

MY VIEW



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Ralph Waldo Emerson: On Grief

In the wake of recent mass shootings and other tragedies many of us are asking the same question: *“How do people recover from terrible loss?”* One answer to this question which is widely accepted is that people who experience traumatic loss recover by working slowly through the stages of grief, by seeking professional help, and by withdrawing from their normal activities to take care of themselves. I will call this the “Grief Work” approach to recovering from loss.

Who can argue with that approach? In fact, the eminent 19th century philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson does. He offers a different approach. In his article “Self-Reliance” Emerson challenges our “grief work” approach to dealing with loss and traumatic events. His philosophy can be summarized in his own words:

“Don’t hold onto your pain and wait for it to work itself through, get up and do something. Don’t make yourself a patient, don’t plump the mattress or pickle yourself in cabernet. Instead make life more demanding than it was before. Be tougher on yourself; fill your mind with your tasks and go after them hard. When we are down, we must get up and fight as best we can...not tomorrow but now.”

What a different approach to dealing with grief... Do something! Keep doing your life’s work! Emerson would say that it’s a sign of resilience (not “denial”) when a mother focuses her energy on caring for her children after her husband dies, or when a man who loses a child focuses on his work.

I would like to give 2 examples of those human beings who practiced what Emerson wrote: *“When we are down, we must get up and fight as best we can... not tomorrow but now.”*

The first example involves the veterans of World War II. Many of those in this “greatest generation” experienced terrible traumatic events during the war. Nevertheless, following the war they returned to this country and built one of the greatest economies in our history. But many of their family members and friends were frustrated and wondered: *“Why don’t these veterans talk about their traumatic experiences? Why aren’t they doing their grief work?”*

The second example of using Emerson’s the “Get on with it” approach involves my father. He had 5 children and a thriving business before he was struck down by brain cancer which left him disabled for the rest of his life. How did he respond to his traumatic injury? He just worked, worked, worked at whatever jobs he could find. His main focus and purpose was to get back to supporting his family. Because I grew up in the “grief work” culture, I was frustrated by my father’s silence about his emotional pain. *“Why wasn’t he doing his grief work?”* I would ask myself.

I think Emerson would have applauded the WWII vets and my father as ones who *“filled their minds with tasks and went after them hard.”* However, he wouldn't disparage those who utilize the current “grief work” approach. He understood that we all need to grieve in our own ways. He would agree with what we preach in TIP: *“Everyone grieves differently.”*

But by presenting us with a different approach to recovering from traumatic events, Emerson has given us something to think about. Perhaps quickly getting on with our work and our lives is a legitimate way of recovering from loss. Perhaps we should pause before judging those who deal with their grief by quickly getting on with their mission in life. Perhaps we shouldn't be so quick to advise our grief-stricken friends to take time off to “heal” and to focus on themselves.

I certainly wish that I would not have spent so much time wishing that my father had “opened up” about his suffering and more time admiring him for putting his pain aside and selflessly working to support his family.