

## Parent's Corner

### THE GRIEF PROCESS IN CHILDREN

While you cannot protect your children from the cruel realities of death, you can help them cope with their loss in constructive and growth-producing ways. In many ways, children grieve differently than adults. However, if you understand some likely reactions, helping them grieve will not be such an overwhelming task for you.

Children have difficulty understanding and expressing their feelings in words; instead they are likely to act them out. When they are stressed, newer, unproven ways of handling situations are dropped for older ways. For example, a boy who has outgrown fighting to get his way at school may start fighting again. Another young child may become clingy and needy. This regression is an expression of grief.

Children see themselves as the center of the universe. For everyone, death arouses feelings of insecurity. However, to a child who is largely dependent, the death of a significant person is the ultimate threat to their personal survival. They need and deserve nurturing and security.

To children, death is a cruel monster that wrecks havoc with their lives. A child may think, "If death can affect me so much, he can easily take other members of my family including me." A child's experience of death is more raw than an adult's.

Consequently, grieving children need reassurance that there will always be adults to take care of them. Don't be surprised if your child asks you, "What will happen to me if you die too?" First, recognize and admit to your child that his fear is legitimate. Second, explain that it is unlikely that you will die soon. And third, discuss the tangible provisions you have made for your child if you die. "If that happens, you would go to live with..."

When with children who are grieving, remember that they have a limited understanding of death which makes them anxious. Their fear may show itself in ways that don't seem related to the death. They may develop school phobia, the fear of going to school, because they want to stay at home to make sure Mom is going to be okay.

They may have increased anxiety when someone close is ill or injured. Children find it reassuring to talk about the illness or injury in a direct way. We can support and nurture them by respecting their feelings and allowing them to share their anxiety.

Children can discuss issues of death and dying, indeed they want to, as long as the adult respects their need to control the discussion. This means letting them choose the time and subject matter of these talks. Answer their questions in a direct and honest way, but don't go beyond what they're asking.

Frequently, children also feel guilt about the death. Because children see themselves as the center of the universe, they often feel responsible for what goes on around them. For example, a young boy whose grandmother died in his home felt he caused the death by arguing with his mom.

If you ask children directly about their sense of responsibility for the death, they are likely to deny it, especially if they feel criticized. It is better to address children's fear that they may have contributed to the death in more general ways. For example, you might say something like, "Some children worry that they may have made their mom die by what they might have thought. I want you to know that you did not cause this even if you felt angry or wished that she was dead." Provide the facts about how the person died. Make it clear to the children that wishing cannot kill anyone.

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# Grief's Journey

*Grief's Journey, Issue Three*

## Dear Friend

*As the months pass, you may experience new challenges as you follow your path through loss and grief. Others can provide support, but only you can walk the path of your grief. As you work through your grief, we hope that you are not alone and that you are receiving the support you want. We hope that this month's bulletin will help you reflect on your personal journey through grief. Use it to examine whether you're "on course" or if your direction needs to be altered slightly. Each bit of information gives you a different insight for reflecting your own grieving process.*

*As you continue through this first year of bereavement, reach out to receive support. Pain in isolation is far more intolerable than pain which is shared. We support you in your journey.*

## THREE OPERATIONS OF MOURNING

The psychotherapist and author, Therese Rando uses the word "mourning" to describe the active, purposeful part of grief: the work. She talks about mourning as promoting three operations and six separate processes. The first operation is the undoing and changing of the ties with your loved one and the creation of a new relationship. The second helps us to adapt to the loss, revising our perceptions and assumptions about the world, and adapting to new roles, skills, behaviors and a new identity. The third promotes mourning by helping us to go on to live in a healthy way without the deceased.

## THE SIX PROCESSES OF MOURNING

### 1. Recognizing and Understanding the Reality of the Death

This process involves allowing ourselves to gently confront the reality that someone loved has died and will not return. It means allowing ourselves to fully understand this and move from an intellectual understanding to an acceptance in our hearts.

### 2. Experiencing and Expressing the Pain of Grief

This process involves allowing ourselves to embrace all the thoughts and feelings that result from the death of someone loved. We all need permission to mourn. Sometimes what we need most from others is an awareness that it is okay to talk out our many thoughts and feelings, both positive and negative. You may feel the pain of losing not only what you had, but what you never had as well. All feelings must be felt, reacted to and expressed in some form which may be different for each person such as crying and sharing with others, writing

about your grief or journaling, using exercise as a means of expression or an art process.

### 3. Recollecting and Re-experiencing the Deceased and the Relationship

This process entails a review of the relationship with the person who died. What was good and what was not? Were there any unfinished issues that were not resolved that may have been left even early on in the relationship? It means coming to a completion of the relationship; forgiving, asking forgiveness, expressing gratitude and offering a final goodbye.

### 4. Developing a New Self-Identity and Revising our Assumptions about the World

Of course, you do not want to stop loving the person who has died, or stop cherishing your memories. Yet, your fourth task of mourning is to separate the love you have for the one who has died and rediscover the part of loving which belongs in this world; your ability to give and receive love here on earth. Often in working through this process we discover some positive aspects of our changed self-identity. It also means revising our assumptions about how we thought about the world. We may have assumed that we would grow old together with our spouse, or that we would die before our children. If that assumption is wrong, what else may have changed? When you have integrated your loss into every part of your life and find that the pain gradually changes and shifts, you will know that you are adjusting.

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## 5. Readjusting to Life and Search for Meaning

In a very personal sense, you face a new and unfamiliar world. Just as an immigrant needs to adjust to the language and culture of a new country, you must adjust to your new world. You need to develop and get used to new routines, learn to handle new responsibilities, and interact with people in new ways. The process of discovering your new world and learning how to cope with it is the fourth process of mourning.

We often ask "why" questions about the deaths that have affected us. "Why now?" "Why in this way?" "Why did this happen?" It is important for us to be able to search for the meaning to these questions. With support and understanding we usually learn that human beings cannot have complete control over themselves and their world. They learn that faith and help are central to finding meaning in whatever one does in this short life. We learn a true appreciation for life and what it has to offer.

## 6. Continuing to Reinvest and Move Forward

### Finding Value with Life

One of the issues we all need to contend with in our grieving process is that we need to have continued, and on-going support, love and appreciation from others. It is important that we build a system of many supports to meet the varied needs that we have. You will always continue to have a relationship with the person who died. However, when you have integrated your loss into every part of your life, you will find that the pain changes gradually and the focus changes to the future, and you will know that you are becoming a new person. You may examine your priorities and activities and find that you shift what interests you, and possibly how you live –all in finding new ways to find meaning in your life.

## SOCIAL SUPPORT DURING BEREAVEMENT

For most bereaved people, support from others is essential to recovering from loss. Unfortunately, the death of a loved one increases the need for support, yet often reduces the support available. Less support may be available not only because your loved one had been a primary source of support for you, but also because bereaved people and their friends tend to withdraw from one another.

You may want to evaluate your network of social support and to consider whether you are receiving the support you need.

**Family** Do you live with or near family members? Can you talk openly about the feelings and changes you are experiencing?

**Friends** Do you live with or near any close friends? Do you tell them what you need or how you feel? Are you open to their support even when it's less than perfect?

**Spiritual Support** Do you belong to a church or spiritual community? Do you find emotional support from attending services, or visiting with your priest, minister or rabbi?

**Work** Are your contacts from work, at home or in the larger community supportive of you?

**Economic** With whom do you have financial involvement? Are you satisfied with the quality of those relationships?

**Clubs and Groups** Do you belong to any clubs or groups? What interests would you enjoy sharing with a group? If so, would a loss support group help? Consider asking a friend to attend a group with you.

**Physician** Do you have confidence in your physician? Does he or she know about the death? Remember that grief often affects your physical well-being.

**Other People** Are other people part of your life? Are you satisfied with the quality of these contacts? Do you also find comfort in contact with other living things, such as pets, plants, trees, or nature itself?

As you reflect on your overall social support network, do you feel it is adequate to meet your needs? If not, this may be the time to consider reaching out to new groups or individuals, or to improve the quality of your present involvements. It is a time when many people change their priorities and reach out to find more meaningful and satisfying activities.

Getting your social needs met after the death of a loved one may be very difficult. It may require taking risks and learning new skills. Like all new undertakings, reaching out socially may seem frightening at first but it becomes easier as you persist. It is part of your road to hope.

At times, you may feel intense anger at the person who died or at family members, health professionals, people who have been spared a similar loss, or even God. Bottling up the anger seldom helps. Expressing and sharing the anger in healthy ways can hasten the healing process.

A loved one's death can challenge your faith or philosophy of life. Questioning your beliefs can be frightening, but it also can deepen and enrich your faith and philosophy.

After the death of your loved one, you may face many practical decisions ranging from disposing of your loved one's belongings to determining your own future. Many people find it helpful to move slowly with these tasks and decisions. If possible, you may want to postpone major decisions for up to a year.

Holidays, anniversaries, and birthdays can be very stressful. One way of coping with this stress is to plan these special days carefully. Make sure you have the time and support you need to confront and express the feelings that the holidays raise so you can use these occasions to move your healing process forward.

Grieving is a natural healing process. May you find comfort and companionship now and, gradually, hope for the future.



"In back of tranquility  
lies always  
conquered unhappiness."

David Grayson

## STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH GRIEF

An individual who survives the death of someone close usually faces intense, conflicting emotions and profound changes in his or her way of life. Moving through the inner and outer turmoil toward a new sense of equilibrium and hope is an enormous challenge for anyone. Each person finds a unique way to cope with this challenge.

The way you cope with grief is probably similar to the way you have coped with difficulty and change throughout your life. Because loss through death can be so traumatic, however, you may want to evaluate how you cope to see if it is working for you.

You may recognize some coping strategies that you have used with your own grief in these lists.

### Helpful Coping Strategies

• Crying	Getting rest
• Humor	Respecting your own needs
• Talking & Sharing	Nurturing yourself
• Music	Soothing activities
• Reading	Prayer
• Exercise	Writing
• Setting goals	Helping others

These positive strategies allow you to take care of yourself. Beware of following strategies that ease the pain temporarily but may be harmful in the long run.

### Harmful Coping Strategies

- Alcohol & drugs
- Enshrinement (keeping a room as a permanent shrine to the dead person)
- Escape (avoiding all reminders of loss)
- Oversleeping or overeating
- Smoking
- Somatization (suppressed emotional pain resulting in physical symptoms)
- Preoccupation with suicide
- Recklessness (careless or fast driving, gambling, overspending, etc.)
- Overactivity, over work
- Self-neglect and pushing past limits
- Social isolation

Are you satisfied with the strategies you are using? Do you want to make some changes in the ways you are coping? Consider reading *The Courage to Grieve* by Judy Tatelbaum, and *Living Through Personal Crisis* by Ann Kaiser Stearns. These books are excellent resources as you seek coping methods that work for you.

## ESTABLISHING REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR YOUR GRIEF

Holding on to society's myths about grief can hinder your healing process and cause unnecessary frustration. However, if you establish more realistic expectations for yourself, you will ease your burden and facilitate your grieving. Consider these expectations. They may be appropriate for your grief:

- Your healing will take longer than most people think.
- Your grief work will require more energy than you might have imagined.
- Your grief will change over time. Grief evolves and unfolds; it continually changes and develops.
- Your grief will impact all areas of your life; social, physical, emotional and spiritual.
- Your grief will not follow a "logical progression" of decreasing intensity. The grief process is more like a roller coaster, with dramatic ups and downs, than it is a logical, step-by-step progression.

- How you grieve will depend on how you perceive the loss.
- You will grieve not only for the person who died but also for all of the hopes and dreams you held for the future, and all of your needs that your loved one can no longer fulfill.
- Your grief will involve a wider range of feelings than those typically recognized as "grief" such as sadness or depression. You may also experience anger, guilt, frustration, resentment, intolerance and irritability. There is no one, all-inclusive list of "appropriate grief feelings," but remember, feelings are not "good" or "bad," "right" or "wrong", they just are.

Give yourself permission to feel and express whatever emotions you are experiencing.

- Your loss may trigger feelings of grief for earlier losses that you have not resolved or had not recognized at the time of the loss. Coming to terms with earlier, unresolved losses may be part of dealing with your current loss. Look at this as an opportunity to heal old wounds and to free yourself of burdens which you may have been carrying for a long time.
- Grief usually involves an "identity crisis." You may need to figure out who you are now without the person who has died.
- At times you may doubt your sanity and fear that you are going crazy.
- Grief is unpredictable. It comes in waves of intense pain which often occur with no warning.
- You may have difficulty concentrating or focusing on the task at hand because you are preoccupied with the deceased or the death.
- Grief often involves re-evaluating your beliefs or philosophy of life. You may question your religion and doubt your faith. You may feel compelled to search for meaning to make sense of the tragedy and the pain you are experiencing.
- Grief may involve physical reactions including body aches, stomach problems, shortness of breath, lack of energy, etc.
- Grief may impair your capacity to think clearly, make decisions, or solve problems systematically. Consequently, even minor problems or annoyances which you would normally take in stride may become huge and feel more burdensome than they would have prior to this loss.
- Your behavior in social situations may change.
- Certain dates, events, and places may trigger sudden upsurges of grief.
- No two people will grieve in exactly the same way even if they are grieving for the same person.
- You may be disappointed from time to time by how others respond to your grief. Because our society has many unrealistic expectations – "myths" – about grief, you are bound to encounter people who respond inappropriately to you.
- Even after you have thoroughly worked through your grief, certain events and experiences may resurrect intense feelings of grief for you temporarily.
- You may always miss the person who has died. However, missing that person will not prevent you from moving forward and finding meaning, peace and contentment.
- Take some time to review the "Myths of Grief" in your last bulletin. Use these realistic expectations to change the myths you hold in your own life. It also may help to share this list with family members and friends to teach them about the natural, normal and necessary grief process you are experiencing.

Grateful acknowledgement for the inspiration of Realistic Expectations from Mary Ann Harter Janson, RN, MS.