

—Endings and Losses—

By Trina Swerdlow, BFA, CCHT

Just being alive means having to face many beginnings and endings. Depending on how we handle them, both can offer us important life lessons. Since most of us have a natural instinct to avoid dealing with death, it's no wonder that we often resort to fight-or-flight responses when we're faced with endings and losses.

Clearly, some of us face endings more easily than others. And having strong coping mechanisms certainly helps us to fully embrace endings. At the same time, others avoid endings altogether by resorting to the "flight mode." As a Certified Clinical Hypnotherapist, I've seen this happen when a client cancels his or her last appointment to avoid saying good-bye. In this case, a full completion experience is missed—both the celebratory aspect of accomplishment, as well as the sadness that can come from closing a chapter of emotional connectedness and support.

Another way of avoiding the vulnerability of an ending is by going into the "fight mode." Either way, avoidance keeps us from the completion that often comes from embracing the full cycle. And, the positive side of avoidance is when it is experienced as nature's way of protecting us from being completely overwhelmed by a loss—when we simply aren't able to handle the extent of the trauma all at once. Then, thankfully, our own natural defenses come forward to let us process the feelings at our own pace.

For example, Charlie's "fight response" to his wife's unexpected death in an auto accident was to stay angry for years. Filled with blame and rage for how she ruined his life, he thought of every way that she could've and should've avoided the accident. During that time he simply wasn't strong enough to accept this horrific loss and embrace his vulnerability. As a result, his blood pressure went up, and his ability to sleep well went down; then his overall health began to decline.

These challenges eventually led him to seek help. With support, Charlie was ready to let go of his anger and deal with his loss. His emotional floodgates opened only when he was able to face his wife's death and the loss of his marriage. By embracing the various stages of the grief cycle he was finally able to make peace with his wife and himself. As a result, he discovered softer parts in himself that he had never known before.

Family members and friends told Charlie that he became a more loving person for having grieved his tragic loss. By courageously facing this painful ending, eventually he was able to open his heart to life again.

In my private practice, I sometimes hold the flashlight for clients who are embracing losses. A small book I often recommend is, *How to Survive the Loss of a Love*, by Harold Bloomfield, M.D., Melba Colgrove, Ph.D., and Peter McWilliams. This book guides readers through three stages of recovery:

- Shock/Denial/Numbness
- Fear/Anger/Depression
- Understanding/Acceptance/Moving On

How to Survive the Loss of a Love, refers to many types of losses and describes what loss feels like. For example, it clarifies how losses can be either subtle or dramatic. Obvious losses include the death of someone you love (including a pet), separation, divorce, or the end of an affair. Less obvious losses include the loss of a job, health, teachers, schools, safety (after being burglarized or attacked), money, friends, or even the loss of an important dream. In addition, there are losses that are related to the aging process, which include loss of youth, attractiveness, hair, sex drive, and loss of work upon retirement.

Another book I often share with clients is a book that has inspired me for many years, *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal*, by Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D. Dr. Remen believes that if we want to live fully, then we need to listen from the soul to one another's stories. This author shares insights from her vast experience with her many patients suffering with life-threatening illnesses. In addition, Dr. Remen also tells stories of her own personal challenges and the wisdom that she's gleaned from being a long-term survivor of a chronic illness. This New York Times bestselling book is filled with inspiring stories exploring suffering, the mystery of life, and the transformation that can open our hearts wider...when we are able to look for meaning.

Oh, the complex task of being human; births and deaths, joys and sorrows filling our years. I say, thank goodness we can find other folks to paddle with as we navigate these ever-changing waters we call life. And, that just for today we make time to appreciate the moment, our loved ones, and the glorious fresh air and sunshine that

surround us. *Ahhh...savoring the mystery of it all...the beginnings, endings, and all the precious juice in between.*

Name and client details changed for confidentiality.

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