



WALKING THROUGH GRIEF CAN HELP ANSWER A LOSS

BY KELLY MATTHEWS

Travel by foot has long been associated with learning and processing our thoughts and emotions. In many religious and philosophical traditions, making a pilgrimage on foot is a mode of self-education — a journey through which one learns to rely on others and to strengthen one's own inner resources.

Pilgrims may recite prayers as they are walking. They may use a rosary or japa mala beads to count their incantations. They may walk barefoot, or even on their knees, as they approach their final destination. All of these are ways to connect the physical to the metaphysical, to link bodily motion to the brain's journey as it strives to make sense of the world.

I've lost a close friend in difficult circumstances, and I have found that walking is one of the best ways to manage circuitous questions that preoccupy my thinking in the wake of profound loss. Working my way through grief has included talking with a therapist, close friends, and certainly my siblings and other family members, but one of the most helpful activities has been a long daily walk. Each day,

I make my own personal pilgrimage through the neighborhood my friend and I shared, putting one foot in front of the other as I learn what grief has to teach me.

As a teacher and academic, I have also sought out resources to help me understand what I am thinking and feeling. One of the most helpful has been the book *The Grieving Brain: The Surprising Science of How We Learn from Love and Loss* by Mary-Frances O'Connor. Drawing upon connections to John Bowlby's theory of attachment, O'Connor explains that the limbic center of our brain forms primal attachments to people we love, and these are not easily undone. It is often hard for others outside our circle of loss to comprehend the length of time it may take us to work through grief when a loved one is gone.

According to O'Connor, grief-centered rumination is also a normal feature of loss. Rumination tends to focus on a few common topics, all of which have been true for me: emotional reactions to the loss, its unfairness, its meaning and long-term consequences, other people's reactions

to my grief and its impact on my relationships, and plenty of what-ifs circling around how things could have turned out differently.

My walks don't always follow a planned route. Instead, I let my feet carry me wherever I need to go, for as long as it takes, until my thoughts and sadness settle down and I can resume my obligations for the day.

There are no shortcuts, I am finding. But the brain can make new neural pathways, whether that is through our neighborhoods, as in my case, or along a centuries-old map, as for religious pilgrims. I hope, as O'Connor suggests, that eventually I will be able to transform my grief into a learning experience. Until then, I am walking a new path each day.



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