

Surviving a Life Crisis

That some good can be derived from every event is a better proposition than that everything happens for the best, which it assuredly does not.

—James K. Feibleman

No matter how hard we wish it otherwise, each of us comes face-to-face with difficult life crises. These life events—death of a loved one, divorce, job loss, devastating illness—are types of personal loss. They evoke a grieving response in those affected by them. This natural process allows us to let go of the old, deal with the difficult feelings associated with the life event, and recover a sense of stability and meaning as we embrace life again.

Grief is the psyche's natural healing response when faced with change and loss. Grieving is a *process*, not an event. We need to take time to understand and experience the process of grieving and recovery from a personal loss.

Grieving

Important elements to recognize about the grieving process are as follows:

Painful feelings are genuine and necessary expressions of grief.

We cannot control the feelings that arise within us. Denying or minimizing the emotional pain of loss only postpones the day you must face feelings. You cannot avoid them forever; they will not just “fade away.” Repressed feelings will stay buried until they are triggered by another loss, only to intensify the pain and difficulty of the new life crisis. The fastest way to get to the other side of the pain is to lean into it.

Grieving is a highly individualized process.

Grief has its common and its unique sides. Although it is a universal experience, no two people grieve the same. Like a snowflake or a fingerprint, each person's grief has characteristics all its own. Even though there are common feelings and experiences, the depth and duration of each phase is different for everyone. Understanding the phases of grief—shock, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance—can help you cope and have hope knowing that others have also gone through similar pain and survived. At the same time, respecting your unique grieving experience will provide comfort and reassurance when you feel all alone.

Grief has no timetable.

Grief often takes much longer than the bereaved or the people in their lives expect. It is unwise to place a time limit on your grief. Be realistic about it. Time heals only when you do something. Time alone does not heal; it is what we do with the time. Find someone who will listen—friend, family member, clergy, support group, therapist—and talk about your feelings and your experience. It helps to take one day at a time, or even one hour at a time.

Recovering

Taking the time to recover from a life crisis is essential to surviving, and even thriving. Here are some suggestions of what you can do:

Take care of yourself.

Symptoms such as headaches, insomnia and fatigue, anxiousness, irritability and crying spells are common during recovery from a life crisis. Staying active with regular exercise and social outings can help reduce stress and depression. Mini-breaks to go see a movie or walk with a friend, or a weekend getaway

can help you step back from your situation and regain perspective. Since your body is under stress, don't allow yourself to get worn out; get extra rest, eat properly and avoid alcohol and other drugs.

Be realistic.

Try to maintain as "regular" a schedule as possible, but don't force yourself to do things that are too uncomfortable. Avoid unrealistic expectations and pressures. Set small goals for yourself that are achievable. Put major decisions or changes on the back burner for now.

Reach out for help.

When you are in the midst of a crisis, it's easy to isolate yourself. Yet reaching out to others is crucial. Try to increase your circle of support—connect with old friends or join a support group. Sharing with others who care about your suffering or have been in a similar situation is healing. You might also want to contact a mental health professional.

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