

SEASONS

LEGACIES OF THE HEART

Grief and Lasting Love

The month of February is especially associated with love. Valentine's Day is a romantic event that gives us the special opportunity to let our loved ones know how much they mean to us. It is a time to let all those close and dear to us know how much we value and cherish their love. Yet for many of us who are facing the challenge of loving in physical separation due to the death of our loved ones, it is an uncertain experience at best.

Uncertain in that it is in our heart where we carry both the satisfaction of our lasting love for that person, as well as the sadness and loneliness for their absence. Loving in separation calls for a shift in the expression and experiencing of that love. The common aspects of the normal exchanges that occur in a loving relationship have to shift to allow us to successfully grieve a loss, while maintaining lasting love. It calls for a change in the relationship within our hearts in order to experience a healthy bereavement.

In exchange for our lasting love for those individuals, we receive



their cherished legacies. Legacies such as memories, stories, shared experiences, traditions, and even a few physical items keep us connected with those individuals. We hold dear these legacies and make them our own, and in doing so our loved ones live on in our hearts. By focusing on these legacies we experience the reassurance that they will always remain an important part of our lives. Awareness of these legacies helps us find comfort during the most difficult of losses and gradually allows the uncertainty to diminish leaving only room for the lasting love.

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HOSPICE and PALLIATIVE CARE
of GREENSBORO

THE TASKS OF GRIEF

Part one

There are many different ways to structure the process of grieving a loss. Some theorists describe it as stages; some use a wheel; and some use stair steps. My favorite way of looking at grief is to see it as a series of tasks to be completed. J. William Worden of Harvard described these in his book, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*. In this and the next few newsletters I will describe these

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tasks that are so important for the griever to understand and work through.

Understanding gives permission for grievors to do their grief work and helps them know they are not “going crazy” or “doing it wrong.” This is especially important when friends and family, who may not know much about the grief process, try to “help” the griever with suggestions, such as, “hurry up and get over it” or “put it behind you and get on with life.” Other than the loss itself, there is little that is more devastating to grievors than for others to make them feel there is something wrong with them when they are doing normal grief work. It is impossible “to get on with life” without doing the needed grief work.

The first task described by Worden is to accept the reality of the loss. It would seem obvious that anyone would know that the loss had happened. It is true that grievors know it on some level. But that level is like the “tip of the iceberg.” There are many parts of the psyche, or unconscious, that do not know it yet. This is because we are able to block out events or information that is too painful or scary for us to let in all at once. We are blessed with the gift of what we call shock or denial, which allows us to let in painful knowledge a little at a time as we can handle it. It takes anywhere from weeks to months for the full reality of a major loss to become totally real to us on all its levels. We may even spend the whole first year letting it in “dropperful by dropperful.” That is

DEAR LORD

help me to live this day

quietly, easily;

To lean upon Thy great strength

trustfully, restfully;

To wait

for the unfolding of Thy Will

patiently, serenely;

To meet others

peacefully, joyously;

To face tomorrow

confidently, courageously.

— *Anonymous*



why many people come to Hospice for grief counseling in the second half of the first year saying, “I am getting worse instead of better.” No, the loss and all its implications are just much more real by then and they are feeling it and mourning it more actively than at first. It is important for them to do this work.

The period of shock can be particularly scary to someone who is grieving. That is because so much psychic energy is being used to hold out the reality of what has happened that their mind does not work quite like it always has. Some people say they can't focus or concentrate - that they read a paragraph and can't remember anything in it. Others have trouble staying on task or finishing anything. Others say they have trouble remembering anything. They may go in a room and not remember why they are there. It is particularly hard to return to work, though they must at this time. Their productivity and accuracy may suffer because of their difficulty concentrating. When in shock, grievors tend to avoid situations that would make the loss more real. It is too painful to be “hit in the face with it” when not ready. During this time, grievors need to be assured that these reactions are a normal part of the grief process and that these troubling effects will pass with time. It helps for them to move into acceptance if they can tell the story of the loss, sometimes over and over again. Some people get a lot of help from writing the story, but most people prefer to tell it and to tell their reactions and feelings

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about the story. All grievors need an understanding listener or several of them, who will not grow tired of listening and will see it as a way to help the griever with the first task of the grief process - accepting the reality and permanence of their loss.

DEAR COUNSELOR

Q My father died two months ago, and my mother died several years ago. With the death of my last parent, I have this feeling that I am, for lack of a better description, an adult orphan. I know this sounds odd. Along with this change, I am experiencing some feelings of emptiness and loss of a sense of who I am. Will this improve with time, or do I need to seek counseling to get past this?

A Even though we are adults, for most of us the longest relationship that we have experienced in our lives is with our parents. We are no longer dependent upon them in the way that we were as children, but we still in some ways continue to seek approval from them, and enjoy their happiness at our successes and go to them for advice. We may even go so far as to pick up the phone to call a parent when something exciting has happened, only to once again realize that they are no longer with us physically. It is helpful to remember that death ends a life, not a relationship. We will always be our parents' children and those relationships continue with our memories, mementos,

SUPPORT GROUPS

Support groups bring people together who are experiencing similar losses to share their feelings and the ways their lives have been affected.

Call Tammy Chaput at 621-5565 to register for a support group or to schedule a counseling session.

If you have a question that you would like answered, please call the Counseling and Education Center at 621-5565 or write to us at 2500 Summit Avenue, Greensboro, NC 27405. We can also be reached by email at thecenter@hospicegso.org.

stories, traditions, etc. No one can replace a parent, nor would we want to, but we can turn to others in our support network and begin to use them differently to fill that emptiness.

If our relationship with a parent was problematic, our grief may become complicated and prolonged. Counseling would be indicated under those circumstances and I would encourage you to seek either individual or group counseling, both offered through the Counseling and Education Center.

BOOK REVIEWS:

(Not to be considered endorsements)

Dying: A Book of Comfort
Pat McNeese, Warner Books

In this treasury of life-affirming passages, more than 40 celebrated writers, thinkers, and religious figures from various faiths speak eloquently on the nature of dying and provide words of comfort for those left behind.

The Mourning Handbook: A Complete Guide for the Bereaved
Helen Fitzgerald, Simon and Schuster

A therapist's detailed map of grief's variations, with useful checklists and responses for those going through it, and its often perplexing return on special family occasions, anniversaries and other symbolic events.



HOSPICE *and* PALLIATIVE CARE of GREENSBORO

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*When Parents Die: Learning to Live
with the Loss of a Parent*

Rebecca Abrams, Routledge

A journalist and bereavement counselor's account of the various patterns and complications of moving from grief to recovery after the loss of a parent.

*After the Death of a Child: Living
with Loss Through the Years*

Ann K. Finkbeiner, The Free Press

A science journalist puts aside the question, "What is a normal recovery?" to take up the less judgmental question "When a child dies, what happens afterward to the parent?" Interviews with parents show the ways relationships within and outside the family change and how parents often creatively maintain some bond with the deceased child.

SEASONS...

is a publication of the Counseling and Education Center of Hospice and Palliative Care of Greensboro. We welcome your comments and suggestions.

Diane McLaughlin, Editor

Bereavement Counselors may be reached through the Counseling and Education Center.

336-621-5565



SELF HELP TIPS

It is important not to neglect yourself when you are grieving.

Here are a few tips:

1. Exercise daily - walking is a good exercise and combats depression.
2. Eat balanced meals - Avoid over-eating foods high in sugar and fat content.
3. Get sufficient rest at night.
4. Go with your heart. If you are not ready to participate in a certain activity, wait until you sense that you are ready. Don't feel guilty about not going.
5. If you are feeling overwhelmed, don't be afraid to seek counseling to talk about your feelings of loss.

