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Cloe Shasha Brooks: Hello, TED Community, you are watching a TED interview series called How to Deal with Difficult Feelings. I'm your host, Cloe Shasha Brooks, and a curator at TED. This past year has been full of both personal and collective grief. And this grief has taken many forms. And to dive deeper into the world of understanding and managing grief, I'll be speaking first with Nina Westbrook, a marriage and family therapist who has supported clients through loss. Hi, Nina.

00:34

Nina Westbrook: Hi, Cloe, good to see you. Thank you so much for having me.

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CSB: Thanks for joining us. Nina, you have talked about how grief can be about the loss of people and tangible things. But that it can also be about the loss of dreams, something that many people have experienced over the past year. Can you give me some examples of grieving for lost dreams and talk about what it means to experience this kind of grief?

00:59

NW: Absolutely. I believe that grief can take so many different forms, and I think oftentimes when we think about grief, we associate it with the emotional process that takes place when we're coping with the death of a loved one. I don't know. It's just not as common to associate grief or correlate grief with the loss of a dream. So when you think about dreams and when they begin and how deeply they're rooted into our daily lives and our routines and how much our dreams determine our decision-making process and the choices that we make throughout the course of our lives, they hold a pretty significant amount of space in our minds and in our hearts. Imagine a child who, you know, from a young age, we begin to dream and they begin to dream about becoming an astronaut one day and walking on the moon or becoming a professional athlete. And then as we grow older, we begin to focus in on what our needs are and what our wants are, and our dreams begin to look more like acquiring our dream careers or job positions or opening businesses, having children or finding love. And the reality is that these dreams do not always work out and manifest themselves in a way that we have imagined, right? And that can be so devastating for so many people. The loss of careers and jobs or our divorces, the loss of relationships, or infertility can all be extremely devastating things and those types of devastating events propel you into the emotional process that takes place during grief.

02:59

CSB: Let's bring a question up from the audience. What are comforting things to do or say when someone is grieving? So I guess someone else in this case.

03:07

NW: That's a really amazing question. A lot of the time, simply being present and offering support and encouragement is really going to be important when you're trying to support someone else through their grief. I think communication is also important, asking that person, "What can I do," or "What do you need from me in this moment and how can I best support you," is kind of going to be the best way to figure out how to support this person. Sometimes they just want someone to listen to. Sometimes they need someone to make them laugh or to help, you know, keep them distracted for a moment or sometimes they just need someone to be around them. It just really depends on the person, since grief is so subjective in the way that we go through it.

04:01

CSB: Totally. And let's go right into some strategies, too. So I'm sure you have strategies for managing the grief of lost dreams. How do people pick themselves back up after that?

04:13

NW: You want to give yourself permission to grieve, first off. And it's not a linear journey, there is going to be lots of ups and downs that take place. Some days you're going to be OK and some days you might cry and sometimes you might go a month without crying. And then one day everything comes crashing down all at once. It's just a matter of giving yourself permission to go through these feelings and knowing and reassuring yourself that this is OK and it's normal. And also keeping in mind that it's OK to feel joy even in those moments of sadness that you're going to experience when you're grieving. The other thing that I think is really important is just to be proactive in the grieving process. Don't ignore your grief. You can seek support. You can't be afraid to ask for support or lean on others, people that you trust, friends, family members, coworkers, whomever it may be for support. And then making a plan, making a new plan. Mourning happens over time. What it's doing, what we're doing, and all of the emotions that were going through during that mourning process is we're literally detaching ourselves emotionally from the dream that we are mourning or from the object that we're mourning. And what that's doing is opening yourself up and making space for new dreams and new experiences and new opportunities in the future. So goal setting and planning is going to be key. A lot of the time we really focus on plan A. So this is a great time to pivot and focus on planning for a new future and a new outcome.

06:08

CSB: Absolutely. And just one final quick question for you, which is that sometimes people get mad at themselves for not getting over their grief. What would you say to those people?

06:18

NW: It's really important to keep healing at the forefront of your mind. And I think that understanding the grief process and going through the ups and downs and knowing that that's all a part of it, you have to be patient with yourself, you have to give yourself grace and understand that you're going to have good days, you're going to have bad days. But when it all comes down to it, if you're keeping the idea of healing in the forefront, then you can focus your energy and your time into that process and going through it in a way that is productive to your emotional well-being in the future.

06:59

CSB: Wonderful. Well, thank you so much for this conversation, Nina. We have come to the end, but really grateful to you for joining us. Take care.

07:07

NW: Thank you so much for having me. Take care.