Losing a loved one can shake a person’s world. Each of us will mourn, heal and rebuild in our own unique way. *Grief’s Passage* seeks to offer you information, practical tools, inspiration and hope as you make this journey. In this issue we focus on some of the challenges that confront many of us in the months following a loved one’s death, and we share suggestions for coping from others who are further along in their grief. We invite you to visit our website, [www.hospicegso.org](http://www.hospicegso.org), for more information about grief and the programs offered by the Counseling and Education Center. You can call us at 336.621.5565 or email us at thecenter@hospicegso.org, if you would like to meet with a bereavement counselor or register for one of our programs.

If a few months have passed since the death of your loved one, you may find that friends and relatives are in less frequent contact as they return to their normal routines. It may be that you too have found your way to some semblance of normal as well. If so, that is wonderful.

For many of you, this can be an incredibly tough time. As the numbness wears off, the experience of grief can intensify. People around you seem to expect you to be better, but perhaps you don’t feel that way. This is often a time when grieving persons contact Hospice and Palliative Care of Greensboro’s (HPCG) Counseling and Education Center, and tell us:

- “I feel worse now than I did right after the death.”
- “I’m backsliding.”
- “I’m not making any progress.”
- “I should be doing better.”

Know that it is quite common to experience intense grief about this time. The overwhelmed sense of a few months ago may have given way to an empty or stuck feeling. You may find that you miss your loved one, and your old life even more now than at first. Some say they are finding it hard to get motivated to do anything and that makes them feel bad about themselves. It can be hard to know if you are making any progress or that you will ever feel better. In all likelihood, you are making progress and you are continuing to heal.

### Special Challenges in Grief

Grief can challenge us in ways that are not always understood or acknowledged. It may help you to be patient with yourself and the process, if you consider these five challenges:

**Challenge Number One: The Back and Forth of Grief**

Grief is anything but orderly. When we are healing from grief, we do not progress neatly from feeling bad at first to feeling better each day. Instead, the motion of grief is better described as a back and forth process. Some days you may be energetic and focused on the tasks that need doing, and the next day or week you may be awash in tears and sadness. Many grieving persons think that the energetic, focused days are the signs of progress, and that the tears and sadness are signs of back-tracking. But, in reality, both are important parts of grieving and coming to terms with your loss. And, it is healthy and normal to go back and forth between these states. That is how we ultimately heal and move forward. So, when you have an emotionally difficult period, try to be patient with the process, and know that if you allow your sadness and tears to be experienced, you will swing back to the other side of grief recovery in due time.
Challenge Number Two: One Death = A Thousand Losses

“Drop a pebble in the water, just a splash, and it’s gone; But there’s half a hundred ripples circling on and on and on ...”

The biggest loss in grief is, of course, the loss of the unique person we loved. According to Arthur Schopenhauer,

“The deep pain that is felt at the death of every friendly soul arises from the feeling that there is in every individual something which is inexpressible, peculiar to him alone, and is, therefore, absolutely and irretrievably lost.”

But there are many other secondary losses -- “half a hundred ripples” -- that we also grieve, and changes that we must make:

- Loss of companionship and security.
- A lost or changing sense of meaning or purpose.
- Loss of hopes and plans that you had for your future.
- Loss of one of the people who knew and shared your personal history.
- Changed family relationships.
- Changed social relationships.
- New routines and changed rhythms to your daily life.
- New jobs and more tasks, such as estate settling, cooking, taxes, lawn care, etc.

Naturally, it takes time, energy and patience to adjust to and make peace with so much change.

Challenge Number Three: The Unpredictability of Grief

The emotions of grief tend to come in waves. Grief is unpredictable and that makes us feel vulnerable. Grief is triggered by the most unexpected and unlikely events, such as a song on the radio, a person you see on the street or a photo. Even a simple walk down the grocery store aisle can trigger grief. You may instinctively pick-up an item for your loved one, before realizing that he or she is no longer here. It is perfectly natural to fall apart in reaction to one of these grief triggers. Most people find that the best way to find their emotional balance again is to simply breathe, accept that this is part of the process and let the emotions flow. The feeling will pass, and the tears will stop as they always do.

Six months, but the grief is still raw, open to the bone. In the most unlikely places - the dentist, restaurants, creative meetings, sitting on the john - I can still be engulfed in sobs. In public I have to excuse myself or pretend something’s gone down the wrong pipe. Once, in L. A., a guy actually gave me the Heimlich maneuver. I could hardly tell him it was okay, that I was only choking on grief.

– Tony Hendra, “Father Joe: The Man Who Saved My Soul”
Challenge Number Four: Busy Stillness

Grieving people often report they can’t seem to get anything accomplished; they feel unproductive and do not have much to show for their days. They are accustomed to working hard and checking things off of their to-do list. Since they have been grieving, they feel frustrated with themselves. It is important to remember that grief and loss forces us to carry a heavier load, and it will require more energy than usual to get through the day. One metaphor that may be useful is that of a swan floating on water. On the surface the swan appears to float without effort, serene. A peek under the water reveals a different story, as the swan is paddling furiously to make its way across the pond. In the same way, grieving people may seem idle on the surface, but are doing a tremendous amount of work to stay afloat, such as processing loss, dealing with intense feelings and adjusting to new realities. It is no wonder that many grieving people are exhausted much of the time. If you are grieving and wonder why you cannot be more productive, remember how hard you are working even when you are sitting still.

Challenge Number Five: Eating the Elephant

Question: How do you eat an elephant?

Answer: One bite at a time.

A death of a loved one often leaves us with an almost insurmountable pile of new tasks to take on, even as we suffer emotionally and feel drained of our usual energy. It is very easy to feel overwhelmed by the size, number and scope of the challenges you are facing. If so, you might want to try setting two small goals for each day:

What is one thing that I will do today?

Choose something manageable that will allow you to feel relief or accomplishment when you are done. If it is a big task, try to break it down into smaller parts and take it a little at a time.

What is one thing that I will do today to give myself comfort?

Again, think small and simple, such as a phone conversation with a favorite person, a stroll around the back yard or listening to your favorite music.
What Helped Me Get Through My Grief

At the Counseling and Education Center we often ask people, “What has helped you to manage your grief?” Some of the responses include:

**Gentle Exercise:** “Believe it or not, it was walking - even though I really had never exercised in my life before all this. One day I found myself sitting on the sofa, sobbing for what felt like the thousandth time. I was so sick of crying, that I just threw a jacket on, left the house and started walking. About 10 minutes later, I realized that I was no longer crying. That was a huge relief. I started walking every day, and I can’t believe how much it helps me. Twice a week I walk with another widow in the neighborhood, and this companionship has been enjoyable as well. Yes, of course I still cry, but it helps to know that I can break the cycle by getting out of the house and moving.”

**Remembering:** “I didn’t want my grandchildren to forget their ‘Paw-Paw.’ So, I put together a scrapbook for each of them with photos and stories about their grandfather and about how much he loved and enjoyed them. At first it was hard to pull out the photos and look at them. But by the end of the project, I was reminded of so many happy memories. I remembered even more clearly all of the gifts that I had gotten by being married to that man for 45 years.”

**Talking with My Pastor:** “After my son died, I felt abandoned by God. I wanted to understand why. Why did he die before me? Why did he suffer so much? My faith had no answers that satisfied me. I spent time questioning my own beliefs. I read, and I had conversations with my pastor. Ultimately, this helped me get some measure of peace.”

**Working on a Project:** “After my son died, I spent my weekends restoring my son’s 1968 Plymouth Roadrunner. It gave me something to do at a time when I really needed something to do. When I was working on the car, I felt close to him. I think he would have been happy that I finished what he could not.”

**Someone to Listen:** “I am definitely a person who needed to talk and cry. But, my kids couldn’t stand to see me upset, so I wasn’t able to talk with them. Thank goodness for my sister; she is the best listener. When I was feeling low, a talk with her almost always lifted my spirits. She helped me remember who I am and gave me hope that things would get better.”

**Watching Reruns of “Everybody Loves Raymond”:** “Sometimes I just had to turn off my brain. For whatever reason, the silliness of the show took me away from my pain for a while.”

Is a grief support group right for you?

We all need time, space and the support of others to grieve. A grief support group offers all three. The Counseling and Education Center offers a range of grief support groups, all of which are led by professional grief counselors. Our groups meet for four to six sessions, usually weekly, for 90 minutes each. Most of our groups are organized around specific losses, such as spouse, parent, child, sibling or suicide.

Many people say the grief group experience was a lifesaver, and that it helped them feel less isolated, more normal and more hopeful. If you think you may be interested in participating in a grief support group, please give us a call or go to our website to find out about current group offerings.

336.621.5565  www.hospicegso.org

thecenter@hospicegso.org | 2500 Summit Avenue | Greensboro, NC 27405