HAPPINESS

When the Stops Make Us Frown

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Pain, perspective, and the possibility of happiness

I have often described life as a series of stops along the way. At some stops we smile. At others we frown. Some are so joyful that we wish we could stay a little longer; others bring disappointment, loss, or pain we would never have chosen.

When I look back over my own journey, I cannot pretend that every stop was a happy one. Yet I can say honestly, without diminishing those difficult experiences, that I have found happiness in my life. That realization has made me curious about an important question: how do we make sense of human suffering while still making room for gratitude, connection, and hope?

This is not an instruction manual for grief. I would never tell someone whose heart is breaking simply to look on the bright side. It is a reflection, drawn partly from my own experience and partly from what thoughtful researchers have taught us, on what it means to live with both the smiles and the frowns.

Pain we cannot see

We often judge how another person ought to feel by what we can see: financial security, family, friends, health, professional success. None of these offers a reliable window into someone else's emotional world. A person may appear to have every reason to be content and still be carrying pain that no one around them can see.

Psychologist Edwin S. Shneidman, a pioneer of suicide prevention, devoted much of his career to understanding suicide. He coined the term *psychache* to describe intense psychological pain: anguish that can feel unbearable to the person experiencing it. He also described *cognitive constriction*, a narrowing of thought in which alternatives and possibilities become hard to see. His work invites us to ask not only what happened in a person's life, but what that experience felt like from the inside. [1]

These are useful ideas, not a formula for explaining any one person's death. Suicide rarely has a single cause, and neither psychache nor constriction is a fixed or irreversible path. A person in crisis can still be reached and helped. Yet Shneidman's insight reminds us of something easy to forget: the depth of another person's pain may be hidden even from those who love that person most.

The question that may not have a complete answer

After a profound loss, especially a death that seems impossible to understand, people often return to the same questions. Why? Was there something I should have noticed? Something I should have said?

We ask because we loved someone, and because the mind searches for an explanation. Yet we may never be able to reconstruct another person's inner experience or identify one cause that accounts for a tragedy. Financial strain may play a part. So may illness, isolation, grief, substance use, or many other factors. No single circumstance tells the whole story.

I have come to believe that compassion begins with acknowledging what we do not know. We can recognize another person's suffering without claiming to understand it completely. We can wish we had done more without turning uncertainty into a verdict against ourselves. And we can go on loving someone without answering every question their absence leaves behind.

Grief does not move in a straight line

It is tempting to imagine grief as a staircase: one difficult step after another until we reach acceptance and leave the pain behind. Grief rarely behaves so neatly. Researchers Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut describe a process in which grieving people move back and forth between facing their loss and tending to the ordinary demands of life. In their view, taking a break from grief is not necessarily denial; it can be part of healthy coping. [2]

Someone may weep in the morning and laugh at a family story that evening. A familiar song may bring sudden tears years later. A holiday may feel almost normal until an empty chair comes into view. None of this means a person is grieving the wrong way.

Perhaps most important, a moment of happiness is not an act of disloyalty. We do not honor those we have lost by refusing every future joy. Remembering them and continuing to live are not competing obligations; they may be two expressions of the same love.

What experience has taught me about happiness

While I was writing *The Sun Will Come Up Tomorrow*, my book on happiness, I was privately dealing with a costly and frustrating business setback. I had made decisions I wished I had handled differently, and the consequences were real. Earlier in my life, I suspect an experience like that would have dominated my thoughts and diminished my sense of well-being.

This time, it did not. I worked to resolve the problem. I accepted that I could learn from it. And I refused to confuse one unhappy circumstance with the whole of my life. The relationships that matter most to me, the work I find meaningful, the memories that make me smile, and the opportunities still ahead had not disappeared.

I want to be careful here. A financial setback is not the same as losing someone you love, and my response is not a standard against which anyone else's grief should be measured.

Happiness is not a test of character, and being unable to feel it during a painful season is not a failure.

What I have learned is more modest, but it matters to me: over a lifetime, perspective can change. We can learn to give a difficult event its rightful place without allowing it to occupy every room of our lives.

What we can offer one another

When someone we care about is grieving, our instinct may be to find the right words, offer reassurance, or explain how they can move forward. A grieving person often needs something simpler: someone willing to stay close without trying to hurry the pain away.

We can listen without correcting every emotion. We can say the name of the person who died and welcome a memory. We can offer help with a specific errand or an invitation to take a walk. And we can check in again after the first wave of attention has faded, remembering that grief does not end when the service is over. The American Psychological Association notes that there is no standard timeline for grieving and no single right way to cope, and that leaning on others and talking with a professional can help. [3]

Sometimes the most caring words are not “You will get over this,” but “I know you miss them. I am here, and I would love to hear about them.”

If someone speaks of wanting to die, feeling trapped, or being in unbearable pain, compassion must include action. Ask directly about suicide; research shows that asking does not increase suicidal thoughts or behavior. Listen without judgment. Help them stay safe and connect with support, including the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Then follow up. [4] Understanding psychological pain should never lead us to believe that help is impossible.

When tomorrow comes

One phrase that has guided me, and that became the title of that book, is “The sun will come up tomorrow.” I do not mean that tomorrow is guaranteed to be easier, or that a new day erases grief. Some mornings begin with the same heaviness as the one before.

I mean that tomorrow remains open. There may be a conversation we have not yet had, a kindness we have not yet received, a memory we have not yet shared, or someone who can help us carry what feels too heavy today. Tomorrow does not have to be bright to hold possibility.

Perhaps that is the perspective I most want to offer. Life’s difficult stops matter, and we should not pretend otherwise. They can change us permanently. But they do not have to erase every smile that came before, nor forbid every smile still to come.

We need not choose between remembering and living, between sadness and gratitude, or between honoring the past and remaining open to tomorrow. A full life has room for all of them.

When the stops make us frown, may we give ourselves time to grieve, the grace to accept help, and, when we are ready, the freedom to smile again.

Research notes and support resources

[1] Edwin S. Shneidman, “Some Controversies in Suicidology: Toward a Mentalistic Discipline,” *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 23, no. 4 (1993): 292–298, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1943-278X.1993.tb00199.x. See also Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[2] Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut, “The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement: Rationale and Description,” *Death Studies* 23, no. 3 (1999): 197–224, https://doi.org/10.1080/074811899201046.

[3] American Psychological Association, “Coping after suicide loss,” last updated July 8, 2024, https://www.apa.org/topics/suicide/coping-after.

[4] National Institute of Mental Health, “5 Action Steps to Help Someone Having Thoughts of Suicide,” revised 2024, https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/5-action-steps-to-help-someone-having-thoughts-of-suicide.

> *This is a personal reflection, not clinical guidance. If you or someone you know is struggling, help is available. In the United States, call or text 988 to reach the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. In an emergency, call 911.*