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Abigail Maggi
amaggi@bgsu.edu

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Sorrow, Healing, and Hope: A Braided Narrative

Abby Maggi

Honors Project

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Paul Standinger, Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, Advisor

Michael Schulz, Department of English, Advisor

This project is dedicated to Anna, a young woman who left too soon and who loved so much. You will forever inspire me with your tender heart and your open arms. You always lifted others up and offered comfort when they needed it. You are forever in my heart, sweet Anna.

Abstract

This project is a creative nonfiction essay about sadness. In the form of a braided essay, I weave personal narrative with insight and guidance from therapists, psychologists, and friends. In this essay, I share my experience of sadness and how I have processed my emotions during challenging times. The essay is split into three sections – sadness, feeling a little better, and hope – to share my story, the skills I learned that helped me move through sadness, and my decision to choose hope despite and amidst the struggles.

Preface

In the proposal for this project, my research focused on the psychology of emotions and the necessity for emotional expression. In the final product here, I write about the emotion of sadness specifically and how I have worked through challenging times. I knew that I wanted my project to validate emotion, and I decided that writing about personal experience would be the best method.

My two disciplines, broadly speaking, are psychology and English. I narrowed in on creative non-fiction as my form of writing. Creative non-fiction is like fiction in that it tells a story, and non-fiction because the story is based in real events and experience, like a memoir. The specific form of writing I use here is a braided essay, also called a woven or lyric essay. In a braided essay, the author weaves two or more “threads” of writing together. Each fragmented thread follows its own theme or perspective, but the multiple threads come together to tell a more coherent story or to point to a common message.

In my essay, I weave two threads together. One is personal narrative where I share my experience with sadness and how I have moved through it toward healing. The other thread includes insight and guidance from therapists, psychologists, and friends. I chose to write a narrative essay on psychological health that validates emotion, and my research in the discipline of psychology influenced and guided my writing.

This format of weaving therapeutic insight with personal narrative allowed me to share my experiences moving through sadness alongside an outside perspective that guides the reader through my story and emphasizes the actions that helped me process my emotions and find hope amidst the sorrow.

Introduction: To the Hurting

When I was younger, I struggled with my heavy emotions and didn't know what to do with these feelings. I became sad easily and often, and I wasn't sure how to express my emotions or to whom I was comfortable and safe expressing them. I expressed my sadness the only way I knew how, which was usually by crying alone, and this brought little to no relief.

In the latter years of my time at college, I have learned some healthy coping mechanisms for when emotions drag me down. I can still feel heavily burdened when loss, disappointment, stress, news, hormones, and fatigue weigh on me, but I am now more capable of caring for my emotional health.

Unfortunately, pain never ceases to exist (in this lifetime anyway), and sadness is something we must experience when troubles come our way. I am well-acquainted with sadness, and over the years, I have begun to befriend this emotion. Instead of a stranger I cannot care for, sadness is a friend with whom I continually grow closer, and as I have chosen to turn toward sadness with an open and ready hand, I have learned how to validate and nurture this emotion when it needs me.

In this essay, I describe a few narratives from my life to show some of the ways I have learned to work through emotionally tough situations. Sadness is still heavy and burdensome at times, but I am not afraid of it anymore.

My hope is that my words and stories speak to you. Sorrow is real.

But so is healing and hope.

Part 1: Sadness

“Sadness: grief, sorrow, cheerlessness, gloom, melancholy, self-pity, loneliness, dejection, despair, and, when pathological, severe depression.”¹

Sadness captures me easily, and it’s an emotion I have worn often, like a piece of clothing that is difficult to remove.

At 8 years old, my family moved across the country from Washington State to Ohio. I remember crying for much of the road trip and the long adjustment that followed; I missed my friends, teachers, my older brother who stayed behind, and the only home I knew.

For years, I cried when someone I loved moved away, and I would stay gloomy for weeks after.

In high school, a close friend and I fell apart, painfully, and the daily hurt left me in self-pity and dejection for months.

My senior year of high school, our beloved band director temporarily left for health reasons. What should have been 2 months turned into 5 months without him. I missed our director so much; the loss was heartbreak.

In 2021, I experienced sorrow like never before when my 29-year-old friend and mentor died by suicide.

Sadness surely isn’t a pleasurable feeling, but it is a real feeling and a natural response “to a significant loss, such as the death of someone close or a major disappointment.”²

Even though I did not lose a loved one to death until recently, my experience has taught me that loss comes in many forms. When my best friend moved to another state, I did not lose her

¹ Daniel Goleman. *Emotional Intelligence*. Bantam Books, 1995. 289.

² Goleman, 7.

friendship, but I did lose the daily occurrence of sharing love and laughter. My class rejoiced when our band director returned for the last 2 months of the year, but we would not get those 5 months back.

Shutdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic took away leadership and service-learning opportunities, Christian gatherings, meals and workouts with friends, and live class discussions. More opportunities like these would come again, I knew, but I felt I had forever lost the experiences I hoped for and expected.

Even little losses sadden me, like leaving my delicious, boxed leftovers on the restaurant table.

Sadness can often be a feeling that we would rather discard and forget, but these experiences of loss do not simply go away; and besides, they are significant parts of our lived experience.

The feeling of loss often paralyzes me. Feelings of sadness, disappointment, and grief lead to hours crying at night, on walks, while watering flowers for my job – whenever alone, the tears of pain streak down my face. It's overwhelming.

Sadness does not need to trap us, though; we can ease the pain. My therapist told me, "It's not about getting rid of the sadness; it's about feeling a little better."

Then, she asked, "What can you do to feel a little better?"

Part 2: Feeling a Little Better

Change

Temporality. Noun. “The quality or state of being temporal.” “Temporariness.”³

Change is difficult. When I had to suddenly move out of my college dorm and back to my parents at the start of the pandemic, I was greatly saddened by the change. The experiences I was hoping for would no longer be possible. I would no more live with my roommates at the time – I lost treasured time with them.

Change is inevitable, a part of life, out of our control. We cannot go back to the way things were before, which can be both a blessing and a curse.

But I guess everything changes, and sometimes at distressingly inconvenient times. Endless tears ran down my face for months as I spent hours in my bedroom at my parents’ house, missing my friends and wishing I was still on my college campus, enjoying the fullness of life there.

“But Abby, this [pandemic] is a part of your college experience.”

The gift of temporality – that everything has a season, and each season brings blessings and struggles.

I came to understand that my college experience hadn’t ended, only changed, and even though I painfully desired a different experience than the one that life handed me, this experience was still valuable, still important. It could still be meaningful if I wanted it to be.

We cannot go back to the way things were before, and it’s okay to be disappointed.

But what can we do now?

³ “Temporality.” *Collins English Dictionary*, 2022, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/temporality>. Accessed 19 Apr. 2022.

That summer, I couldn't work my usual job. A married couple from my Bible study near my university invited me to live with them for the summer, helping them out with their three young girls. I knew this option was the best one available, though I had trouble mentally accepting it. After sitting on the pavement at midnight under the stars and having a long discussion with God, I realized my only hesitation was that accepting their invitation would mean I accepted the reality of how COVID-19 had affected me. To move forward would mean to loosen my grasp on the pain of what could have been, to begin letting go and to start healing.

“By choosing to radically accept the things that are out of our control, we prevent ourselves from becoming stuck in unhappiness, bitterness, anger and sadness and we can stop suffering.”⁴

Once I stopped wishing for the past to change and accepted the circumstances as out of my control, I was still sad. I was still disappointed about the lost experiences.

“Completely and totally accepting [the facts] is still challenging and painful, but focusing on what we can control versus what we cannot, can be liberating. It frees up all of the energy we were using to fight reality, and helps us use it to focus on how we can effectively cope with the situation and take care of ourselves.”⁵

The difference, though, is that I wasn't in bondage to this sadness anymore. I could feel the emotion and acknowledge my losses, but then I was free to find the value and meaning in that season. The summer had its emotional challenges, but I began to embrace moments of joy again.

A few weeks later, I was holding an 18-month-old baby girl and dancing with her two older sisters to Taylor Swift's "Fearless." I felt free-spirited in a way that I hadn't felt since before the pandemic. I was still sad, but I felt joy, too, and I learned that the two can coexist.

⁴ Andrew Harris. "10 Steps of Radical Acceptance." *HopeWay*, 7 Apr. 2020, www.hopeway.org/blog/radical-acceptance.

⁵ Harris.

Reaching Out

In the past, I haven't always had the social support I needed. When I faced challenges in high school, I kept quiet about what I was going through. Instead of reaching out, I cried my tears alone – in bathrooms, at night, on walks – when no one was looking.

*Loneliness makes it difficult to work through stress and challenges.*⁶

A year after the pandemic began, my entire experience of grief shifted when my friend and mentor Anna died. The disappointments of COVID-19 were nothing compared to this pain. In the early months, there was no accepting reality, no moving forward. The intense grief came in realizing, and re-realizing, that there was nothing I could do to change what had happened or to turn back time for one more moment of laughter or embrace.

The key to feeling a teensy bit better in this season was to find bits of alleviating comfort, often from people I trusted.

Social Support: a network of friends, family, teachers, mentors, pastors, peers, and others who provide support in challenging and stressful times.

By the time Anna died, I had developed a stronger support system than the one I had in high school that I continued to refine as I grieved. The support available felt limited, not because the people were incapable, but because there was nothing that they could do to fix it, to take away the intense pain, to bring her back. Nonetheless, there were people who didn't try to take away my sadness but rather sat with me and listened, and their soft-spoken support meant the world to me.

⁶ Moira Lawler. "Why Friendships Are So Important for Health and Well-Being." *Everyday Health*, 25 Aug. 2021, www.everydayhealth.com/emotional-health/social-support.aspx.

“A strong social support network can be critical to help you through the stress of tough times and can help in “alleviating the effects of emotional distress.”⁷

There were many times I reached out to friends in my early grief, often at night when the pain was heaviest.

In challenging situations, leaning on people you trust can help you pull through the loss; their support can be the main thing that helps you deal with trauma.⁸ They can offer a shoulder to lean and to cry on as you process the pain.

I left a social gathering one night, feeling so sad and so alone. One of my friends had offered me on-call emergency sleepovers, so I called her on my way home that night, around 10pm, and she quickly came over, heard my sadness, and stayed the night so I wouldn't be alone.

Another night, I was in bed crying when I texted a friend. I didn't even tell her anything was wrong, but she knew, and I said yes when she asked to come over.

There were many 11pm phone calls to friends who picked up and stayed on the line as long as I needed them to.

In these instances, the biggest obstacle was myself. It was easy to think that I shouldn't reach out to friends because it was so late at night – they have their commitments, they need their sleep, and they don't have time. I had to remind myself that I am worthy of support.

“Being surrounded by people who are caring and supportive helps people to see themselves as better capable of dealing with the stresses that life brings.”⁹

⁷ Mayo Clinic Staff. “Social Support: Tap This Tool to Beat Stress.” *Mayo Clinic*, Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 29 Aug. 2020, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/social-support/art-20044445>.

⁸ Lawler.

⁹ Kendra Cherry. “How Social Support Contributes to Psychological Health.” (*Verywell Mind*, Dotdash Media, 14 Apr. 2020, www.verywellmind.com/social-support-for-psychological-health-4119970).

Reaching out was and continues to be a crucial part of my healing. Even if people couldn't change the past, they offered me a space to grieve, and their company told me that I wasn't alone.

Self-awareness and Self-validation

When I began my senior year of college in the fall, grief didn't permeate every part of my life like it had all spring and summer, but many times it overwhelmed me when I wasn't expecting it. My support system was still available and helpful, but often, I didn't need the help of someone else. I learned to allow myself the space to feel and process what I needed to, and many times, the emotional space that I offered myself was all I needed to get through the difficult moments.

Sometimes, my grief is triggered in situations where I am not comfortable expressing how sad I feel, often in group situations where the people around me are not prepared or available to help me feel heard. In these moments, I feel like I must suppress what I am feeling, but suppression only amplifies the intensity of the sadness.

In other moments where I find a way to express what I am feeling, I can validate and process the sadness for myself.

*When people accept their mental experiences, the emotions can diffuse more quickly.*¹⁰

One weekend, I was at an annual Christian youth conference held at a hotel with around 200 people. The last two years, Anna and her husband led these conferences, and so my grief was heavy at this year's event. When we all transitioned from listening to Biblical teachings to getting to know each other, I suddenly felt a strong urge to cry.

*Self-awareness: "an ongoing attention to one's internal states."*¹¹

And so I paused, quickly assessed what I was feeling, and decided I needed to take a break to process my grief.

¹⁰ Brett Q. Ford, et al. "The Psychological Health Benefits of Accepting Negative Emotions and Thoughts: Laboratory, Diary, and Longitudinal Evidence." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 115, no. 6, 2018, pp. 1075–1092., <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000157>. 1075.

¹¹ Goleman, 46.

“Labeling our distressing emotions give us a way of validating our inner experience, but it has the added benefit of dialing down their intensity.”¹²

I went upstairs to my hotel room to be alone for as long as I needed to, and I chose to write out my thoughts so I could better grasp why I had experienced an emotional reaction and what I was feeling. I cried a bit while writing, but not as much as I thought I would.

“Self-awareness is not an attention that gets carried away by emotions, overreacting and amplifying what is perceived. Rather, it is a neutral mode that maintains self-reflectiveness even amidst turbulent emotions.”¹³

Because I slowed down and gave myself the time and space to gently reflect on my inner turmoil, the emotions were not as strong or heavy as I expected. I processed my feelings, allowed them to exist, and cried out the tears that needed to fall.

“Mindfully observing what we are feeling can help us cope with whatever is before us.”¹⁴

After about ten minutes of writing and slowing my breathing, I felt ready to rejoin everyone downstairs. And when I did, I was peaceful and emotionally available to engage with other people, only because I acknowledged and responded to my needs first.

I’ve had many moments like this where I observe what I’m feeling and respond based on my needs in that moment, and as time passes, I grow more attuned to my emotional needs. If I need to go home, I go home and practice some extra self-care for the rest of the day. If I need a moment to step aside, I do so and process the sadness enough to rejoin the group. Sometimes, I’m in a situation where I cannot immediately leave or take a break, so in those moments, I take

¹² Beth Kurland. “What Happens When You Embrace Dark Emotions.” *Greater Good*, The Greater Good Science Center, 14 Jan. 2019, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what_happens_when_you_embrace_dark_emotions.

¹³ Goleman, 47.

¹⁴ Kurland.

deep breaths and let some of the tears out to alleviate a bit of the distress until I am in a setting where I can more comfortably express my emotions.

Sometimes it is difficult to accept the circumstances behind our mental experiences, but the key is acceptance of our emotions and thoughts. When people accept negative emotions (by mindfully and nonjudgmentally observing them),¹⁵ they often experience less negative emotion.¹⁶

Taking needed breaks to acknowledge and process my emotional experiences doesn't fix or eliminate the sadness, but it helps me to cope with difficult and stressful moments. In responding to my needs, I continually learn what coping mechanisms work best for me.

I will never completely accept Anna's death, but healing comes as I allow the sadness to exist and as I gently respond to my heart when it feels heavy. The more acquainted I become with sadness, the better I can practice self-care.

¹⁵ Kristalyn Salters-Pedneault. "How Accepting Emotions Can Improve Emotional Health." *Verywell Mind*, Dotdash Media, 4 Apr. 2022, www.verywellmind.com/how-accepting-emotions-can-improve-emotional-health-425368.

¹⁶ Ford, 1076, 1082.

Part 3: Hope

*“To everyone who's lost someone they love
 Long before it was their time
 You feel like the days you had were not enough
 When you said goodbye
 And to all of the people with burdens and pains
 Keeping you back from your life
 You believe that there's nothing and there is no one
 Who can make it right”¹⁷*

My experiences have taught me that life is hard and full of change that I cannot control. Sorrow has torn me apart and left me wondering many times if it will ever leave.

Disappointment comes, but it doesn't have to prevent us from “dreaming, making plans, trusting again, and hoping.”¹⁸

Moving forward from all types of loss can be difficult. Sometimes during the healing process, I wonder when life will shoot its next arrow. Fear of the next sad thing can hold me back from embracing joy again. When I begin to experience more moments of joy and laughter, I'm also afraid for the next disappointment.

We can feel vulnerable when we hope for something better because we know that disappointment and loss are inevitable. However, we don't have to allow the fear of sorrow to prevent us from choosing hope. “Our hope can be stronger than the possibility of disappointment.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Third Day. Lyrics to “Cry Out to Jesus.” AZLyrics, 2022,
<https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/thirdday/cryouttojesus.html>.

¹⁸ Brianna Matchett. “Processing Disappointment – Not Losing Hope.” *Living Well Counselling Services*, 24 Sept. 2020, <https://livingwellcounselling.ca/processing-disappointment-not-losing-hope/>.

¹⁹ Matchett.

A couple summers ago, I chose hope when I danced with those little girls, choosing to be fearless despite the disappointments I carried. And once again, in my grieving process, I decided to choose hope over fear – hope that I will heal, hope of days that hold more joy than sorrow, hope that my experiences will allow me to support others, and hope that one day all will be made right.

*“There is hope for the helpless
Rest for the weary
And love for the broken heart
And there is grace and forgiveness
Mercy and healing”²⁰*

The healing I’ve experienced is a gift, and I’m thankful that I have learned healthy ways to deal with the pain life can bring. It’s true that life’s sorrows will continue to come, and my coping mechanisms don’t make me impervious to sadness in the future.

But there is hope for times when we feel helpless. My past has taught me that although sad and challenging times are an inevitable part of life, I am capable of getting through these times. Sadness is a familiar road I have walked, but it isn’t the only road I walk. There are seasons of heavy weariness, and there are seasons of joyful rest and healing.

*To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.
A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance²¹*

When I am sad, I hold hope for better days to come. And I do believe that they will come – because they always have.

²⁰ Third Day.

²¹ *New King James Version. BibleGateway,*

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ecclesiastes+3%3A1%2C4&version=NKJV>. Accessed 25 Apr. 2022. Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4.

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