

How does one cope with the numbness that comes with grief?

That numbness is one of the symptoms of being in shock, which is simply our organism's way of helping us cope with excessive demands on our emotions and physical strength. What shock feels like varies from one person to another, but generally in time there may appear brief moments where you feel like yourself - able to feel emotions, able to pray, able to make a little decision. It is quite natural to wonder about whether one might have done more for the person before they died, and that may tie up so much energy that one is left numb. As for what one did manage to do in the past, one may consider all those acts as expressions of love and caring.

As for what one was not able to do, consider that only God is without fault or failing, and we are mortal and fallible, so that our provision and foresight cannot be perfect. It is also good to remember that each one of us is responsible for the conduct of his/her own life. Some live their life very carefully and with measure and restraint. Others live their life with reckless abandon. Both can be heroic and saintly, but it is not for us to dictate or control how another chooses to spend their life energy.

We can be grateful for the times where we managed to connect well with others, and for those imperfect connections, we can only sigh and remember the good ones. The only useful course is for us to respect the mystery of another's freedom - even God makes a lot of room for each person's freedom of conscience and of conduct.

Another possibility is that one may be numb from anger, which is itself a natural mechanism designed to give us strength to act in a difficult situation. When in danger or under threat - either ourselves or someone we love or feel responsible for - or in the event of a loss, anger is triggered. If we could translate anger in danger into words, it would sound like: "How dare you threaten me/them! Back off!" and the anger from loss might sound like: "Hey, I've lost someone/something here, and I want him/it back!"

This anger which comes from loss is resolved when one of the following happens: (1) the thing lost is restored; (2) something of greater value is received in compensation; or (3) we simply accept the loss and let go, or release what has been lost. In the case of the death of a loved one, it is only over a period of time that we can hope to release the one who has died. We can do it spiritually right away, and even intellectually, but emotionally, the complete release and letting go of the person is made up of countless little acts of letting go in particular moments and circumstances - much as a bouquet is made up of many individual flowers.

As for praying, this is the time to experience in practice what we've heard Paul say in Romans 8: when we don't know how to pray or can't pray the spirit in us moans and groans, and the Holy Spirit who knows what we mean lifts our prayer to the Father, who receives it with love. So we don't need to worry about what words to pray, about the tumultuous feelings surging through us, or the numbness... or about the fact that we can't even bring our self to sit in the pew or chair for more than 11 seconds...

What you can do is, wherever you are, gently allow yourself to become somewhat aware of the groaning within you, and groan and moan wholeheartedly - don't fight it - just let it be, as a true expression of who you are and what you are going through at this time, and let yourself do it knowing you are in God's sight. Much as a child comes before Mommy all full of mud or bleeding and weeping from a fall, letting the sunshine of Mommy's love wash over you. You are entitled to mourn over your beloved, and your grief can be expected to be in direct proportion to your love for him. In whatever way your grief manifests itself, you can be proud of it, and let it rise up to him in God's presence as the best way you can love him, for now, until this too changes.