Dear Therapist:

December can be a month full of heightened emotions for many people – one of which can be grief. Please share advice for dealing with grief, particularly for people with autism.

– Asking for a Friend (OK, me)

Dear Friend:

Grief can include a spectrum of feelings and all reactions are valid. Autistic people may show classic signs of grief including denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Autistic people’s initial reactions may be more rational and based on logic. They may also show what looks like a failure to grieve or delayed grief, difficulty connecting to or naming their feelings, decrease in executive functioning or increase in ASD symptoms.

Things to remember as you navigate grief:

- Take care of your physical health including getting plenty of sleep.
- Know your triggers as best you can and have a plan for if they come up. It’s okay to have boundaries that help you protect your mental health.
- Take time to talk with someone. Meeting with a counselor or a trusted person in your life can help you feel less alone and help navigate your personal grieving process.
- Create a routine or ritual to honor where you’re at in the grieving process and who/what you’re grieving.
Take care of yourselves this month and know that your feelings, your ways of processing, and your ways of getting through are just right.

Grief, a poem.

Whether grief is a mountain range
towering high above you,

or an unsettling hum
in a desert
you didn’t know
as it wildly erupts,

or an earthquake
that never prepares you
before it breaks everything up,

a storm of waves that turn the ocean
into an inescapable dome

a starless void of silence
millions of light years from home,

for whatever shape grief takes,
it's presence claims space,
unapologetically pushing the boundaries
of logic, time, and place.
You are not a failure
when you cannot
make the grief just
“go away”.

It’ll take time to move through this landscape
and I hope you know
that’s okay.

– Poem by Morgan Harper Nichols (autistic artist and author)

– Maura McDonald, MA
Therapist, Autism Society of Minnesota

If you would like to submit a question for the AuSM Counseling and Consulting Services team, please e-mail autismcounseling@ausm.org or contact us at 651.647.1083.