

GRIEF'S STRANGE THOUGHTS

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Before we plunge in and see what grief-related strange thoughts are all about, we need to establish a fact about your brain.

First, as a psychologist, it is very important for me to tell you something you likely know already:

the human mind has the capacity to think of all types of bizarre, strange, weird, odd, unusual, peculiar thoughts.

Here you are in the middle of a conversation with someone and your mind begins to wander to a never-never land of odd notions. Suddenly, out of nowhere your brain goes, “What if I found out that she was my half-sister?” or “Does she realize that her teeth are yellow?” or “I wonder what she would look like without a nose.”

Has this ever happened to you? Never? Of course it has.



And, in your brief fantasy moment you may have wondered, “Where did THAT come from?” Well, it’s your creative, active brain just having a little fun, mainly because we can think faster than a person can talk; and your brain has time to insert whatever it fancies at the moment without missing a beat of conversation.

So, let’s be clear: just because your brain comes up with a strange thought does not—repeat—does not—mean that you desire this thought to be true.

It is simply a thought that your brain came up with at that instant—no more, no less.

In the book *1984*, people could be arrested by the Thought Police for just thinking government-defined negative thoughts. If that were true today, we'd all be in jail looking at one another saying things like, "They got me for thinking I'd like to kiss the President's dog. What'd they get you for?"

Fortunately, we live in a world where we can daydream, imagine, fantasize, and conjure up anything and everything without spending one day in jail. As you read this (and fantasize about two or three other things at the same time), you might be saying, "Yes, I get it. I get it. But where is the grief part?"

Okay, here it is. Since your loved one died, your brain has had thousands of thoughts about this person and about your reaction to their death. Thousands. However, some of your thoughts can be logged into the strange category. So, strange that you have been reluctant to share this with anyone, or perhaps even admit it to yourself.

In a moment we're going to cover some categories of strange thoughts. However, if you find that any one of your thoughts is not included, fear not. Why?

Because, as I stated earlier, the most important thing to remember is: They are just thoughts—just your brain going on another of its frequent flight of fantasy.

Grief reactions following the death of a loved one are disturbing enough. Add to it strange and bizarre thoughts and you indeed feel like you're going crazy. And, in a way you are. In the language of bereaved people, it is called "normal crazy." Now, let's look at a few of these grief-related flashes of thought:



- ◆ **I deserve this.** This is a common one. After a death it doesn't take much for our brain, in its attempt to make sense of the death, to frantically search the past and discover our wrongdoings, transgressions, mistakes, errors, blunders, and missteps that somehow must be a reason for all the pain we are now experiencing. We're talking here, of course, about the big G—guilt. Did you deserve this terrible thing that has happened? No. Neither you nor anyone who loved or cared about the person who died deserves all the pain you are experiencing.
- ◆ **I'm going to let myself die or make myself die.** If you've **not** had this thought following the death, consider yourself unusual. A natural response to experiencing the worst pain of your life is to consider all of the ways to end the pain—one of which is ending one's life. Fortunately, despite their misery and despair, most people push through such thoughts and choose to live.
- ◆ **It's better this way.** What? Where did that come from? How could anyone ever have this thought cross their mind following the death of a loved one? "It's better this way?" You may have never ever had such a thought, but you need to know that such a thought can flash in a person's brain in a fraction of a second and then, of course, be quickly dismissed. Why might such a shocking thought emerge, if only for a fraction of a second? There's a term in Psychology called *Rationalization*—you've heard it many times. When a negative event occurs in our life, our brain frantically searches for ways

to make the event seem not so bad so it comes up with excuses and justifications. Because your brain does not like pain, it does everything it can to ease it; and rationalization is one way to do it. Don't blame your brain. It's doing the best it can.

- ◆ **I can find a substitute.** Does this one sound familiar at all? If the thought has ever crossed your mind that, perhaps someday you could find someone else to love, to care for, or to feel affection for, then you've had such a thought. For many, such a notion is considered a form of betrayal. How in the world could you love a person, only to see them die and then you think of loving someone again? What kind of person would do such a thing? Answer: a normal human being. Let's put it this way: If your best friend experienced the death of a significant loved one and later shared with you their thoughts of perhaps finding love again, would you blame her? Or would you say, "You are hurting so much that such thoughts are understandable?"
- ◆ **He deserved this.** How could anyone think this? Perhaps you never have. If you haven't, then skip this one. However, if you have, then this thought may have been highly disturbing for you. Why would your brain come up with such an idea? Again, it is your brain's attempt to make sense of the death. But, why blame the person? Because, in most cases the death of a person is senseless. And, your brain cannot tolerate senseless events. Therefore, because your brain is wired to find meaning and to reduce confusion, it grasps at anything it can—including blaming the victim. As with other strange thoughts, from the moment they emerge into our consciousness, we wonder what has gotten into us. We ask ourselves, "What kind of person would ever consider such a belief?" You know the answer by now: A normal person whose brain is capable of considering anything, even the so-called unthinkable.

As we move into another type of thought, it is important to repeat: If you did not see one or more of your strange thoughts mentioned, remember, they are just thoughts—just your brain doing what it normally does.

- ◆ **I will feel this way for the rest of my life.** "Yes!" you say, "This is a thought that I know to be absolutely true. It's not strange at all." Well, I'm going to be blunt: You're wrong. While this thought may not at all seem strange to you, it is the most frequent and incorrect thought in all of bereavement. Why? Because, even though it doesn't feel like it at this time in your life, the following statement is true:

At some point in your life, you will not feel this bad.

I am not saying that you will ever get over your grief, or that you will ever get back your old life, or that you will gradually forget your loved one.

What I am saying is, over the past 30 years, after meeting thousands upon thousands of people in deep grief, I found that virtually all of them got to a point where they said, "Back then I thought for sure that my

grief would always feel the same. But, with time and support from others, I have gotten to a point in my life where I am not so sad, not so angry, not so guilty, not so confused. A time in my life where I can laugh again and yet never forget this precious person.”

Yes, despite the craziness of grief and despite the strange, odd, peculiar thoughts your brain has come up with, the most important thought you need to tell your brain is:

“Someday, I will feel better, even though at this very moment,
my brain, finds it hard to believe.”

And, then, as you move through the weeks and months of your grief, remind yourself that this most important of all thoughts has a name: it’s called hope.

Your brain is amazing—which makes humans amazing—and that includes both you and the wonderful person who is no longer alive. Go ahead and let your brain come up with bizarre thoughts. And, when it happens, just talk back to it by saying something like this:

Yes, these are strange thoughts; but they are not who I am. It’s just my brain going on a fantasy trip.

So, I can go ahead and think anything I want and refuse to be affected by it. I’ve got enough to deal with.

And, even though there are times I’m not sure I can go on, I realize that not only do I have a lot more grieving to do, I also have a lot more living to do. And, that’s not so bizarre.