



Dealing with Loss & Change:

The Acceptance Stage

2 May 2014

Hello

Acceptance is one of the stages in loss/bereavement or personal change. It is a stage that some people never reach. It takes time, pain, and effort to reach acceptance. Some people refuse to feel all the emotions associated with loss. They have either become so cut off from their feelings they cannot feel and cannot remember when they last felt, or they believe that to feel their feelings would overwhelm them. They think that were they to allow themselves to fully feel all the emotions, the emotions would just overtake them and they would spin out of control. Oddly enough they choose not to experience the loss fully because they think it will be better for them, but feeling your emotions fully is vital to being a healthy and happy person. And it is vital to moving on. If you do not move through the acceptance stage then you don't move into reinventing your life. And following a loss or change, reinventing your life is exactly what you need to do. Following a loss or change, the future you had mapped out for your life is no longer exactly the way you planned it - for example people have left, your job has gone, you need to relocate etc. You cannot move on unless you can create a new future for yourself. You may very well be able to keep elements the same, but it will never be exactly as you wanted it to be or dreamed it would be. Now you need to dream a new dream. If you don't come to accept what happened, you remain stuck in the loss, and never get to create and experience a new life for yourself. One that may actually turn out to be better than your original plans.

Acceptance does not mean I like what happened. Some things are just never going to be nice. If a car hit your child who subsequently died, you can never make it a good thing. You can however move on and use the experience to better the world. Acceptance also doesn't mean you have forgotten. You can still remember something very clearly and yet accept it. Acceptance means I can integrate what happened and the implications for me and those around me into my life. It is now part of my life story.

Battling to reach acceptance?

People who battle with acceptance are those with a great deal of guilt and shame, those too scared to feel the pain or who don't or won't make the time to feel the pain and grieve, and those just surviving where all the energy and effort goes into putting food on the table and a shelter overhead for the family. People whose focus is on surviving day to day don't have the time and energy to process loss and change. Others who struggle with coming to acceptance are those people who are very controlling, folks with poor coping skills, and those with very low self-esteem who essentially feel inadequate to the challenges of life. If you fall into any of these categories (which many people who do won't be aware that they do), or are really struggling to deal with the loss, I believe the right professional help could be extremely beneficial.

The stage of acceptance comes after grieving. However the two are not completely separate. As you start to come to the end of the grieving process, you can start having moments of acceptance. Acceptance is also a process. It is not a one-time, at-the-moment thing when you suddenly go – “yes I have now accepted this”. You will learn to accept the loss and change pieces at a time. One day you may be more accepting and the following week less accepting and still angry and tearful. Acceptance is a stage, like the others, that takes time to get through. The more unwanted, unexpected and traumatic the loss/change, the more likely acceptance will take some time to achieve.

If you do not come to acceptance of the loss/change, not only will you not move onto reinventing your life, but you will become stuck in the past. As life continues day after day, you will continually find yourself drawn back into the unfairness of the past with bitterness and rage.

With very difficult changes you can go through the change cycle several times

The first time is usually the most intense, but as you understand the impact of the change later, you may also go through the grieving process again. For example if you lost a child, you will go through the full change cycle at that time. Later on in life various situations could trigger your loss again. You could be sitting at a wedding ten years later when it just hits you that you will never attend a wedding for that child. And so you grieve that specific loss. And as you go through the process again (usually for a much shorter time) you have to reach acceptance of that specific aspect of the loss of your child. With some really traumatic changes you may end up going through the process over and over again - sometimes for the rest of your life. And you do need to process all the stages. You need to feel the anger, you need to grieve, you need to reach acceptance, and you need to move on. This is one of the reasons why the pain never really goes away completely. With substantial losses we learn to live with them and carry on. The time we spend thinking about them does diminish, and we do spend less and less time preoccupied with what happened. However it often never totally goes. People who have experienced severe losses in their life will attest to that. It gets better and more bearable. But it still hurts.

Actions

- As you come to acceptance this may be a time when you want to consider if legal action or confrontation is appropriate (if it hasn't already happened). If the change involved any sort of violation towards you such as a negligent driver who injured your child, an unfair dismissal, abuse of yourself, or a crime, you need to consider how you will confront the other party. Do you want to pursue legal action? Do you want a verbal confrontation? Do you want to write a letter to someone? Some people will just want to let things be, believing that what goes around comes around and those who did them harm will get what they deserve. The decision is yours, and I (or anyone else for that matter) cannot tell you which the best option is. You need to carefully consider all your options, get professional and plenty of advice, and make your own decision as to the road you will follow going forward.
- Part of accepting change is to look at what you got out of the experience. In some instances it is very clear that things are better. You may be in a better job; you may have left an abusive partner; you may be living in a town much more to your liking. In others it is not so obvious, and in still other instances you may think it incredulous to consider looking for something positive in the change. Despite what happened, spend time thinking about what you can take from the experience. What did you learn? We seldom go through change without learning more about who we are. As the saying goes, we don't go through change, we grow through change. What strengths did you find out that you had that you never realised before? How has your resilience and wisdom grown? Do you have a better understanding of who your true friends are? Do you understand more about yourself and what you like and dislike? Have you come to a greater understanding of your values?
- Consider a ritual or rite of passage to put the past to bed. Ceremonies are important symbolic ways in which we leave the past behind and move on. Make some time to recognise and celebrate what has gone. If you want to have a ceremony by all means do so. Symbols, ceremonies, and rituals all help to put the past in the past. These can also help you deal with anniversaries of loss.
- Consider writing letters to people (even if you don't send them), or writing in a journal, or maybe if you are so inclined producing a drawing or painting or writing a poem or piece of music. Maybe you want to write the story of your change. This is not the same as writing down your feelings and emotions during anger and grief. This is writing your story of how you have come through the change. What you went through, what you learnt, how you benefited. Many people find writing about changes, especially very traumatic ones, very cathartic.
- Write letters or emails to those who helped you through the change. Write a letter to yourself recognising your own courage and efforts in getting through the change.
- Use the loss for inspired action. Take up a new cause, take on a new challenge, volunteer to help others, commit to making some positive change in your life. Speak about your experiences with others or in public forums.
- Write down all the growth from the change. These can include your own learning and increased wisdom. People discover sources of strength and resilience in themselves during times of change that they may not have been aware of before.
- Find meaning in the whole change process for you. Write about or talk about what it meant to you.