the loss I feel of these admirable qualities of love, laughter, and courage. If I could have just two minutes to see him again I would tell him I love him, and thank him for the wonderful qualities he embodied for his children.

How can you use psychological flexibility to deal with loss?

Psychologist Steven C. Hayes recommends these steps.

- **Acknowledge the loss.** Accept your pain and embrace all of what you lost, the good and the bad. Trying to suppress your pain will only heighten it. And you can't learn from it if you ignore it.

- **Picture yourself as a child.** Think of your clothes and mannerisms. Imagine yourself talking about the loss in the voice of a small child. How would you comfort that child with compassion? Do that for your adult self.
- **Focus on your body.** When you think of your loss, how does your body react? When you inhale, breathe in the pain, and when you exhale, breathe out awareness. This will help you accept the pain.
- **Notice your thoughts.** “When you think: ‘I will never get over this’ or ‘I will never find another partner,’ that is your mind trying to make sense of the loss, but these thoughts can come to dominate you,” says Dr. Hayes. “You want to be more mentally flexible.” To prevent buying into the thought, try singing it—to the tune of “Happy Birthday.”
- **Look for the lesson in the pain.** Think about what you lost and what it can teach you about what you want going forward. If a loved one died, think about all the qualities of the person—good and bad—and how you can embody those you most appreciated.