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Could letting go of anger help Sittons cope with grief?

Anger is the second of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' famous stages of grief - the steps, it's believed, that we must go through before we can come to an acceptance of our loss and begin to heal.

But what happens when we're stuck on step 2? And enveloped by a rage that consumes us and prohibits us from moving on? And in situations where there is a justifiable target of that rage, how does our helplessness impede us?

The heartbreaking sight last week of Jim Sitton falling to his knees as he pleaded with a judge to give the death sentence to the man who murdered his 6-year-old daughter Makayla is a reminder that an unfathomable loss can shake us to the core.

Paul Merhige was instead given seven consecutive life sentences for the murders of Makayla, her grandmother and Merhige's twin sisters and will never be released. The understandably disappointed Sitton and his wife, Muriel, who is five months pregnant, have said that they don't believe justice was served.

Linda Losi, a counselor at the Fair Oaks Pavilion psychiatric facility at Delray Medical Center, says that people who suffer a profound loss and don't get a desired resolution are never completely satisfied.

"Regardless of the work they do, they can never get their daughter back," Losi says. "(The mother) is pregnant, (but) there is no replacement for the baby they lost. They may reach another stage, but anything could bring them back to that place."

Anger is the biggest stumbling block in the grieving process, says Dr. Joyce Morley, a Fort Lauderdale native who now runs Atlanta-based therapy practice Morley and Associates. "When we're in a state of unforgiveness, we can be unable to see clearly. What makes it so difficult is that we don't have answers."

"One thing that struck me about this particular tragedy is that we can have difficulty dealing with things when they're particularly senseless," adds Dr. Don McCulloch, an associate professor of psychology at Palm Beach Atlantic University. "It's always harder to process those things when they're unexpected, like 9/11. No one expects a plane to go into a building, and no one expects a man to kill his twin sisters."

The Sittons and others, including America's Most Wanted host John Walsh, advocated for Merhige to get the death penalty.

"The easy way seems to be to kill him," says counselor Losi. "But if you can't move on, your grief gets arrested."

Also possibly making it harder: an American society that closely follows such cases and keeps them alive. Says Morley: "No one (in a family) wants to tune into TV every time and see (their loss) there. We should be able to deal with this in the confines of our family. There is no limit on grieving. You grieve the way you do. The media is like 'Hurry up and do it!' And that's stressful."

Of course, there have been cases where crime victims have used their palpable anger and grief to start a crusade - America's Most Wanted's Walsh was propelled by the violent loss of son Adam to start the groundbreaking crime-fighting television show. The Sittons have started the Makayla Joy Sitton Foundation, with an inaugural fund-raising 5K run/walk scheduled for Nov. 19.

Losi says that sooner or later, they're going to have to reconcile their grief and anger with Merhige's sentence.

"You have to get to the point where you say 'I have to try to move on with my life.' You don't really get over it," Losi says. "Losing a parent is a natural course of events. Losing a kid never is. Of course this man is on his knees, saying 'Please kill him' because that's all he has in his heart right now.

"Only time, and faith and family can hold him together."

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