

TAMING THE TIGER

COPING WITH WORRY DURING GRIEF

Grief is not a simple emotion. It is an extremely complex mix of many different emotions, all of which seem to come at us at the same time. When someone very dear to us has died, we grapple simultaneously with intense feelings of sadness, nagging regrets and anger, fear and wonder about the meaning of life, and our own mortality, as well as endless worries about how we will cope in the future without our loved one.



The impact that grief can have on our ability to function effectively in daily life is similar to the effect that a four-legged stool has on a magnificent and powerful tiger. The renowned Methodist minister Rev. William H. Hinson explains why animal trainers carry a four-legged stool when they go into a cage of wild animals. They have their whips, of course, and their pistols are at their sides. But invariably they also carry a stool. Hinson says it is the most important tool of the trainer. The trainer holds the stool by the back and thrusts the legs of the stool toward the face of the wild animal. Those who know maintain that the animal tries to focus on all four legs simultaneously, a kind of paralysis overwhelms the animal, and it becomes tame, weak, and disabled because its attention is fragmented.

Sound familiar? How many different things are you trying to focus on right now in the wake of your loss? Too many things, and a sort of mental paralysis sets in. We get overwhelmed. We don't know what to do so we don't do anything. We just shut down. Or worse, we keep going and create even more pain for ourselves. When someone close to us dies, the number of things to worry about can be debilitating.

But think about worry for a moment. Worry is taking responsibility for something over which you have no control. When you find yourself immobilized by the worries of grief, try this. Take a sheet of paper and draw a line vertically down the middle of the page. On the left side of the line list all the things about your situation that you can control. On the right side list all the things you cannot control. The left side becomes your "to do" list, and the right side a list of things you hand off. Coping with the worries associated with loss is about being strategic. Developing the skill of discernment between what you do and do not control, as early as possible in the worrying, will identify quickly what to let go of. We hand off worries to the person who can actually effect change, or to our higher power who controls it all. Breathe, relax, focus, discern, and hand off. You can stop pouring energy into things or people you do not control.

