

Exploring The "F" Words

by Russell Friedman & John W. James of The Grief Recovery Institute

This column is the first of a trilogy in which we will probe some of the **myths and misinformation** about three words that are very important in the process of Grief Recovery. The words are *FORGIVENESS*, *FEAR*, and *FAMILIARITY*. *FORGIVENESS* is the subject of this article.

It is almost a pleasure to write about forgiveness rather than talking about it. There is no subject that provokes more argument, more rigidity, or more pain than the idea of forgiveness. In fact, if forgiveness were not such an important stepping stone to successful Grief Recovery, we would not bring it up at all.

Forgiveness is one of the least understood concepts in the world, and is especially problematic in English speaking countries. Most people seem to convert the word forgive into the word condone. The definitions in our Webster's Dictionary illustrate the problem.

FORGIVEto cease to feel resentment against [an offender].

CONDONE.... to pardon or overlook voluntarily; esp.: to treat as if trivial, harmless, or of no importance.

If we believe the two words to be synonymous, it would be virtually impossible to forgive. The implication that we might trivialize a horrible event is clearly unacceptable. However, if we used the top definition of forgive we would be on the right track.

For example, a griever might harbor a tremendous amount of resentment against the person who murdered his/her child. That resentment might create and consume a lot of energy which in turn might mask the pain and sadness about the death of the child. As long as the griever stays focused on the murderer they may find it impossible to grieve and complete their relationship with the child who died. The resentment, or lack of forgiveness of the murderer gives more importance and energy to the murderer than to the child. Successful recovery from the pain caused by loss requires that we focus our energy on completing our relationship with our loved one who died. By *not forgiving* the murderer we almost guarantee staying incomplete with the child.

Grief is the normal and natural emotional response to loss. It is essential to correctly identify the loss *the death of the child*—so a process of completion can begin. The example about the murderer and the child can be applied to the perpetrator and the victim of any kind of event.

If the death of a loved one was a suicide, you might need to forgive them for taking their own life, so that you could then complete what was emotionally incomplete for you when they died.

Forgiveness is not our objective. Forgiveness is one of the tools we may need to employ in order to complete the relationship that ended or changed, due to death or divorce or other life circumstance. The subject of forgiveness is massive and carries with it many, many beliefs, passed on from generation to generation. We offer this column and the following questions and answers to help you determine if the definitions that were taught to you are helpful to you or if they need some updating.

Exploring The "F" Words #2---Fear

by Russell Friedman & John W. James of The Grief Recovery Institute

In our last article we explored the impact that lack of forgiveness might have on our hearts, our minds, and our bodies. This month we are going to focus our emotional microscope on the possible consequences of using **FEAR** to guide our recovery from significant emotional loss.

Retained FEAR is cumulative and cumulatively negative. If the griever does not feel safe enough to communicate about their fears, then the fears themselves appear to be real and begin to define and limit the griever. In a play on that old phrase, "you are what you eat,"... "you create what you fear."

Fear is one of the most **normal** emotional responses to loss. The fear of the unknown, the fear of the unfamiliar, the fear of adapting to a dramatic change in all of our familiar habits, behaviors, and feelings.

Fear is one of the most **common** emotional responses to loss. For example, when a spouse dies: How can I go on without them? Or, after a divorce: Where will I find another mate as wonderful, as beautiful?

Those fears are normal and natural responses to the end of long-term relationships. If acknowledged and allowed, those fears and the thoughts and feelings they generate, can be **completed** and diminish without serious aftermath. As we learn to acknowledge and complete our relationship to our fear, we can then move on to the more important task of grieving and completing the relationship that ended or changed.

But, if we have been socialized to believe fear is unnatural or bad, then we tend to bury our fears to avoid feeling judged by our fellows who seem to want us to feel better very quickly after a loss.

There is also danger in that we have been socialized to express fear indirectly as anger. While there is often some unexpressed anger attached to incomplete relationships, we usually discover that it accounts for a very small percentage of unresolved grief. It is also important not to confuse Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's "stages of dying," which includes anger, with the totally unique responses that follow a loss.

An even larger danger looms in the fact that we develop relationships with and loyalties to our fears. We believe them as if they were real. We defend them with our lives, and to some extent, it is, indeed, our lives that we are gambling with. As we develop a fierce relationship with our fears, we lose sight of our original objective, which was to grieve and complete the relationship that has ended or changed. **It is as if we have shifted all of our energy to the fear so we do not have to deal with the painful emotions caused by the loss.**

Reminders of loved ones who have died, or relationships that have ended will often take us on a rocket ride to the PAST, where we are liable to dig up a little regret. After thinking about that regret for a while, we might rocket out to the FUTURE, where we will generate some worry or FEAR. The point is that those fears we generate, while they feel totally real, are often the result of some **out-of-the-moment** adventures. It may be helpful to remember this little phrase: "My feelings are real, but they do not necessarily represent reality."

While FEAR is often the emotional response to loss, in our society, **ISOLATION** is frequently the behavioral reaction to the fear. If isolation is the problem, then participation is a major part of the solution. Fight your way through the fear so that you will not isolate further. Recovery from significant emotional loss is not achieved alone

Exploring The "F" Words #3---Familiarity

by Russell Friedman & John W. James of The Grief Recovery Institute What you practice is what you get good at! [The Grief Recovery Handbook](#) makes constant reference to the fact that you must **grieve and complete** your relationship to your **pain**. Lacking Grief Recovery skills, griever often begin to identify themselves by the pain they have experienced. In a relatively short time, the griever becomes familiar with that pained identity. The griever may also develop a very strong loyalty to the now familiar pain. No one wants to give up things they own or feel very familiar with.

What you practice is what you get good at!

In a society that does not encourage or support effective grief recovery actions, it is typical for griever to find themselves **isolating** from friends, family and co-workers. In an attempt to escape the very real sense of being judged or criticized for having the normal feelings caused by loss, the griever may begin to avoid all people or events that might lead to having to defend their feelings or to act as if they were recovered. The griever becomes very familiar with and loyal to the **isolation** that seems to protect them.

What you practice is what you get good at!

We have been taught, incorrectly, that grievors want and need to be alone. We have been taught, incorrectly, that grievors do not want to talk about the losses they have experienced. The griever, caught between the treatment they receive from well intentioned friends and their own fears, begins to become very familiar with being alone.

What you practice is what you get good at!

So far we have identified Pain, Isolation, and Loneliness as highly probable areas of familiarity for grieving people. It is tragic when a griever, already struggling with the normal and natural emotions caused by loss, is further limited by some habits that do not enhance or encourage **completion** and **recovery** from significant emotional loss.

Familiar is not necessarily good, it is only familiar. Comfortable is not necessarily good, it is often just familiar. The old cliché, "better the devil I know then the devil I don't know," almost explains our loyalty to the familiarity of Pain, Isolation and Loneliness. Change can be difficult and awkward at the best of times, and it is clearly difficult for grieving people for whom the whole universe may seem upside down.

It is essential that we begin to become familiar with actions, skills and behaviors that will lead to successful recovery from significant emotional losses. It does not require any more energy to practice helpful things than unhelpful ones. [The Grief Recovery Handbook](#) is an excellent source of appropriate and effective Grief Recovery tools that can lead to completion of familiar behaviors or beliefs that are not helping us improve our lives. In a prior article of this series we said, "Familiarity can create a powerful illusion that change is not necessary, that growth is not possible." You must fight off the illusion of comfort caused by familiarity. It is not your nature to live a life of Pain, Isolation and Loneliness. It is your nature to be loving and lovable, trusting and trustable. Practicing the principles of grief recovery will help you become familiar with your natural ability to be happy.

What you practice is what you get good at!