



Dying to Understand



**LOSS &
DISAPPOINTMENT**

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Introduction

I am sure that you are no stranger to loss or disappointment in life. We all experience both at some stage of life. It may have been the time you did not get the promotion you expected, or your favourite team lost the championship final, or you only got a silver medal rather than gold.

Regardless of the magnitude of the loss and the resulting disappointment, all disappointments are painful and unpleasant. They can be very bitter and enduring, yet new opportunities are missed if we dwell on them, potentially resulting in even more disappointment.

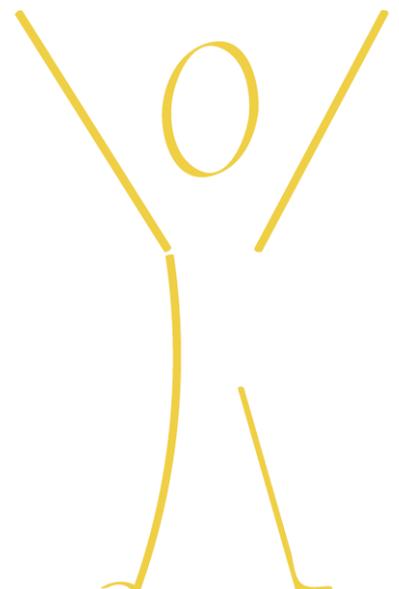
At the heart of loss and disappointment is expectation. We are disappointed when our expectations are not met. It may be why pessimists lower their expectations; if you expect nothing, you cannot be disappointed, but this can prevent you from doing the exceptional. To do something exceptional is risky, but we all need to take the risk sometimes because with risk comes reward. This is also possibly why optimists are prepared to give it a go, even at the risk of failure.

Where do you fit?

Regardless of our efforts, whether we are a pessimist or an optimist filled with good intentions, one of the greatest disappointments in life is when we, or someone we know, experiences death. This loss diminishes any other kind of loss we will ever face. With this comes an enormous amount of emotion; sometimes a tsunami of emotion that has the ability to destroy everything in its path including friendships, marriages and strong family ties if not managed effectively.

Most people are ignorant about the emotions of loss and how to navigate through it. I recently spoke to a bereavement group and almost every one of them wished they had known more about the emotions associated with loss. If you know about it, you can manage it and do something about it.

The first step is to recognise the emotions of loss.



The emotions of loss

Before we consider the emotions, try to remember a time when you experienced great loss. Can you remember how you felt? Dame Kubler Ross, a giant in the field of palliative care, documented the progression and emotions of loss very well.

There are five classic emotions associated with a loss that are considered to be the process of grief. These emotions may not be in this exact order and not everyone experiences all of them. They may be experienced by a person diagnosed with a terminal illness as well as the family and friends of this individual. There are no rules to how this grief plays out, but this is a good insight.

Denial

“This is not possible”
“It cannot be happening”
“There must be a mistake”
“The tests are incorrect”
“They have the wrong person”

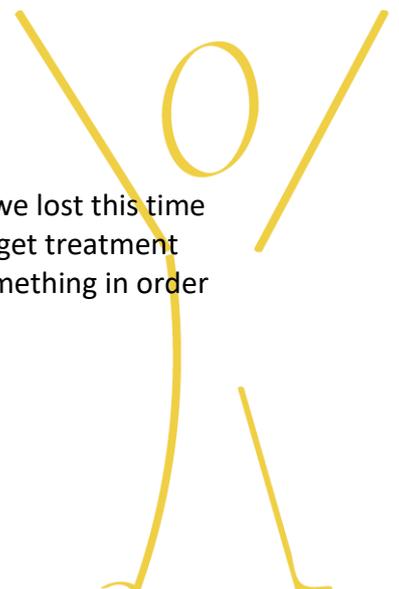
Denial buys time in the storm of emotion. It is the first level of protection against loss. It has value, but ongoing denial in the face of loss can be destructive.

Anger

After denial comes anger. Someone is to blame and they must be punished. Anger may be direct and manifest as violence, shouting or abuse. It is unkind and explosive and warns people to get out of the way! It does have a nasty cousin called passive anger and while this may not be explosive, it is no less nasty. The icy indifference of passive anger can also be very harmful.

Bargaining

If anger doesn't work, then bargaining may be an option. “Okay, so we lost this time but what if we do this or change that? What if we go to Mexico and get treatment there? Perhaps that will work?” Bargaining is the action of giving something in order to get a win in return. Unfortunately, wins are not always possible.



Depression

Once the reality of irreversible loss has set in, depression follows. It is sad to lose or not having our way and have to deal with the consequences. We may weep as a result of our loss and this is more than permissible, acceptable and should be done.

Acceptance

Once the depression and the reality of loss has settled, we may be able to move on to the new reality after the loss. This moving on may be difficult, but it is always easier once this happens because as we move on, we can create new possibilities of things we can do, even if there may be limitations.

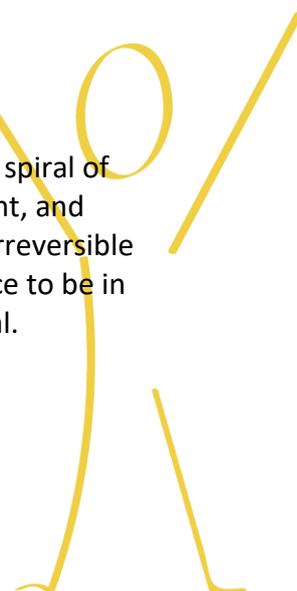
We can change our football team, or marry a nicer girl, or find a better job. But when it comes to dying, there are no wins unless there is another life beyond this life, and death is a doorway and not the end. It is worth exploring this thought. Our e-book, *Conversations with God*, can help with this.

Why it is important to understand the emotions

As humans we are emotional beings. Emotions range from joy, happiness and ecstasy, to sadness and fear or the emotions of loss. Strong emotions happen to all of us. As humans we are held captive by our emotions and, although we may not experience all the emotions all of the time, we will experience some of them. The intensity of the emotion depends on our personalities, our culture, the depth of our disappointment and our coping skills - are we pessimists or optimists?

We all have emotions of loss and, when it comes to the loss of illness and the reality of dying, these emotions can endure and be extreme. How should we deal with someone who is so angry as we cannot have a conversation with them? How do we manage if someone is about to spend the family fortune in search of the unattainable cure? What should you do about depression?

While most emotions are manageable, they can spin out of control easily. Uncontrolled emotions, loss and disappointment can result in a downward spiral of further loss and disappointment. We may say and do things we never meant, and this makes our loss greater. There is a risk of losing everything we love by irreversible actions and unkind words at a time of emotional upheaval. It is a nasty place to be in the vortex of loss. If it is spinning out of control, get help. See a professional.



It is important to recognise when this downward spiral is happening. Ask for advice, think about what is happening, make sure that you are safe if the tsunami of emotion is destroying you and those around you.

Another possibility

I think that loss is associated with disappointment. By managing our expectations, we can be more in control of our disappointments. We may still experience loss and taste disappointment, but the following thoughts may help to soften the blow.

Disappointments are time bound

Thomas Edison was a master of disappointment. Yet every failure was viewed as an opportunity to succeed. His ability to see beyond the obvious failure and disappointment allowed him to persevere because success was on the horizon. Today's disappointments fade if tomorrow's hopes are real. Disappointment is time bound. Every morning heralds a new opportunity. Seek this opportunity and move away from yesterday's disappointment. We have a choice in the matter.

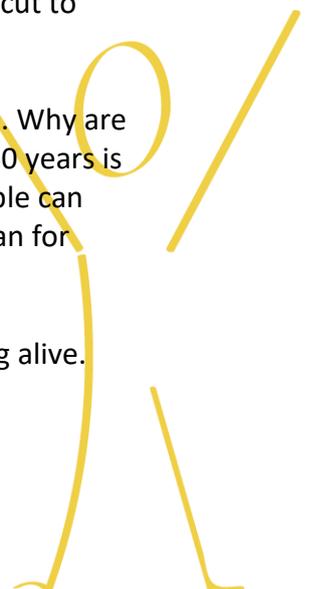
Disappointments follow unrealistic expectations

I am not sure if you feel any loss or disappointment at not winning a gold medal at the Olympics (unless of course you are an Olympian). It may seem ridiculous to consider this, but the reason for this is that you did not have an expectation to win a gold medal.

If, however, you trained and worked hard and spent years preparing for this massive achievement, obtaining a silver medal may be a bitter disappointment if you were expecting a gold. The greater the expectation, the greater the disappointment. While it is good to have realistic expectations, unrealistic expectations are a shortcut to disappointment.

Whoever said we were going to live forever? It is an unrealistic expectation. Why are we so disappointed when we know that life is limited? We think to live to 60 years is better than 50, and 70 may be better than 60. The reality is that some people can live for 90 years and never be alive. Don't aim for how *long* you will live, plan for how *well* you will live.

Change your expectations about being alive to how you can maximise being alive.



Everyone is disappointing

I am sure we all have stories about how we have been bitterly disappointed by someone at some point in life. It may be our parents, teachers, children or partners. It may even be us! We may have been bitterly disappointing to someone else. If you expected someone to be perfect, the expectation was unrealistic. No-one, including you, is perfect. Give yourself and everyone else a break.

We cannot undo what happened yesterday, but we can choose how to react to past disappointments today. Let them be. Don't hold onto them. Forgive others and forgive yourself. We can only travel a new path if we choose to abandon the old.

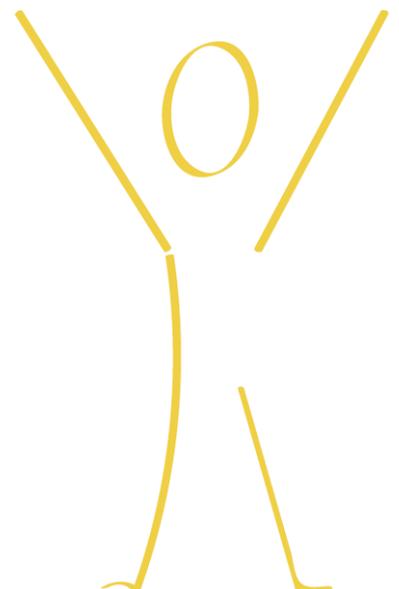
Life is unfair so don't be disappointed

How many times have you been cheated or unfairly treated? I can, as I am sure you can, draw up an impressive list of unfairness that has happened in life. As much as unfairness is unpleasant and possibly unforgivable, did you notice that the world did not stop turning and that life carried on?

Unfairness happens. Accept it and move on. Everyone experiences misfortune and heartache at some point in life. Don't let yours overwhelm you. Good things also happen! Look out for them. Make them happen. Do something good to someone else. Surprise them.

Escape the disappointment prison

Don't be trapped in a prison of disappointment. Often, we are the gatekeepers of our own prisons. Set yourself free. Consider the reality of your circumstances, accept them whether they are good or bad and make a decision about your next step. Dwelling in loss prevents you from creating opportunity.



The Big picture

Loss and disappointment are a part of life. My metaphor is that life is like a large powerful speedboat racing through the water. We cannot do anything that is in our wake: that is past, it is behind us, we can do nothing about it. There are many disappointments here.

We can however decide where the bow is pointing. We have a choice about where we point our lives, regardless of how long the journey will be. Where are you pointing? If it is to darkness, change direction and head for the light. There are less disappointments in the light.

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