

Grief's Journey

Grief's Journey, Issue Nine



Dear Friend

As the months pass, we hope you are discovering changes in yourself and how you experience and adjust to your loss. Terrible as it is, grief brings us to the edge of death, the edge of our own individuality, and the edge of our limitations. That edge is a place where we are confronted with a truth beyond words. At that place, we come as close as we can in this life to meeting our true self face-to-face. At this time, you have enormous potential for growth.

How have you grown? Hopefully, you have decided that life, uncontrollable and risky as it can be, is worth living. You may have a new sense of who you are and new skills for managing the practical realities of your life. You may have made new friends or become involved in new activities. You may have been surprised by the return of your sense of humor and your ability to relax and have fun. Perhaps you have learned to enjoy living without feeling disloyal to your deceased loved one and perhaps you have begun to imagine a new life for yourself. You may find your mind is not always wandering to thoughts of your loved one; when you run across a favorite picture, hear an old tune, or smell a familiar fragrance, you may be able to remember with joy.

You probably have grown in many ways, and still there may be days when it seems as though the death were yesterday. Though you may have accepted the loss and begun to release feelings of grief, the memories will always be with you. On certain days and in certain places you will continue to keenly miss having your loved one beside you. The sorrows and joys of the past have become part of you; they are part of what you bring to where you now stand at the edge of your future.

How Do You Know When YOU'RE GETTING BETTER?

Everyone has his or her own individual path through grief, but there are certain landmarks along the way that may help you recognize that you are healing.

You will know you are improving...

- As you find the courage to face the facts and your true feelings.
- As you find patience and give yourself time to accept the shock and to feel your feelings so that you begin to sense that you will gradually be free, not of sorrow, but of suppressed emotions.
- As your head clears enough to sift good advice from bad and you recognize that you can make decisions based on your own needs instead of what friends and relatives believe you should do.
- As you realize that you can change what needs to be changed.
- As you find the self-discipline to work your way out of shock and suffering and you recognize that you can rejoin the human race with dignity and a sense of your own worth.
- As you regain your sense of humor and find yourself laughing.

- As you notice that your mood swings are not quite so high and so low, and that your good times last longer and the bad times are shorter.
- When you can remember the past with pleasure and when you can remember your loved one as human, with both strengths and weaknesses.
- As you recognize that each day can lead you closer to your goals and you rediscover your ability to plan each day.
- As you find the fortitude to reach beyond your familiar world for new friends and still remain on easy terms with old friends.
- As you feel ready to take one step at a time toward your future, even though it is unknown.

Exercise: Ideas for Measuring Progress

It may help to deliberately notice your feelings and behaviors that show how far you've come. Take a few moments, either in writing or in your mind, to consider these landmarks.

- It took courage for me to...
- I had the patience to...
- I made my own decisions about...

(Continue on page 2)

Join us at one of our annual events

BUTTERFLY RELEASE

To Be Announced
Details to come
Call for information

LIGHT UP A LIFE

To Be Announced
Details to come
Call for information

All of these events are open to the community

For more information, contact the Hope Bereavement Center at (760) 431-4100

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Call us to schedule individual grief counseling and/or group information.

- I've discovered these capabilities that I never knew I had...
- Since this experience of loss, I have become...
- I have regained control of my life in these areas...
- I feel hopeful about...
- I am making future plans to...
- I was able to laugh when...
- A memory of my loved one that gives me pleasure is...
- I will always love him/her, but I can release and say goodbye to my loved one by...
- I have made progress in...

Progress Means...

- Having the courage to accept the reality of your loss
- Being able to identify what you are feeling and work on expressing those feelings
- Being able to confront areas, issues or relationships that are "incomplete"
- Allowing yourself to "feel the feelings" to be free of suppressed emotions
- Making decisions just for you
- Being willing to make changes
- Being able to laugh again
- Sensing that the highs and lows are not quite so far apart
- Periods between major lows are lengthening
- Remembering the past in balance, the good things with pleasure, the bad things realistically and individuals, with the good and the bad
- Being able to see what you like and didn't like about your life (that person) then and now
- Seeing some good things about your grief (How has it changed you for the better?)
- Being able to concentrate again
- Returning to old friends and activities
- Finding new friends and activities
- Feeling hopeful about the future
- Being able to think about something other than your grief for any amount of time (minutes, hours, days)
- Having a return of energy, self-esteem, identity
- Noticing that foods taste better
- Acknowledging that grief has made you different and better
- Paying attention to how you look and dress
- Wearing more colorful colors
- Feeling peaceful
- Enjoying things of beauty
- Realizing you have choices
- Experiencing your moods as less fluctuating and more predictable

Each of these signs can symbolize healing and an increasing attachment to life and a future.

THE LIGHTER SIDE OF BEREAVEMENT

While you grieve, it is very important that you give yourself time and space to express your grief as well as opportunities for respite from the intensity of your feelings. Striking a balance is not easy; it often involves a trial and error process to find the right activities for yourself at the right time.

How can you find respite from grief without avoiding or discounting your pain? Experience with the bereaved and research shows that laughter is good medicine. Some of you may be startled by the suggestion that humor and grief can co-exist but consider what George Bernard Shaw said: "Life does not cease to be funny when people die any more than it ceases to be serious when people laugh."

Humor and laughter do not force you to avoid your feelings, they simply give you an opportunity to focus on another part of the picture for a while. Instilling fun, laughter and levity into your daily routines lends perspective and can give you some much-needed relief at this time.

Furthermore, laughter and tears have more in common than you may think. Both crying and laughing release tension stored in the body. When you cry, you release toxins from your body. When you laugh, endorphins, the body's natural painkillers, are released, fostering euphoric feelings and a sense of well-being. One of the wisest pieces of advice regarding coping with grief came from a bereaved mother, "Cry when you have to, laugh when you can." In other words, it is essential to give yourself permission to both laugh and cry to heal completely.

Prescription for grief: One good belly laugh per day. Repeat as needed for relief of pain. If you are like many grieving people and feel like a "pain magnet," you may need to be deliberate in your attempts to integrate humor into your daily routines. It helps to balance your most difficult times with opportunities to tickle your funny bone. Consider integrating one or more of the following suggestions into your daily routine.

1. Visit the comedy section of your local video store. Watch amusing movies or TV shows.
2. Read something funny, especially before bed. Try something by Robert Fulghum or children's books like Dr. Seuss' "Oh the Places You Will Go" or Judith Viorst's "Alexander and the No Good, Horrible, Very Bad Day."
3. Get out of the house and have some fun. Consider going to a comedy at your local movie theater. Allow yourself to see the humorous side of life all around you. It's there – in your children and grandchildren, your pets and your neighbors – you'll see it if you look.
4. Spend time with funny people. Laughter is contagious.

Warriors

In her book, "Widow," Lynn Caine talks about the scars you earn from your grief. She calls your scars "battle stripes". The scars are part of you and your struggle for development. They are proof of the fact that you are a human being.

Most decorated soldiers would readily trade their battle ribbons for an end to war. Still they can be satisfied that they did, what they had to do, that they made the most of the experience, that they learned from it, and that they came back alive.

As a human being, you are significantly impacted and shaped by the pain in your life. Your scars are your "battle ribbons" and they represent where you've been. They are part of your personal histories and present strengths. Why should you disclaim them?



Parent's Corner

COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR KIDS

Often, you may not know what or how to explain a loved one's death to your children. Since children ask the same questions again and again, you may feel confused and wonder if you're saying the right things. You may be tempted to "protect" your children and only tell them the "easy" things about the death. You may also be so filled with your own strong feelings that you tend to put off talking to your children – even though they need to talk to you. But how you communicate with your children affects how they handle their grief over time.

The following are tips for communicating to your children about death and your ongoing grief:

- Tell children about a death immediately with honesty and respect. Explain death in terms that children can understand (i.e., use correct terms such as "die", "died" and "dead"). Words and expressions such as "passed away", "lost", and "went to sleep" may only confuse them.
- Express your own feelings openly. When children see you angry, crying, upset, and sad, they know it's okay for them to have the same feelings. Seeing you express yourself shows them how to express their own strong feelings.
- Understand that children will express their feelings differently than adults, in their own way and in their own time. They may "act out" what has happened in their play. This is not disrespectful; it is a way for them to make sense of what has happened.
- Continue to talk about the person who died. Children need reassurance that the person will remain in their memories and in their hearts.
- Be patient with children and get feedback to know that you have understood each other.
- Be sure to validate your child's expressions of feelings. Let them know that you accept what they are saying without judging or minimizing. Rather than saying, "You shouldn't" feel that way", or "it isn't that bad", you might say, "You're right, it is hard, painful, or frustrating" or "I can see that your stomach is hurting".
- Help your child elaborate from general thoughts to specific ones. For example, help them move from "I'm scared" to "I'm scared of being alone in the dark."
- Avoid trying to read your child's mind. Ask for confirmation about your guess. For example, you might say "You look pretty angry. Is that what you're feeling right now?"
- Don't be afraid to speak openly to others about the death while your child overhears. This gives children information, which they may not have thought to ask and permission to talk about it to others.

Communicating with Your Kids

- Communicate how you feel about your child through appropriate physical contact, including touching and hugging.
- Observe the non-verbal clues such as facial expressions, body language and tone of voice, which may help you understand what your child is feeling.
- Most of all, let your children know they can talk to you about anything and that you are open to hearing about their thoughts and feelings. This means the good feelings as well as the difficult ones!
- Notice clues that might include that your child could benefit from professional counseling. These include:
 - Any dramatic change in behavior or decline in functioning
 - Any suicidal statements
 - Panic attacks
 - Physical assault on others or cruelty to animals
 - Drug or alcohol abuse
 - Serious delinquent acts
 - Withdrawal from normal socialization

Some Suggestions to Children When Dealing With Anger

- Tell your parents how you plan to express your anger so that they understand what you are doing. They may be able to help you get old phone books, which you can tear up.
- It is important to clean up any messes you make.
- It is a good idea to have a cooling off time or time away from the person you are angry with.
- It may help to talk with someone you trust after you cool off.
- It is rare that anything gets fixed when we are very angry. Problems between people are easier to solve when we allow a cooling-off period and get in touch with the feelings underneath the anger such as: hurt, shame, anxiety, and frustration.