

Tips from Article: “Autistic Grief Is Not Like Neurotypical Grief.”

(Written by Karla Fisher; Posted in online resource: THINKING PERSON'S GUIDE TO AUTISM; Autism news and resources: from autistic people, professionals, and parents)

ASD Grief Things to Think About

(**ASD**: Autism Spectrum Disorder, **NT**: Neurotypical)

- May or may not cry or overtly show emotions. Alternatively, emotions may be delayed or very extreme when they do come.
- Grieving will very possibly manifest itself via increased ASD symptoms (increased sensory processing issues, shutdowns, meltdowns, decreased social abilities, etc.).
- May be unable to articulate what is wrong or talk about feelings.
- Increased desire to be alone to work things out (this is opposite of most NTs who will feel better by sharing how they feel).
- May not relate to many emotional or relational concepts designed by NTs.

Things That May Help ASD Persons

- Taking care of the physical part of the body (nutrition, sleep and exercise).
- Alone time.
- Learning about ASD symptoms (increased awareness about sensory issues and taking care to avoid triggers).
- Time spent with obsession.
- Getting involved in viable projects (focusing on helping others).
- Setting realistic goals/expectations for recovery (grieving symptoms can last for longer than 1 year).
- Discovering/exploring new areas of interest or special interests. Many people with ASD are avid explorers or wanderers. Take some time to explore or wander. Take up an instrument or new language, etc. Learning helps to calm and to process feelings.
- Understanding that your way of grieving is not like everyone else's (the NT world) and that your way is just as valid.

For Therapists and Caregivers/Loved Ones:

- Make sure the ASD person is taking care of the physical part (nutrition, sleep and exercise).
- Give space.
- Understand that they may not want to speak of feelings or even be aware of them.
- Teach about ASD symptoms and symptom management versus focusing on feelings or talking about feelings.
- Send clients to research ASD cultures and send them to places such as Wrong Planet to make discoveries about themselves as a person with ASD. Just like NTs, people with ASD like to share things like this, but our language will sometimes be sufficiently different that we will find comfort only within our own kind. (We can speak more bluntly about things like death for example.)
- Validate their way of grieving (not crying at a funeral does not make them a monster)
- Allow more time to process information (keep concepts/data minimal). Some sources recommend two to three times the amount of time for CBT than an NT client needs.
- Encourage special projects and/or involvement in activities that are related to special interests. People on the spectrum are often helped by focusing on learning/doing.
- Learn where the autistic person's emotional and relationship understanding currently are and teach from that, rather than from the currently existing NT models. If the person cannot articulate their own model, begin with the ones in this article as an example and then show the NT models. Encourage them to start talking about how they relate with respect to these two models. This will start the process. From here, work can be done to increase emotional language and awareness.
- Encourage exploring or wandering.