

# DROWNING DOESN'T ALWAYS LOOK LIKE DROWNING...NEITHER DOES GRIEF

*Posted on April 30, 2018 by Jennifer Stern, LISW*



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I just read a very informative article about drowning by Mario Vittone. *Drowning is not the violent, splashing call for help that most people expect. Drowning is almost always a deceptively quiet event. The waving, splashing and yelling that dramatic conditioning (television) prepares us to look for is rarely seen in real life.*

The same is often true of grief.

If you have family or friends who have lost a loved one (all of us) try to remember that grief, like drowning, can be deceptively quiet. We must be mindful of this disconnect between what we believe deep grief will look like and how it often presents. Deriving from deliberate courage, of innate survival instincts, those who live with grief often appear “okay”. They are going to work, showing up for family functions, honoring their obligations, nodding appropriately...they are dressed and going through the motions of life. They look like they are floating (if not swimming) yet on the inside they feel they are drowning, unable to flail their arms or ask for help.

*Sometimes the most common indication that someone is drowning is that they don't look as if they're drowning. They may just look as if they are treading water and looking up at the deck. One way to be sure? Ask them, "Are you alright?" .*

It takes herculean effort to stay afloat during the rough waters of grief. There is no rescuing someone from their grief but we can offer support to help them stay afloat.

- Compassion, connection and care are ways to support those who are living with grief.
- Ask about their grief: *Tell me what your days are like. Have you been sleeping? What is most difficult? Can I bring you a meal? Would you like to go for a walk? A movie? Can I bring you groceries? What would be most comforting to you?*
- Remember and talk about the person they are mourning.
- Take them a plant, a picture of times shared, a book or a meal.
- Send cards, emails, texts.
- Stay connected.

If you are the one living with grief and feel you might be drowning have the tenacity and courage to proactively seek help. Be it friends, family, co workers, your doctor or clergy, get help. Do not wait. Do not wait to see if someone will notice that you are drowning. Tell them. Have the courage to let people in. To ask people to swim alongside of you. To let people know what you need. Find your life vest through therapy, support groups, online groups, your clergy.

Learning to tread water is as important in grief as it is in swimming:

- Rest
- Drink plenty of water
- Move your body

- Use the buddy system
- Consider what a life vest might look like for you in grief (therapy, a support group, exercise, a book discussion, gardening, journaling, daily meditations, music, art, taking a class, going to lectures, speaking to clergy...).

Do not wait until you feel yourself being pulled under. Proactively care for yourself and get the support you need to stay afloat, to learn to tread the unpredictable and often rough waters of grief.

## Comments



**Jennifer Stern, LISW** - 2018-05-04 11:50:12

One stroke at a time. You are self aware. Your awareness is what will keep you afloat. Continue to explore new ways to enjoy the things you used to love (as well as new experiences that might bring you joy now). There will be good and bad days. Your ability to recognize triggers, acknowledge your ability to tread water, and accept the best intentions of people (even when they fall short) make your ever expanding life vest key to not getting pulled under. You are swimming!!!!



**Heidi Widmar** - 2018-05-03 23:47:17

I think this very accurately describes my feeling of grief...drowning quietly without people taking notice. I am not sure if people don't take notice, I sometimes feel they do not know how to help and I can not find the words to tell them my needs. I am not sure of what I need to make the drowning stop, but I am learning. I have had so many people discredit my overwhelming feelings of grief by the words they say, which to them are well meant but unhelpful. Some days I am able to tread water and do it well. Some days not so well. It's the triggers that get me most. They creep up on me and pull me under unexpectedly. I am starting to learn a few of my potential triggers and am starting to explore the things that will become part of my life vest. Journaling is helpful, music can be a trigger so I am careful with that. I am exploring new ways to enjoy the things that I used to love to do again. At this point, I can only take it one step at a time or should I say one stroke at a time and hope it is not a back stroke.



**Jennifer Stern, LISW** - 2018-04-30 19:22:33

Eileen, Thank you. Isn't it amazing, the power of perception. What matters is your ability to stay afloat when others see you as dancing (connecting with those who will swim alongside you) .



**Jennifer Stern, LISW** - 2018-04-30 19:19:52

Sherry, The waves of grief and sadness are painful and overwhelming. Finding what soothes you is experiential. What works for one may not work for another. Keep trying to explore what offers some relief, comfort, positive distraction. It takes tenacity, courage and patience to live forward in grief. One day at a time. Take care.



**Jennifer Stern, LISW** - 2018-04-30 19:05:57

Diana, I appreciate your insight and your feedback. Examples of questions one might ask (when most feel completely overwhelmed by what to say or lean towards complete avoidance) are simply suggestions. No words will take away the grief. There really are no "right" words in grief. I believe it is about showing up. Not avoiding the discomfort, the fear or the pain of seeing someone you care for mourning the loss of their loved one.



**sherry tucker** - 2018-04-30 18:15:58

How I wish I could speak about grief in such an eloquent way. I struggle with dealing with the overwhelming waves of such sadness and grief, and while I THINK it is a good thing to write about it, I find it too painful. So painful. I am grateful for this blog.



**Diana Tolladay** - 2018-04-30 16:50:37

Drowning Doesn't Always Look Like Drowning - makes some valid points. However, to "Ask them, Are you alright?" Seriously? NOTHING is "alright" Synonyms = reasonable, fine, good, when you are grieving. Please watch this Steel Magnolias Movie CLIP - (1989) HD: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZx1W6cHw-g> and please end that sentence with "Ask them." Instead of asking "What your days are like?" Ask them What are ---day's like, the day before the day that marks when they're significant loss occurred. It took me months to see thru the fog clearly enough to recognize the day before my soulmate died MONDAY, the anxiety was building. EVERY Tuesday was an overwhelming trigger. The hour, the minute, wasn't a wave- it was a riptide in the fog, you cannot see or feel anything that's "alright" to hold onto.



**Eileen Turoff** - 2018-04-30 13:51:03

Jen, many years ago when I was in therapy I once commented that I look like I'm drowning but people on shore see me as "dancing.:" That's what my depression was like. So, obviously, read your article and totally agree with it. Thank you