

Reasons to Go On.

by Dr Bill Webster

Damini, aged 72, had lived alone for six months when Champakali, who was pregnant, came to live with her. The two became inseparable in no time, as Damini poured all her maternal care and affection on the much younger Champakali, who lapped up the attention. Damini made herself available at all hours caring for her new friend. Tragically, however, Champakali died in childbirth. Damini was heartbroken. Tears would roll down her face, as she simply lay on her side, unwilling even to get up, staring at the concerned staff through sad, moist eyes. Within a few weeks, Damini had completely stopped eating, and despite intravenous and other medical attention, within a month, Damini herself died.

These events are true, but you need to know “the rest of the story”. Damini and Champakali lived in India, and were both *elephants*. According to experts, elephants often make strong attachments and follow elaborate rituals around the sickness and the death of one of the herd. In the face of her intense grief, Damini somehow found it impossible to go on.

This story came to my attention when Peter, a gentleman in my support group, whose wife of many years had recently died, gave me the news article which he had carefully cut from the paper, and photocopied. Can you imagine my concern? What was he telling me? Was this a cry for help? Was HE saying he couldn't go on, and wanted to die? I took the situation very seriously.

Many humans might have a similar struggle to Damini. Many of the difficult situations of life involve the loss of a relationship: the death of someone we loved and needed, or who needed us; someone moving to a distant geographical location; kids “leaving the nest”. The loss of any relationship leaves us searching for ways to adjust to a new life in which that relationship is missing. In some situations, we may wonder *how* we can go on without the relationship, and possibly even *why*.

As it turned out, Peter did not particularly want to *die*. He just wasn't sure how he could go on *living*. While there may seem little difference in effect between these two, psychologically they are utterly contrasting. Damini (if I may hazard a guess, even though elephant psychology is not my major!) wanted to die, because, she saw no

alternative. Her whole “raison d’etre” seemed gone. She could find no reason or resources to go on living after her loss. The word “survive” finds its roots in two Latin words, meaning “to live beyond”.

That is often the challenge for people after a significant loss. How can I go on living without this relationship, and why. While there are always reasons to go on, I have discovered that they are never as obvious as many observers seem to think. Caregivers need to assist people find these reasons and support them while they regain the resources to go on with life.

Yet this is never easy. The choices people are forced to make in such situations are rarely the ones they really want. They go on, albeit reluctantly, because they would much rather they had a better option that did not involve the loss. That is the problem.

Peter taught me a great deal about this process. He has found reasons to go on. He joined a seniors group, he attends our ongoing support programs, he has done some travelling with new friends. He still misses his wife tremendously, but he discovered new directions and a purpose in which he could invest himself. He might wish things had been different, but he is making the most of what he has left. This is why grief is a courageous journey, and what makes grief support such a rewarding effort.