

What's the Difference Between Grieving and Self-Pity?

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Someone recently asked me, “How do I know if I’m stuck in self-pity or grieving?”

It may appear as if you’re having a pity party after a devastating loss, but it’s normal to withdraw and lick your wounds. You want to curl up in a corner somewhere or go to bed and pull the covers over your head. You wrestle with God asking honest questions: “Why did this happen?” “Why now?” and “When will this end?” You might have moments of believing you’re the only one suffering.

Self-pity and grief can overlap, especially after the shock and numbness of loss wears off.

Grieving is about protesting the pain, feeling all the emotions, and slowly working through your anger, sadness, guilt, shame or frustration. It takes time to recognize, name and own your feelings. It takes time to talk and journal about what you’re experiencing.

In contrast to grief, with self-pity you *excessively dwell* on yourself and your sorrows. There comes a point when you need to refocus on something or someone other than your own pain. A time when you realize other people have accidents, have lost a loved one or faced the loss of their home after a tornado or fire.

In unhealthy self-pity you keep seeing yourself as a victim and the only person genuinely suffering. As Rich Exley wrote, “We can hug our hurts and make a shrine out of our sorrows or we can offer them to God as a sacrifice of praise. The choice is ours.”

Self-pity is when you refuse to see the little things you can be grateful for, even in the midst of the pain. Self-pity is rejecting the idea that others face challenges and hurt deeply. Self-pity is resisting the thought that one day God can bring something good of what is terrible.

On the other hand, self-pity is not whitewashing your misfortune with comments like “It’s all good.” Or comparing your pain to someone else’s and deciding you should not grieve.

Your pain is your pain. Recognize it rather than pretend it does not exist. For example, Annie was waiting at a red light when someone behind her failed to stop and pushed her car into the car in front of her. Her car was totaled, and she ached all over. When I saw her five days later,

she told me about the accident, but she also wanted me to know the blessings she'd received. She told me her husband was in town close by, which was unusual during the workweek, and he immediately came to the accident. "My friends have pampered me with their time and attention," she said. "It's a huge disappointment because I really liked my car. It's also a real inconvenience, but I'm dealing with it as best I can." Annie is honestly dealing with her feelings of loss.

In contrast, Whitney is not. Three years after Whitney's husband walked out on her and their two children, she continues to be bitter and self-focused. When one friend mentioned that a mutual friend's husband was dying of cancer, Whitney barely acknowledged the news. Immediately she shared all that she and the children have faced and their latest challenges. Referring to their mutual friend, Whitney finally said, "Well, at least she wasn't rejected by her husband and left financially destitute."

Recently I lamented to a friend about how upset I was about a difficult situation in my family. I did what I normally do. I beat myself up for feeling sad and said, "I realize I have so much to be grateful for. Besides things could be much worse."

"Yes, it could be worse, but remember what you told me after my husband died? I was afraid I was complaining about my circumstances too much and stuck in self-pity. You reminded me that my pain was my pain. It was okay to feel bad. Acknowledging the hurt was the only way I could get to the place of accepting what had happened."

Don't you love it when someone throws your words back at you? But she was right. My pain was my pain, and it was real. I wasn't to wallow in it and dwell on it. Instead, I needed to acknowledge it, grieve what happened and come to terms with it. I'm still working through the sadness and anger, but one day I will reach a place of acceptance. Some people might think I'm focused only on my sorrows, but I know I'm grieving.

Scripture:

"The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit." (Psalm 34:18 ESV).

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