

Grief and Physical Exercises

By Henya Shanun-Klein, Ph.D.

The value of regular physical exercises has been well documented. It has special importance to the physical and mental well being of the bereaved:

In parental bereavement in particular, it represents a re-engagement in Outward Steps. In others words, the parent reconnects to the outside world – he or she takes necessary steps in the lifelong process of readjustment to the new reality.

In general, a grieving person may feel that as a result of his/her loss his/her capabilities have been diminished. Engagement in physical exercises therefore, may signify a shift in focus - from a perception of bodily limitations – to bodily capacities, and from illness to health. A shift from not caring about oneself to caring, and on a general note, from despair to hope.

Typical to some bereaved persons is an ongoing inner conflict between a wish to die and join the deceased, and a wish to live. ‘Exercising to death’ or the abuse of physical exercises, may describe those who wish to die. These individuals may not be aware of their intentions. Paradoxically, they may appear as if they take good care of themselves. However, the abuse of exercise is the ‘give away.’ This is just another disguise for self-destructiveness.

Grieving depletes both physical and mental energy – grieving is fatiguing. But although exercising may be fatiguing as well, it also energizes. Therefore, when the grief is acute, if one can muster some energy it is best recommended to do gentle exercises, such as water exercises (tears cannot be seen in the water), or walking.

We need to remember that in spite of some similarities in grieving, each individual grieves differently. For those individuals that usually tend to use strenuous activity to ‘work off’ stress, gentle exercises may not be suffice even when grieving. These individuals may choose much more strenuous exercises. However, we all need to be aware of our true intentions, not to cross the fine line between ‘use’ and ‘abuse’ of exercises.