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## Not All Healing is Physical – Recognizing and Overcoming Grief

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## Not All Healing is Physical – Recognizing and Overcoming Grief

**By Katie Philp**  
UCF Forum columnist  
Wednesday, March 4, 2020

Despite loss being a nearly universal human experience, it seems we are poorly equipped to address this sort of pain in both ourselves and others.



(Photo by Ben White at Pixels)

Sports have always been a part of my life. As I grew older, I stopped seeing sport as competition and started seeing a source of community. Many of my closest friendships today were forged on the field. My husband and I played soccer together for a year before we began dating, and our biggest wedding-planning stress was making sure we could invite the entire team.

When we abruptly moved to Florida, the loss of that tight-knit group was, in a word, devastating. After a long search, we had finally found a welcoming co-ed team here – when I was suddenly relegated to the sidelines.

Just over two years ago, a routine, low-risk surgical procedure inexplicably resulted in a ruptured quadriceps tendon, leaving me unable to walk or extend my lower leg. Descriptions of this injury often include words like “serious,” “uncommon,” “disabling” and, of course, “devastating.” I did not realize at the time just how fitting this term was.

The months following another surgery to repair my tendon are mostly a blur to me now; taking care of my then 2-year-old and keeping up with school and work while on one leg was all-consuming. It wasn't until much later that I began to recognize signs of depression related to my injury, the cause of which remains unknown.

I often felt myself blinking back tears at small, unexpected moments.

I used to enjoy watching soccer with my husband on Saturday mornings, but increasingly found myself avoiding our time together, unable to fully confront what I had lost. Frustration at once-simple tasks – walking the dog, playing on the floor with my daughter – often boiled over to anger. I stopped wearing shorts and skirts to avoid questions about my scar, and I deflected questions such as, “How's your leg doing?” with humor. “It's still attached,” I'd reply with a laugh.

Unfortunately, the repair failed to heal properly, and I often felt myself blinking back tears at small, unexpected moments, when other parents would kneel down to be eye-level with their children, for example. I was surprised to feel that these simple acts had been stolen from me. It took me a long time to finally label these feelings for what they were: grief.

Despite loss being a nearly universal human experience, it seems that we are poorly equipped to address this sort of pain in both ourselves and in others.

I recognized that the complexity and ambiguity of my injury often made people uncomfortable, so I was happy enough to let others think that I was on a normal path to healing and recovery. This facade worked so well that even I fell for it, chalking up my intense and erratic emotions to just being a tired, working mom.

I've since learned that grief is a normal reaction to any loss, not just loss of a loved one. Grief often follows traumatic injury or chronic illness, yet I never allowed myself to think my situation was “that bad.”

And truly, it's not. I continue to work to regain strength and hope that I will one day have more functionality. But I see now that returning to my former physical state is highly improbable and participating in the sports I once loved would be a huge risk to my livelihood. Admittedly, I lived for high-energy activities; downhill skiing and soccer aren't exactly low-impact. But they were an integral part of my identity and were the foundation of some of my most important relationships.

The poet William Cowper said, "Grief is itself a medicine." So finally, I've started allowing myself to concede the magnitude of my loss.

At a time in my life where much of my agency felt stripped from me, naming and embracing my grief has given me back some degree of control. There are days when I still feel the insult of this injury deeply. Other days, I cope. I acknowledge. I accept.

Perhaps grieving really is another step on the path to healing after injury.

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