



Suggestions to Help Yourself Through Grief

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I remember, after my wife died, how frustrated I felt when everyone seemed to suggest they had all the answers for my situation. Actually, only WE know what is right for ourselves. Others may help us find our way; ultimately, however, it is OUR grief process and we must work it through in a manner appropriate for us.

In this context, may I make a few suggestions?

1) BE PATIENT WITH YOURSELF:

The grief process is a time to heal. Coming to terms with your loss and adjusting to a new life does not happen overnight. Grief usually takes more time than most of us expect. The poet John Donne wrote: "He who has no time to mourn has no time to mend". Some people feel the grief process should be predictable. After one week, this, after two months, that. A few people expect you to experience grief in exactly the same way and at the same pace they did.



Every experience of grief is unique. Some people take longer than others to work through their emotions. Some experience certain emotions, while other people experience different ones. Also, our particular emotions may differ in intensity. We are unique people and how we will experience the loss of a special relationship will be unique to US. Do not compare yourself to anyone else or allow anyone to compare you to another situation. Be patient with yourself. Try to keep decisions to a minimum. Because your judgment is uncertain now, do not take on new or added responsibilities right away. Delay making decisions about moving or buying and selling property, or getting into another relationship, for as long as possible. Do not rush yourself, for your body, mind and heart require all your energy just to mend.

2) ACCEPT YOUR FEELINGS

You cannot choose your feelings. They choose YOU. So feel what you are feeling. We often suppress or deny our feelings. Your emotions may be very raw. You have been wounded and you need to mend. Crying is healthy and can make you feel better. You will experience anger, panic, depression, and many of the responses we have talked about. You may feel other emotions that have not been mentioned. You may think you are falling to pieces at the very time people are telling you to get it together. If you are experiencing any or all of these emotions you are normal. You may be frightened that you are going crazy, but you are not losing your mind. You are going through one of the most difficult and unpleasant experiences of life. It is painful and it hurts.

3) ASK FOR AND ACCEPT HELP

Remember all those people who said, "If there's anything I can do, don't hesitate to let me know"? Most of them meant it, so do not be afraid to ask for help when you need it. Because we don't want to bother anyone else with our problems, much of our pain goes unheeded. But you need not suffer alone. Admittedly, we shouldn't HAVE to ask. But this is the real world. Sometimes help is not offered because



people do not know what we need. And often even WE aren't sure what we need. Maybe what we need most is someone to listen. Not everyone will be willing. Some people may not be able to handle your tears. Some will want to give you all the answers, rather than just listening. Find someone who cares, someone with whom you feel comfortable talking, and to whom you can trust your vulnerability. With these three attributes, you will undoubtedly have someone who can offer support, encouragement and help. There are self-help groups to offer support and friendship. You may also want to talk to a competent grief counselor, or perhaps someone from the funeral home, your place of worship or a social agency can direct you to such resources.

4) BE GOOD TO YOURSELF

You need to look after yourself physically, mentally, socially and spiritually, especially at significant times along the journey.

a) Physically: Try to get adequate rest. Even if you cannot sleep, at least learn to relax and rest. Good nutrition is important. Sometimes it can be a discipline to make balanced, nutritious meals, especially if the loss has left us on our own. Resist the temptation to skip meals or eat junk food. Forcing your body to work hard on a relatively few nutrients denies the body needed resources.

b) Mentally: Do not beat yourself up emotionally. Don't torture yourself with regrets and "if only's". Reading some books on grief will help you understand what you are going through. Keeping a journal or a diary is a good way to express what you are feeling and thinking. A year from now, when you read your journal again, you will be pleasantly surprised to see how far you have come in your recovery. **HAVE SOME FUN.** Laughter is good for your health. Research has shown that positive emotions produce positive chemical changes in the body. Humor is an important tool in handling your grief. Often we feel guilty if we have fun. We sometimes have the impression that to laugh or to enjoy ourselves too quickly is somehow dishonoring to the memory of our loved one. This is a myth! Do what you want to do, without worrying what other people may or may not be thinking or expecting you to do. Feel free to be spontaneous, to laugh and have fun. Ask yourself, what you would want your loved one to do if you had died.



c) **Socially** After being out of your social circle for a time, it may not be easy for you to return. You may find it surprisingly difficult to go back to work, to face friends, or to attend your place of worship. You may think that people are regarding you differently, perhaps feeling sorry for you. If you were married and are now single, others may find it difficult to relate to you now you are on your own. Such adjustments are not easy, either for you or for them. During this transition, attending a support group can help bridge the time between the loss and your return to full social involvement again. However, it is important not to shut yourself away. Social relationships are healthy, and especially so after a loss.

d) **Spiritually** Bereavement can bring a critical turning point in our faith. Regardless of what faith we subscribe to, we may feel that our belief system has been shaken. Why would God allow this to happen? We may feel angry that God does not seem to answer our prayers, or even to care. We may wonder what His purpose is in all this. Grief may also affect our beliefs about life itself. Life is not fair. Sometimes we have to come to terms with this fact. The death may have meant not only the end of the relationship, but also the death of our hopes and our dreams.

In the days ahead, you will need to work through some of these issues. Hopefully you have a spiritual advisor who understands the grieving process, accepts you as a hurting person, listens non-judgmentally to your grief questions, and assists you to find meaning.

Remember, there are no easy answers. Faith enables us to accept what we may not understand.

e) **Special Days:** Certain days can create a heightened sense of loss, and grief attacks are more likely to occur. On such occasions as a birthday or an anniversary, a wedding or a funeral; during seasonal holidays such as Easter, Passover, Thanksgiving, Hanukkah or Christmas; on Valentine's Day or Mother's Day; or simply the "a year ago today..." days; you may experience a heightened sense of missing the person. Other months of the year have meanings related to family togetherness: the August weekend at the cottage, the annual family reunion.



ANYTIME when activities were shared as a couple, or as a family, can be a poignant reminder of happy days gone by. All are special reminders of the absence of someone in your life. Plan to do something meaningful on that special day -- something that YOU want to do that will provide you with the support you need.

5) MOVE TOWARD THE PAIN

After a funeral, bystanders seek to comfort us by turning us AWAY from pain. Consider the following phrases:

- * Maybe it's for the best
- * Be thankful they aren't suffering
- * Well, at least they lived a good long life
- * You should rejoice because they're in a better place
- * Perhaps it's a blessing in disguise

Such sentiments are intended to reduce the impact of the loss and make the situation a little easier to bear. However sincerely intended, they show a lack of understanding of the grief process. People mean well, but in fact they are trying to move us in the wrong direction. The road to recovery leads TOWARD the pain. We must experience the pain of loss - we can't avoid it, go around it, over it, or under it. Tranquilizers or alcohol don't end the pain: they merely mask it or provide a temporary escape. Anything that encourages us to avoid or suppress the pain merely delays coming to terms with our loss. Pain is a gift. OK, it is probably one you wish you could exchange for something else, but it warns your body, mind and spirit of danger. Because pain is our teacher, we must never ignore or suppress it.



This hurt needs to be tended, this wound needs to be bound. Your pain is telling you that you cared about someone. It shows you that you need to attend to the healing of your broken heart. The best pain is shared pain. Find a friend who is willing to listen, willing to accept that you are in pain, and who will not give you easy answers or try to "fix you". Someone who simply accepts you as you are. As well, there are support groups available where you can find friends who will share in the fellowship of sufferings. You don't have to do it alone.

6) HOLD ON TO HOPE

Hope brings us comfort. While we must not minimize the pain and difficulty of grief, we need to trust that someday this pain will subside and life will have meaning again. There is a purpose, even though we may not see it right now. As you are given the grace and the strength to carry on, the feelings of grief will become less painful and occur less often. You will begin to pick up the threads of your life. You will look toward the future with hope and even pleasure. Attending a support group can help bring you hope. People whose loss is recent, who see nothing but despair and darkness, can share with others who have experienced the anguish and recovered. When our pain seems so great, we may question whether others know how we feel. To see the possibility of recovery will provide that first glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel.

7) GRIEF TAKES TIME

More often than not, grief takes much more time than society has been willing to allow. We have often forced unrealistic expectations on people. We expect them to be "over it" in a relatively short time. While it is commonly accepted that the



intense reactions of grief will subside within six to twelve months, it is also widely acknowledged that some may take years to resolve their grief. We are all different. Not everyone goes through the identical process, and no one travels at the identical speed.

You have begun your journey. Sometimes it may seem that the road is too difficult and too long. You may be wondering if you will make it. The answer is: "You can if you want to." Although that may not be the answer you expected or wanted, it is realistic.

Grief can be a challenging experience, but not more powerful than your ability to work your way through your many emotions. No one else knows how you feel. Do not let anyone try to squeeze you into THEIR expectations of what grief should be like. Express your grief in a way that is right for you. Although the possibility of your recovery may seem distant right now, this healing process can happen for you.