



LETTER FROM AMERICA

**GRUMPINESS:
THE SILENT SYMPTOM OF GRIEF**

By Todd Van Beck

THE GREAT THINKERS IN THE WORLD OF THE PSYCHOLOGY OF GRIEF ARE ATTRACTED TO LISTS. THERE ARE THE "SEVEN PHASES OF THIS", THE "FOUR MANIFESTATIONS OF THAT", THE "FIVE STAGES OF THIS" AND THE LISTS GO ON AND ON.

I personally have found these grief lists to be extremely helpful in my work with bereavement support groups over the years. Psychological grief phases and stages such as anger, depression, searching, yearning, pre-occupation, somatic distress, guilt and a raft of other symptoms have been of tremendous value in helping the bereaved to label, identify and recognise just what they are experiencing.

Labelling and identifying the feelings that a griever is experiencing is a liberating experience. When a grief-stricken person begins to label, identify and recognise the tumultuous inner feelings that they are experiencing, many times the happy results of this is a kind assurance that they are not losing their minds.

However, I would like to humbly suggest adding one more emotional state to the grief lists that is currently missing. I would like to add – grumpy.

It is safe to conclude that being "grumpy" here and there, once in a while, is a part of being alive. We all get grumpy at times. Then most times it passes, but not always. When being grumpy does not pass it can turn a perfectly healthy person into a chronically grumpy one and, for some, being grumpy can last

a lifetime. When this happens in the case of a bereaved person, I would suggest that attention needs to be paid by those people who dedicate their lives to helping the bereaved.

Over the years I have had annoyances at airports across the globe that resulted in grumpiness. I have been grumpy after many business and academic meetings. If I am physically tired, or hungry, or insulted, or . . . well I am very sensitive, my being grumpy is assured. My being grumpy makes me difficult to be around.

My grumpiness, however, evaporates over time. I forget about the rude airlines clerk, I get my tummy filled with food, or I rationalise that the personal insult was innocent and the person really didn't mean it. Grumpiness usually vanishes as quickly as it is stimulated. But this does not always happen, and this is where the grief rub comes into play.

Here is a question. How does it happen that a person evolves into a slightly angry person who is slightly angry every day, all of the time, and who gets annoyed and provoked at everything and everybody all of the time? How does this under-the-radar psychology happen to a person?

"THEY HAVE POSSIBLY FAILED IN TACKLING THE EMOTIONS ASSOCIATED WITH LOSS AND GRIEF"

To prove that the psychological phenomena of grumpiness is a psychology that is 'under the radar', when was the last time any of us attended a professional seminar devoted to exploring the "Roots, Dynamics, and Treatment of Grumpiness?" I don't believe there has even been such a professional gathering, but yet there are legions of grumpy people in the world. Not temporarily grumpy people, but chronically grumpy people.

Grumpy is an important emotion, and it is different from depression, somatic distress, guilt and the other syndromes that are usually included in the symptomatology of grief.

Grumpiness is important in the study of grief for the simple reason that the 800 pound gorilla (grumpiness) in a room can be accepted by others and hence enable the behaviour for years. People get used to the grump, or the worse fate for the grump is that people steer clear which results in making the grumpy person even grumpier. Chronic grumps are most often in a hamster's wheel going around and around and going nowhere.

Let's be clear here. We all get periodic episodes in our lives of being crabby, cranky, cross, grouchy, irritable, short-tempered, snippy, testy, irascible and touchy (remember me at the airport?). We all have our bad day which temporarily makes us grumpy. It seems safe to say that this type of grumpiness is normal and is not a symptom of grief, which is connected to the unresolved losses in one's life.

It clearly needs to be stated, with deep sensitivity, that there certainly are legitimate reasons for a person to be grumpy. Not feeling well physically can make you grumpy. Having a disappointment can make you grumpy. Periodic annoyances can make you grumpy. However, most of these causal agents which result in being grumpy are temporary and isolated events and, for many people, their grumpy mood passes in time – and, before we proceed, this point needs emphasis.

However, this type of episodic and temporary grumpiness is not what I am exploring in this writing.

The problem with the psychological issue of being grumpy is that, while it is easily observed every day, in everyday life it is most often silently tolerated, most often never confronted, it can become a habit, and the result is that the grumpy person makes themselves miserable and tries to make most every other person they are in contact with miserable. I will have more to say on this later.

You and I were not born grumpy. Babies are not born grumps. Little babies can be fussy and have colic, but no little baby comes into the world as a bona fide experienced grump – nor have they turned into the kind of grump we are talking about: a chronic grump – well, not yet anyway.

Grumps are not born, they are developed over time. Grumps are products of their environment, of their life experiences, of their sorrows and losses. Grumps

are created over time. Grumps didn't start out as grumps and there is always a story behind the formation of grumpiness and the contention here is that there is a direct cause and effect between chronic long term grumpiness and unresolved grief.

People become grumps because of what did or, more importantly, what did not happen in their lives.

Chronic grumps are people who have, most-likely, lost something precious to them. They have possibly failed in tackling the emotions associated with loss and grief, and the result, possibly years after the initial loss experience is that this person has turned into a chronic grump. This is not the kind of grumpiness that I feel when I am annoyed with an airline.

Grief work tends to focus on the intense immediate phase after the death of someone significant to our meaning of our lives, or focus on the long term mourning period which can be supported through grief support programmes and care. Complicated grief also ranks high on the grief ladder of great interest. But chronic grumpiness throughout life? This irritating, annoying and pesky mood that so many people seem to just fall into. The study of grief, over the decades, has focused on much more urgent and big picture issues than chronic grumpiness.

Chronic grumpiness based on unresolved, unrecognised and unappreciated losses in life is a silent creeping, festering emotional detour for scores of human beings. The danger of this rests primarily in the innocuous nature of chronic grumpiness – we can all see it, but it is still invisible – this is certainly strange.

Chronic grumpiness is not listed in any of the phases or stages of grief lists which are studied in professional circles. Depression is, guilt is, anger is, somatic distress is, even pre-occupation with the deceased is, but the emotional state of being chronically grumpy has, by virtue of its innocuous nature, cunningly evaded all symptom lists over the many years that the psychology of grief has been studied. Yet, chronically grumpy people in unresolved grief (who are in good physical and mental health, have life sustaining resources) are in abundance across the globe.

THE FASCINATING FICTITIOUS CASE STUDY OF CHRONIC GRUMPINESS: MR EBENEZER SCROOGE

Possibly the most famous chronically grumpy person in literary history has to be Mr Ebenezer Scrooge.

Admittedly, just like Walt Disney's "Grumpy" character, the personage of old Mr Ebenezer Scrooge is fiction, but Charles Dickens often structured his unforgettable literary characters on real people that he encountered throughout his many journeys in life, and chronically grumpy people were in abundance, even in Charles Dickens' time.

In fact, the man whom Charles Dickens actually mentions in his letters, and who strongly resembles the Ebenezer Scrooge character, was a noted British eccentric and chronically lifelong grumpy miser named John Ewes. John Ewes was a Member of the English Parliament from 1772 – 1784.

The story of what happened to grumpy old Ebenezer Scrooge is a fictional life narrative which mirrors a deep truth about people, and this truth is as valid today as it was when Charles Dickens penned *A Christmas Carol* over 170 years ago.

A Christmas Carol is a straightforward allegory built on a structure in which each of the main passages has a fixed, obvious symbolic meaning. The book is divided into five sections (Charles Dickens labels them "staves" in reference to the musical notation staff – a Christmas carol, after all, is a song), with each of the middle three staves revolving around a visitation by one of the three famous spirits or ghosts.

The three spirit-guides, along with each of their tales, carry out a thematic function--the Ghost of Christmas Past, with his glowing head, represents Scrooge's past memory; the Ghost of Christmas Present represents charity, empathy, and the true Christmas spirit; and the Grim reaper-like Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come represents the fear and brutal reality of death.

Scrooge, with his Bah! Humbug! attitude, embodies all that dampens Christmas spirit – greed, selfishness, indifference and a lack of consideration for one's fellow man – Scrooge is a chronic grump, first class!

Worse yet, he is getting away with it, part in parcel because of the fear he has created by demanding that everything be done his way. When we are introduced to Scrooge we find an old man, an old grump who has been dodging the radar screen of human decency for a very, very, very long time.

Charles Dickens is at his literary finest when he describes old Scrooge:-

"Oh! But he (Scrooge) was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone. Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! (Scrooge) Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shrivelled his cheeks, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rim was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas. External heat and cold had little influences on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, no wintry weather chill him."

However, let's take a moment to dissect the history of Ebenezer Scrooge concerning his life experiences with the subject of human loss.

- Ebenezer Scrooge's mother dies giving him birth.
- Scrooge's father blames the baby Ebenezer for his wife's death (sadly this reaction is still seen in families to this day).
- When Scrooge becomes of age the father immediately packs him off to a lonely boarding school.
- His first love, Belle, comes to see Scrooge precisely as the grumpy young miser he has become and calls off their romance.
- Just like Scrooge's mother, his beloved sister Fran dies in childbirth, and Scrooge, just like his father had done, levels blame on his infant nephew Fred and ostracizes the only living relative he has on earth.

As a result, Scrooge becomes progressively more mean spirited. Nowhere, though, is Scrooge's



meanness witnessed with more cruelty than in what he does to his boss, Mr Fezziwig.

Mr Fezziwig was, in truth, the closest father figure that Ebenezer Scrooge had in his life. Old Fezziwig was a wonderfully kind and generous man who did nice things for people constantly, and who treated Ebenezer Scrooge, and his other apprentice Jacob Marley, as sons.

The relationship between Fezziwig, Scrooge and his business partner Marley disintegrates to the point that, without any compunction whatsoever of human kindness or sensitivity, Scrooge and Marley swindle nice Old Fezziwig out of his business, and the two young grumpy entrepreneurs feel nothing when the documents are signed tossing Fezziwig out in the street.

As we know, through the experience of revisiting these moments from his past, and seeing a glimpse of a future without him in it, Scrooge is redeemed. with A Christmas Carol, Dickens hoped to illustrate how grumpy, self-serving, insensitive people can be converted into charitable, caring, and socially conscious members of society. Warmth, generosity and overall goodwill overcome Scrooge's bitter apathy as he encounters and learns from his memory, the ability to empathise, and his fear of death.

A Christmas Carol, of course, is pure fiction, and sadly real life just doesn't work that way. There's no ghostly guide to show us an alternative path out of grief. And so, many times, there is no happy ending in real life.

However, the principle remains true. In my work with the bereaved, in order for the griever to move ahead and avoid becoming a chronically grumpy person, the individual griever must explore their 'ghosts' of the present, past and future.

Today, of course, we have different jargon to identify these three phenomena: personal death awareness history, (looking at the past), good-bye letter writing (looking at the present), and creating a life plan (looking at the future). We use this constantly in bereavement support groups, along with the Beatitude, in which Jesus says: "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall find comfort."

"THIS TYPE OF GROWTH, THIS KIND OF REDEMPTION TAKES TIME, A TON OF TIME."

Some of the bereavement support group members actually dismiss this idea as theological voodoo. However, with patience, understanding and courage, when in the support group we bring to the forefront exploring the bereaved person's past history (Ghost of the Past), exploring the person's present life (Ghost of the Present) and finally taking a long hard exploration into their future (Ghost of the things yet to come), most every member begins to grasp and understand just what Jesus is teaching in this Beatitude, and this is a start to being redeemed from the bondage of their grief.

I find that, when they examine, discern, pray, meditate, or whatever you wish to call this process of connecting with the "other" in life, bereaved people can begin to feel an urgency to live their lives. They begin to avoid becoming chronically grumpy even if they are having a bad day. It is as if inside their redemption begins to pull them to a new level of existence.

This type of growth, this kind of redemption takes time, a ton of time. It is not a matter of hours, but instead a matter of weeks, months, or years. But it can, and does, happen.

The question now is, "what can we do?" What can now be done in names of compassion, concern, and carefulness in approaching the subject of chronic grumpiness? I believe there are some things that we can do.

Charles Dickens



The chronic, grieving grump can, like Scrooge, choose to do something nice for someone else. Be charitable, be empathetic, be warm, exhibit goodwill; what the American Baptist minister, orator, philanthropist, lawyer, and writer Russell Herman Conwell called living the “worthy ideals.”

This is not easy.

As I write these words my mind is struck by just how simple this thought is. Some sophisticates might even indict this thought as being terribly naïve. Yet, throughout recorded history, this notion of being nice and kind to others, being of selfless service to others is the most powerful cause for universal good in the world.

Let us return to grumpy old Scrooge. After his record-setting redemption, Scrooge immediately started doing nice things for others, and he clearly didn't care much as to how other people reacted or did he seek their approval or even their understanding. Scrooge was free.

Dickens takes the theme of redemption and climaxes *A Christmas Carol* with the happy ending that Scrooge becomes a great employer, a devoted uncle and a good citizen; demonstrating the healing power of simply being nice to other people.

This sounds ridiculously simple, but this idea of redemptive grief is what I call the “grief pill.”

This is not easy, the pain of grief takes time to accept, to analyse, and to act on and finally to hopefully assimilate into your own experience and then into a permanent way of life, based on the ideas of being of service to others.

This simple idea has, at its core, a type of domino effect. This is not a technical issue that can be solved by another website or computer programme – this simple idea goes from one person to another, to another, to another.

Throughout my long career I have noticed a common thread which seems evident in our day-to-day experiences and interactions. I have noticed that people, most people, strive to find happiness. In fact happiness, the state of being blissfully happy, stimulates and motivates the advertising agencies across the globe. Hundreds of millions

of dollars are spent by people searching for happiness in attending happiness seminars, buying happiness books and attending happiness groups. There are a few people who have become financially wealthy by telling other people how to be happy. Happiness ranks high in the importance to the American cultural value system.

However, for all the happiness hype, chronic grumpy people abound in numbers. Could it be that the happiness movement is missing the mark? Could it be that you cannot teach happiness in a seminar? Could it be that, in the end, there is only one true authentic path to happiness?

Just possibly, there is only one way to find true happiness – and that is being nice to others through being of service to others. I have concluded that nice gestures in life is a synonym for being of worthy service to others in life.

Throughout my life I have been greatly influenced by the writings and life of Dr Albert Schweitzer. Dr Schweitzer won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952 and was, for a half-century, a medical missionary in the Congo. Towards the end of his life, Dr Schweitzer was asked about what he thought made a person truly happy. I believe Dr Schweitzer's wise and insightful response to this ancient question can serve as an appropriate conclusion. Here is what Dr Schweitzer had to say:-

“I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOUR DESTINY WILL BE, BUT ONE THING I KNOW: THE ONLY ONES AMONG YOU WHO WILL BE REALLY HAPPY ARE THOSE WHO WILL HAVE SOUGHT AND FOUND HOW TO SERVE.”

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Dr Albert Schweitzer