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How do we grieve?

In her book “On Grief and Grieving,” Elisabeth Kubler-Ross wrote about the stages of grief. She was later criticized for making the process of grief look so orderly to which she responded that these stages were “never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages.” There are still people, however, who insist that there are stages of grief. Perhaps this is because the messiness of grief makes us uncomfortable.

Meghan O’Rourke wrote:

“Grief and mourning don’t follow a checklist; they’re complicated and untidy processes, less like a progression of stages and more like an ongoing process—sometimes one that never fully ends. Perhaps the most enduring psychiatric idea about grief, for instance, is the idea that people need to “let go” in order to move on; yet studies have shown that some mourners hold on to a relationship with the deceased with no notable ill effects.”¹

Everyone grieves in his or her own way.

Jewish tradition recognizes the ongoing process of grief and the importance of remembering our loved ones; that’s why we have Yizkor—a regular spiritual practice dedicated to remembering our loved ones.

On Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Passover, Shavuot, we say Yizkor. On the anniversary of one’s day, we say the Mourner’s Kaddish. Jewish tradition teaches us through this regular practice that our loved ones are always a part of us. Reciting Yizkor helps us to honor their memories and to care for the hole in our hearts that their passing has left us with.

We all grieve in different ways; there are no right and wrong ways to mourn. We gather together and say these prayers as a community, recognizing both our unique mourning processes and that being together is a source of support and comfort.

In her poem, “I Measure Every Grief I Meet,” Emily Dickinson, expresses her curiosity about other people’s grief as a way of conveying how heavy her own is.

I wonder if It weighs like Mine—
Or has an Easier size.

I wonder if They bore it long—
Or did it just begin—
I could not tell the Date of Mine—
It feels so old a pain—

¹ Meghan O’Rourke, “Good Grief,” *The New Yorker*, 2/1/10.

I wonder if it hurts to live—
And if They have to try—
And whether—could They choose between—
It would not be—to die.

May each of us take this time of Yizkor to be with our own feelings and to feel the support of our community and our tradition.