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Newburyport Counseling Group
Grief and Comeback
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When a tragedy strikes, whether it is personal or distant, the deep emotions of grief get triggered.

When nine Black people are murdered in their sanctuary, their safe haven, their spiritual home, anger, sadness, fear, and utter despair come rushing to the surface.

When we are submerged in grief as a community, we realize that we are all connected in this vulnerable world. No one is immune from the grief of the loss at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston South Carolina.

Sadness descended over the world on Wednesday night June 17, 2015. Death hit us hard and fast. And there is nothing to do but weep together. We have been a community grieving with each other all week.

Anger rises after someone has died. And we long for a place or person into which our fury can go. We often rage at doctors who have been neglectful or have made mistakes. We take out our fury on family members and friends. Anger caused by grief needs a place to go.

If we can't find an outside recipient, we turn anger on ourselves. We let guilt and regret consume our minds. Staying awake through the night, rehashing what we "should" have done or who we "could" have been, causes day-time irritation and moodiness. Anger caused by grief can be consuming.

Life gets dreary and sadder when anger has the final say.

On the Friday after the massacre at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston South Carolina, family members gathered to speak directly to the perpetrator of this horrific crime. Within two days of the murders, they had enough courage to look at the man who killed their loved ones and speak. "May God have mercy on you."

Forgiveness is the antidote to anger caused by grief. Not surface forgiveness but deep down authentic forgiveness. Not the kind of forgiveness that is based on obligation to God or to a religious institution. Coming back from grief, being free to move forward and speak clearly about the sadness and despair, includes forgiving ourselves and forgiving others.

I admit that if a family member of mine had been gunned down in their church, my first reaction would not have been to forgive the shooter. And I am sure the act of forgiving on that first Friday after the racist attacks was bitter and difficult. But I know that forgiveness is a way of healing after death.

Forgiveness, it's said, is the gift we give ourselves.

I believe that this is true. To hold fast to anger, to grip a grudge, to hate without relief, is sure to trap us in a life of sorrow and sadness. To forgive ourselves and others is a way to heal after loss.

I am not a proponent of pretend-forgiveness. In my view, we cannot forgive ourselves until we admit our guilt and regret, feel what these difficult emotions are doing to our bodies and souls, and let them go. And we cannot forgive others until we have explored the ways that we are torturing ourselves with self-blame and shame.

Coming back from grief happens when we forgive ourselves for whatever it is we "could'a, should'a, would'a" done. Seeing grief as our spiritual teacher enables us to have compassion towards ourselves and then towards another.

I do not feel compassion for the man who killed the nine worshipers in Charleston. I am not suggesting that compassion for racist murderers is a goal of grief and comeback. I do trust that forgiveness is born of compassion and compassion is born of grief. We are all in this situation together. These deaths have touched everyone.

As you proceed to process all that has happened and consider your losses with love for the people who have died, both far and near, be gentle with yourself. Have compassion for your anger, guilt, and despair. Choose forgiveness over vengeance. We make this world a better place when forgiveness has the final word.

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