

# Sadness: The Gift We Resist

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[I'd rather listen than read this.](#)

My father passed away last year.

While the memorial service for him was preceded by an unconscionable amount of drama, the service itself and our time together was precious and sweet and everything I could have hoped for. I was able to share my profound sadness with my family and friends and join with them in theirs.

The permanence, realness and finality of the loss of my father made so many unimportant things fall away. I had more meaningful, heartfelt, teary-eyed conversations with my family and friends than I have, maybe ever. The whole experience was such a gift.

## **The Information in Sadness**

Every emotion contains information for us that no other dimension of our experience possesses. The information within sadness is that of loss. Our sadness tells us that we've experienced a loss of someone or something important to us (or someone close to us has). This description makes unpacking loss seem much simpler than it is. Loss is not easily untangled, teased out and identified. That is part of why experiencing loss can feel so overwhelming.

My dad was the single most important person in my life, for most of my life. When he passed, I lost more than just my father. I lost someone who believed in me, accepted me and loved me without condition. I lost the head of our family, the one who convened us, looked out for us and knitted us all

together. I lost my advisor, mentor, and emotional sponsor. I lost the person who humbly embodied so many of the qualities to which I aspire. I lost my hero.

### **The Gift of Sadness**

The gift of sadness, should we allow ourselves to accept it, is sensitivity, intimacy and connection. When we allow ourselves to experience sadness, we connect with our deepest self. We connect with our heart and who or what is dear to us. And when we share our sadness with others, we invite them to feel us and to feel with us.

And when we allow ourselves to feel our own sadness, we can be with and connect with others in theirs. Sadness is like an emotional bridge that joins us with others, connecting our hearts.

At my father's service, anyone who wanted to, was invited to share whatever was in their hearts. I was drawn to tears by the tears of my family as they spoke about my dad and who he was to them. I felt connected with them in our shared sadness. And when I spoke, I was able to feel more of my own feelings by seeing them reflected in the eyes of my family and friends. Such is the gift of sadness when shared.

*Sadness connects, self with self and self with others.*

### **Sadness: The Gift We Resist**



A good friend of mine lost his mother around the same time that I lost my father. He shared that shortly afterward, he still hadn't cried. He explained, "I don't like connecting with that pain."

Sadness is painful. No doubt. And at times denying, avoiding or dismissing that pain can be what we need. To cope. To get through. To give ourselves a break.

But when denying our sadness becomes something more than temporary, it can extract a great cost. This was illustrated in an exchange I had at a training a few years ago.

My dad was sick at the time, and his doctor (not knowing the measure of the man he was dealing with), didn't expect him to live, and called in hospice. (This was the first of several times over the following three years in which he was given weeks or days to live.) I left my father's bedside to conduct a training.

At the training, I was getting to know one of the coaches attending. I shared with her that my dad was in hospice. She laughed. (That's right. She laughed.) I looked at her, speechless and puzzled. Seeing my expression, she explained, "My father was in hospice a year ago, and he died. Six months later, my mother was in hospice, and she died. And now, my sister has cancer. You have to laugh."

What I thought at the time was, "No, *you* have to laugh. I want to cry."

I can't imagine the overwhelming loss this coach must have been experiencing. Perhaps to access all of the sadness within that loss would have been incapacitating. Perhaps she was coping with all that loss as best she could by denying the sadness of it. And by denying her own sadness, she could not be with me in mine. And, though unintentional, she invalidated my sadness.

When we can not, or do not, allow ourselves to access our own sadness, we can not be with others in theirs. Hence, the risk of not accessing our own sadness is insensitivity, invalidation and disconnection. Insensitivity to the pain of others, invalidation of the sadness of others, resulting in disconnection from others.

### **Too Much of a Good Thing?**

Sadness is an emotional muscle that when exercised is more easily recruited. Once we've experienced loss and the accompanying sadness, it can be much easier to access. As we age, we tend to access sadness more easily because we've had more life experience, and experienced more loss.

Some people too easily access too much sadness. People who access high levels of sadness:

- May have experienced great loss and not have not found a way to process, accept and/or reframe their experience.
- May be emotionally and/or physically fatigued and not attending to their own well-being and self care.
- May (consciously or unconsciously) believe that sadness is a more 'acceptable' emotion than other distressing emotions, and so substitute an acceptable emotion (such as sadness) for an "unacceptable" one (such as anger). (Note: The [EQ Profile](#) reveals that sadness is the most easily accessed of all of the distressing emotions.)
- May find that sadness is more comfortable to access, particularly if they fear disconnection from the boundary-setting of anger. (That's another way anger can be bundled under sadness.)
- May be suffering from depression. (Which is a wholly different subject.)

People who have high access to sadness (that falls short of depression) may benefit from reflecting on their sadness and what's underneath it, using the bullets above as a guide.

### **Confusing Coping with Strength, Sadness as Weakness**



When someone has experienced significant loss and doesn't appear sad, it's often said that they are "being really strong." I get irked by that. People who experience loss and tearlessly power through it are coping. Let's call it what it is. Coping. And that's OK. Coping is good. Coping is necessary. Sometimes. But is it strength?

If someone experiences significant loss and is visibly in mourning, are they then weak? I don't think so.

While non-feeling, as reflected in coping, has its place, it ultimately serves to disconnect us from ourselves and others. Only by connecting with our emotions can we connect with others in theirs.

Yes, the distressing emotions (anger, anxiety, fear, sadness, shame) are distressing. Sadness is painful. And feeling our feelings, while we are having them and expressing them in safe and appropriate ways, is a key aspect of being emotionally healthy and emotionally intelligent.

How do you come to understand your sadness? How do you unpack your loss? How has your own sadness connected you with someone else?