

Grief, an opportunity to resignify the relationship

The death of a loved one is an experience of great sadness in our lives; a feeling of deep pain is experienced from the loss, and anguish is often present. Faced with that moment, coping reactions (CR)¹ arise helping us to endure. They are spontaneous, they simply appear as defense mechanisms, protecting us against a situation that we do not like and cannot process at that moment, helping us when ***being able to be there*** with that pain is not possible.

I was able to observe during the pandemic how anxiety not only appears from the very fact of death, but also from the threat of it. For some people: clients, friends and acquaintances with whom I spoke, who experienced the hospitalization of a close relative, the mere fact of considering the possibility of death was unbearable to sustain. Some did not talk about the issue, evading what they could not deal with. Others fell into a state of denial where they clung to "positive thinking" without being able to accept the reality that was happening; some of them began to occupy themselves with activities that helped them to disconnect from what was hurting.

I remember the session with a client, who without her mother being ill, or at risk of being ill, was terrified by the mere fact of imagining the day she would die. She got very angry with her when she talked about it, she had even come to think that, if that happened, her life would lose its meaning.

When death occurs in a clinical diagnosis, that which threatens to take away what is valuable to us, emerges. We begin to live with a feeling of palpable finitude, facing what is unacceptable to us, at least at that moment. When that happens, sometimes we cannot enter the relationship with oneself, with our feelings, and let that moment be, even if it hurts. Letting oneself be touched by grief and that wound that bleeds through tears, taking time to be there with the feelings that appear, accepting the possibility of the death of that person who is important in our life.

I began to experience the death of people close to me many years ago. The first were my paternal grandparents, with whom I lived during my childhood and part of my adolescence, they were very significant figures for me, since they raised me from 4 to 17 years old. Even so, their death was expected for me, not without a feeling of deep sadness, but at that time my logic told me they were old! I was calmed by the fact of feeling a certain degree of "normality" in the death of an old person, I was reassured to think that death only comes with old age, not before. This belief gave me some security and trust ... perhaps it would have been good for me to ask myself when is a good time to die?

As years went by, death began to surprise me ... those who died were no longer old.

My mother was still young when she died. She was vital, cheerful and talkative, with an easy smile, a sparkling look and a contagious laugh. I imagined her when she was old, so full of life as she was then. She died early in the morning after three months of a, fortunately, short illness.

¹ Psychodynamic Reactions

We received the news of her cancer one afternoon at the doctor's office. The words "he has one month to live" echoed in my head and were experienced by me as a sentence. I remember that moment as if the world was huge and I was very small; the feeling of lacking of a floor appeared, threatening. The pain became palpable, my chest tightened, the world became narrow and the anguish emerged in full before the inevitable death of my mother.

I remember being in a state of non-acceptance for a while, which led me to be in constant search. We visited several allopathic doctors, also homeopaths and some shamans, etc. I tried at all costs to avoid her death, clinging to every hope of a cure.

Analyzing that stage of my life, I can see how the **Activism** kept me absent from entering into a relationship with myself and the sadness that touched me. Being in the constant "doing" fed the distance of that moment that, for me, was unacceptable, since it distracted me from my pain with which I simply could not connect. But what was it that was unbearable for me? My gaze turns to that moment and I manage to understand that her absence was already being palpable ... and it hurt a lot.

As time passed, death began to approach and I was still in denial. Hospital stays were getting longer and longer. My mother was getting weaker every day, until she couldn't go home. Her condition was fragile and required constant medical attention. From that moment on, the visits were shorter, there was a time restriction and I could not be with her as long as I wanted.

One day, while holding her hands in the hospital, I could see her in her suffering and stopped, for a moment, from seeing only mine. Like an epiphany, the realization emerged that this process was not just about me, but about her as well. From that moment on, I had the possibility of considering that death could be a relief for my mother, even if it was painful for me ... and then I was able to transcend it. I was able to see the value death could have for her.

During the following days I squeezed every moment I had with my mother. I remember taking vacations, in order to make the most of our time together. He held her hand in moments of pain. Sometimes she spoke with a certain incoherence. I just took her hand and caress her head, so she would feel that she was not alone - Everything will be fine, don't worry! I'm with you!

I appreciate every minute of those moments.

It was a Friday, August 15, around 6 am when the phone rang. My sister, with an audibly distressed voice, could only say - Carola... our mom! -. The moments that came after that call were transformed into rigorous procedures that took me away from my feelings. It was easier to be busy, again being busy was a lifesaver.

Subsequently, the most difficult thing from my own experience in grief was connecting with the absence on a day-to-day basis. There were no more phone calls, no visits, I lacked physical contact. That lack created a space and "I missed her".

I immediately went back to work after the funeral. I didn't want to take time for myself; sustaining the pain that her absence caused me was unbearable. Again **Activism** rescued me. I was trying to keep busy as long as possible. Sometimes I cried secretly, when the tears were unstoppable, and at

night, when everyone slept at home. For others to see me in my pain, also meant seeing myself. In solitude the situation seemed more controllable.

It took me a while, and little by little I was processing the absence, I was able to talk about the feeling of orphanhood that became more palpable and... it hurt. I gave space to my sadness. The "lost value" was reflected in that sadness, and it was right for me to let me be in my pain. I began to feel more confident that the sadness would eventually diminish; I was adjusting to her absence over time. My children were young and I was able to answer questions about their grandmother, the empty space was filled with memories, anecdotes, beautiful stories.

Grief is a personal process, the duration and pain that it entails lies in the resistance of not being able to **accept or endure** the loss. As proposed in contemporary existential analysis (Längle), closing oneself to the possibility of letting oneself be touched by sadness, prolongs suffering, then there is no grieving process. While I am in a CR, as avoidance, activism, rage, etc., I have not yet started this deep process of reconnecting with myself and with my life. The beginning is in **Acceptance**, even before physical death, accepting that yes, it is possible that that person who is valuable in my life will die, and trust that in spite of everything I **can be there** with my pain.

Being able to talk about my mother with my children and my sister, generated a new form of relationship with her. It was certainly no longer the same way, it was different now. There was still a relationship, and one way to get closer to her was to celebrate her birthday, a toast every March 22 feeling grateful for the moments lived together, and the opportunity of being her daughter.

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References

Längle, A. (2018). Libro de texto de Formación en Análisis Existencial. La Segunda Motivación Fundamental de la Existencia. Manuscrito de trabajo no publicado.