

I'm learning to make peace with my grief

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Until this year, I wasn't well acquainted with grief – and I would have preferred to keep it that way.

But last March, when my dad died, grief took up residence in my house. Turns out, grief is a terrible roommate. Grief keeps you up at all hours, leaving you bone tired. Grief suppresses your appetite. Its mere presence is enough to turn you off food. Grief plagues your family in the same way, leaving your support network as exhausted, depleted and cranky as you are.

Sometimes, you can muscle your roommate into a back bedroom and try to pretend it's gone away. But grief is shifty. It quickly picks the lock on the door. When it gets out, it wreaks double the havoc.

Grief is messy. Laundry piles up. Dust bunnies colonize. While you're too busy chasing grief out the back door to care, it's hard to start healing when your haven has been turned upside down by a selfish roommate with zero regard for order.

Grief is socially awkward. People shy away from you because you're carting your roommate everywhere. It blurts out inappropriate things. It bristles at a perceived slight. Your roommate is impatient, and, oftentimes, not very likeable. You learn that people are afraid of your roommate. No one wants an uninvited guest, and grief doesn't RSVP. It just barges in on your life whether you are expecting it or not.

After a while, you learn to keep your roommate at home. It's the considerate thing to do. You don't let your sobbing plus-one come to dinner or drag your morose companion to your morning meeting. You realize quickly that your roommate is greasy and unpopular.

Once your friends and colleagues haven't seen your roommate out and about for a while, they start to forget about your new living arrangement. Some think grief has packed up. Others know it's still lurking and urge you to kick it to the curb.

“Take a trip!” they say. Or “A change of scene will do you good!” As if your roommate would let you off the hook that easily. No matter where you go, grief jumps out of your suitcase like one of those balloons that rears up and smacks you in the face when you try to punch it in the throat.

After a while, you start to negotiate with your roommate. You learn that you can still function when bone tired. You figure out how to channel your pre-grief responses, so you can act almost as you did before your roommate moved in. You get used to sequestering your roommate at home, and sometimes – when you're having a really good day – you forget about grief for an hour or an evening.

But the fact is that this roommate is here to stay. Over time, grief might leave you alone for longer stretches. But you're never going to fully get rid of it. So, you start to accommodate your roommate a little bit better. If grief has kept you up or knocked the wind out of you, you are a bit more prepared. If grief has left your house messy, strewn takeout boxes in the recycling bin or caused you to skip out on an activity, you

understand that your roommate is struggling, and you're more forgiving. You start to be more selective about who you invite into your life – mostly it's people who can accept that your weirdo roommate is playing drums in the basement or banging around in the attic like a wound-up squirrel. They get that your roommate is annoying, but love you enough to put up with it.

You begin to see that your roommate is forcing you to deal with your emotions. Grief isn't just going to slink away, so you've got little choice but to acknowledge it. You begin to understand that some of the things you were focusing on weren't as important as getting to know your roommate. And by consciously prioritizing this relationship, grief is less likely to rear its head at inconvenient times.

Once you realize you can't chase it away, you acquiesce and sit down with grief. Your new roommate is permanent, so you start to be more intentional about how you interact. You make room on the couch for grief while you write in your journal. You spend some time with grief listening to a favourite song or looking at photographs. You invite grief to join a conversation with a trusted friend over a cup of tea. You let grief sob and get messy and be angry and unpredictable, and that's enough to satisfy grief's need for affirmation – at least for now.

It turns out grief is only a terrible roommate if you let it run around unchecked.

Some people say that after grief has lived with you for a very long time, it's possible to move beyond a détente. You find a way to laugh together, remembering happy times. Grief ties you to someone you love – and helps you remember the quirky and unique qualities that make you smile even through tears.

It's hard to imagine grief as a welcome companion, but if you take the long view, it makes a lot of sense. I won't ever stop missing my dad. So, I'm going to make up the spare room, put fresh sheets on the bed and make grief feel welcome. Befriending my new roommate may seem unlikely, but it's a lot wiser than trying to live with an enemy.

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