

Stages of Grief/Mourning Drinking

by AUTHOR

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In my very first AA meetings, I was still shell-shocked from sobriety. I couldn't process what I was feeling or, for that matter, the realization that I was feeling anything at all. My drinking had erased several years of my life from the map like a WWII carpet bombing. There wasn't a lot left to show for it all. Many of the things that were precious to me—a job, friendships, financial security—were gone. I sat in those rooms, only half-listening to the people around me when I wasn't counting floor tiles. I knew I probably belonged in an AA room years before I finally found myself in one. Those church basements and VFW meeting halls were windows into a completely different world, but one that was as welcoming as it was strangely familiar. Still, surrounded by all of those people, I couldn't help but feel alone and disconnected. And I didn't know why. Turns out, I was experiencing something I hadn't had since my grandfather passed away. Full-on, hurricane-strength grief.

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Experts tell us there are five stages of grief. And in those first few weeks in recovery, I went through every goddamn one of them. Otherwise known as the "Kübler-Ross model," the five stages are (in order) denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally, acceptance. I'm not sure my emotions progressed in that exact order, but I mourned alcohol all the same. At the same time, I couldn't believe that I was grieving something that had let me down so dramatically. I'd trusted it; I'd assumed it'd always be there. It'd gotten me through a lot of family gatherings and, thanks to hangovers, out of a lot of obligations. Before I knew it, alcohol was torn from my life as if we'd broken up. I'd checked into a treatment center, got introduced to AA there when I was trying to avoid making any friends, and learned how to talk the talk long enough to get out of there as quickly as possible. Leaving rehab, I'd convinced myself I could have a different relationship with alcohol. It wouldn't be as intense or irresponsible. I could start dating it again or, worst-case scenario: just occasionally flirt with it.

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One relapse later, alcohol was gone from my life for good. I sat in AA meeting after AA meeting, stunned, and genuinely wondered where it'd all gone wrong. After all, alcohol and I had an understanding. We had a long-term relationship that, sure, had its ups and downs, but it was more permanent than any other relationship in my life. If everyone else in my life pulled up stakes and moved away, I'd still have booze. That was the deal. It'd promised me things along the way, including the fact that it'd never leave me. Yet there I was, having survived alcohol's death in my life. To add salt to the wound, I also saw my friends evaporate, one by one, my former drinking buddies. I couldn't process the immensity of such losses. Straight-up denial. Surely, this wasn't my life. I refused to imagine a life without wine at the holidays or beers on my birthday. That was a life not worth living, I was convinced.

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Then, as if on cue, I got pissed. I wasn't numb anymore. Instead, I started attending AA meetings with the sort of arms-crossed, prove-it-to-me anger reserved for teenagers who have life all figured out. I listened to people in those meetings and silently scoffed. They

didn't understand alcohol like I did. We'd had a good thing going. Those people had a drinking problem and were fooling themselves into thinking they were happy like this or that their lives were now suddenly more fulfilling than they were before. I honestly felt sorry for all of them. They just didn't get it. I knew, with every fiber of my being, that alcohol hadn't meant to hurt me. In fact, if I could figure out how, I'd welcome it back into my life with open arms. I'd have given anything in those first few weeks to have alcohol back. I believed that the people in those AA rooms didn't know the midnight charge that vodka gave me or any of the lusty, loving things that cabernets whispered in my ear. And yet, against my better judgment, I kept going back to those meetings and listened.

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Through it all, I kept bargaining with my brain. Certainly, there had to be some solution, that didn't involve step work or, worse, sharing coffee in a church annex. I seriously gave it thought. I obsessively read about moderation. I wanted to unlock the secrets of how people successfully drink. Then again, that's all my life had been about before: the quick fix, the shortcut, the easy way out. Even while I attended AA meetings and met with a counselor and started to see the first glimmers that my life was improving (who knew that quitting drinking would result in weight loss?), I went through endless attempts at the sad math of "What if?" or "If only..." I simply couldn't find the right angle; I couldn't figure out the physics that'd help me avoid the misery that awaited me if I drank again. Some people could leave a quarter-glass of wine behind on their restaurant table. That never computed with me, but I was envious. It couldn't be that hard to figure out.

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It started to dawn on me though that, maybe, I just wasn't programmed to handle booze. I wasn't wired that way. And that's when the bottom gave out on my hopes. There wasn't any way back into alcohol's orbit. No amount of NASA-calculating was going to get me back to Earth like Apollo 13. Pitch-black depression washed over me. I slumped in my seat at AA meetings and passed when it was my turn to talk; I sullenly went to my therapist and said very little; I didn't reply to texts from friends I'd met in recovery. I actually started to plot out the time I'd eventually stop going to AA meetings altogether, imagining what I'd say to my wife about how "AA just isn't for me." My life wasn't supposed to turn out like that. And then, one night at a meeting, when it came to me, I shook my head and said how I felt. It just torrented out. I told a big circle of sort-of strangers that I felt like I was in mourning, like my best friend had just died in a horrible car crash or something. I suddenly saw nods of understanding that night. A gentleman (who's now my sponsor) even approached me afterward to tell me that I'd reminded him of something he'd long since forgotten.

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I didn't accept my reality right away. In fact, some days, I'll catch someone wandering one of those gas-station "beer caves" or see a perfect-looking cocktail on Instagram and I'll feel a cold stab of what used to be. For me, acceptance isn't about suddenly saying everything is okay. Far from it. It's been about accepting life for what it is—and mine doesn't involve alcohol. It's just not an option. That's what recovery is all about: learning to live with reality. I don't feel like I've moved on from alcohol so much as I'm now keenly aware of the toxic relationship I had with it. From time to time, the loss still haunts me, but that's simply part of what makes my grief very real. Time has taught me,

however, that I wasn't mourning drinking—I was mourning ~~the~~ life that I'd never actually lived in the first place.

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