

Caring for families
Along The Way

*Helping you understand your
journey through grief.*

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Getting a Handle on Your Grief

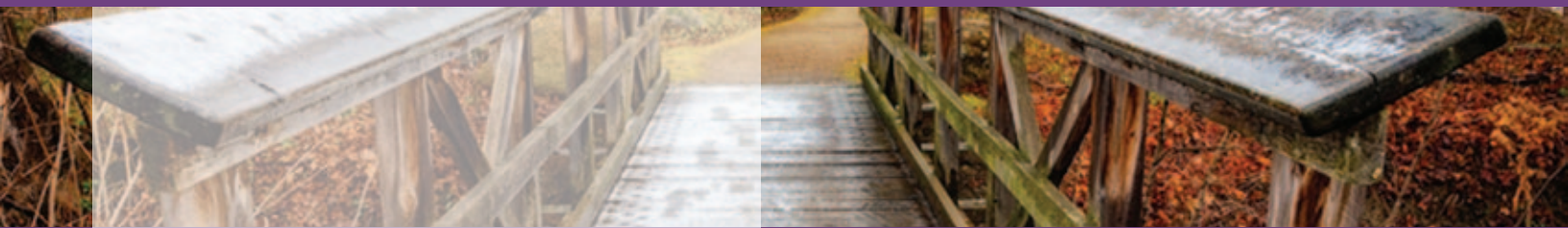
By John Kennedy Saynor

Many people ask me, "What do I have to do?" This isn't an odd question. It is a natural response to anyone who would like to get out of an unbearable situation. It is usually asked by someone who likes to be in control of their lives and who feels they can conquer anything that comes their way. A person like this is really frustrated by their response to a loss. There are a lot of us like that.

Psychologist, Dr. Bill Worden, developed what he labelled the Four Tasks of Grief. They have been very helpful to a lot of people and may be to you too. Here they are:

Accept the reality of the loss.

Too many people live in a fantasy world. They live in a world of what used to be or of what they would like it to be. The result is that they don't grow up, their relationships suffer and they don't achieve their maximum in any way. When someone in your life dies, he or she is dead. Life has been changed forever. Furthermore, you have been changed forever. So to successfully (if I can use that word) recover from grief, you have to face realistically that someone has died.



For many, the emotional and psychological pain of grief is more than they can bear. People resort to keeping busy at work, at home and at play. Some resort to alcohol or drugs to numb their pain.

It is also important to face realistically the fact that the relationship may not have been perfect. Most aren't. But some relationships are destructive and for many reasons, especially in a marriage, we chose not to leave that relationship. The resulting grief when the other person dies may be complicated if you don't deal with the reality that it was a painful relationship. Accepting the reality of the loss is a very important step in your recovery.

Experience the pain.

For many, the emotional and psychological pain of grief is more than they can bear. People resort to keeping busy at work, at home and at play. Some resort to alcohol or drugs to numb their pain. Still others withdraw from the real world thinking they can't cope and even believing that withdrawal is a sign of respect for the one who has died.

These responses to grief aren't helpful at all. What is helpful is to allow yourself to experience the pain at every level. Cry, if you have to. Be angry; if you're angry – just find someone to talk to. When you're lonely, experience the loneliness knowing that tomorrow you'll feel better. It is all part of the roller-coaster that many people who are grieving experience.

Adjust to an environment where the deceased person is missing.

Quite simply this means beginning to live without the influence of the one who has died. If it was your spouse, he may have liked spinach and you didn't. That means you don't have to buy it anymore. Maybe you like sauerkraut and your spouse didn't. Now you can eat it every night of the week. I know you would rather have your spouse back, but he or she is gone and there are new realities in your life.

It may be that your life was occupied with caring for your loved one during a long illness. It will take time for you to become accustomed to the fact that your schedule isn't affected by that responsibility. Yes, you may feel guilty for going to the theatre when you would normally be at home caring for her or him. This is your new reality and in time you will adjust. But it will take time.

Emotionally relocate your loved one.

What does that mean? Well imagine that your emotional home has many rooms. Those who are alive are in the same room as we are. Those who have died eventually move to a new room of our emotional home. This frees us up emotionally for new relationships and activities. When our loved ones move to the new room, it doesn't mean we say goodbye to them but rather begin the process of developing a new relationship with them. Our relationship changes from one of physical presence to a spiritual one – one that is based on memory.

How long does this all take? It depends on many things: your relationship with the one who died, the nature of the death, other stresses you may have in your life, your own health and your general outlook on life and how you deal with difficult situations.

But, if you allow yourself time to grieve, pay attention to the tasks of grief and reach out to others for support you will be able, in time, to come to an acceptance of this loss. When this happens life can be renewed and you begin to move on in ways that you never thought you would.





UNDERSTANDING GRIEF

By John Kennedy Saynor

Probably one of the least understood experiences of our life is that period of time following the death of someone close to us. We know this as the period of grieving. We not only grieve the death of those close to us, but we also grieve the loss of other things in our lives. We grieve when someone dies and we grieve when we lose a job, a relationship, a marriage or our home. We grieve when we begin to realize we aren't as young as we used to be.

Grief is difficult to define.

It helps to understand what grief is if we make a list of the different emotions we are feeling. It is possible to gain an understanding of grief by using metaphors or figures of speech to describe the experience. The following is a list of metaphors people have used to describe grief:

A long dark tunnel

A wandering in the wilderness

An undertow

A deep fog

A door

An abyss

A journey of personal discovery

A pilgrimage

A fresh start

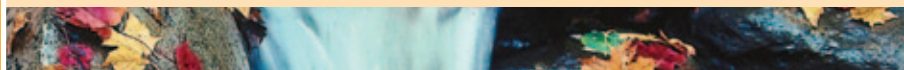
Those are just a few, but it will show you the broad range of ideas people have about what grief is and how it affects them. Often people move from a place of feeling that grief is "a long dark tunnel" to recognizing that it is "a journey of personal discovery" or "a fresh start." Perhaps you could make your own list of metaphors that describe your experience of grieving.

I have often had a person ask me, "Why is this so painful? Why is it taking so long?" Well, grief is difficult and it is painful. Why is it so difficult and painful and why do we try to avoid it? The following will help you understand why grief is what it is.

Is this the first death you have experienced? If it is, then you have never experienced anything like it. Trust me. Even if you have been through this before, it was a different person who died so you have different reasons to grieve. Also you have changed since the last time, so your response is different.

Grief is an assault on the whole person. When we grieve, we are affected physically, socially, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. You may experience emotions you have never known before. Emotions that are familiar to you may be stronger than you have ever known. And some days you will experience such a mix of emotions, it will feel like a spiral of emotional energy whirling around inside of you.

Grief is an intrusion into our lives. Death forces the cancellation of our plans and dreams for the future. It often causes stress in our relationships or accentuates existing tensions. Death takes us into worlds about which we know very little – funeral homes, hospitals, lawyers' offices and sometimes the police. Beyond these material things, death causes us to think about spiritual realities that baffle us and often provide more questions than answers.



It takes a lot longer to recover than most of us expect. Most people who come to my office expect me to give them a quick remedy for their grief so they can “get back to normal.” Well how do you get back to normal after losing someone you have loved for 10, 20, 30 years or more? You don’t. It takes time and it takes work.

I would like you to look at the list of metaphors again. Can you dare to think about grief as a fresh start or a journey of personal discovery? The reality is, someone has died, he or she will never be back, and today is the first day of the rest of your life.

Grief is an important part of our family history, so it is a significant part of who we are and who we are becoming. Our family history – or story – is a combination of many events, some happy and some sad. If you were to think back on your own life, you would probably realize that there has been more sadness than you remember. All these sad events caused you to grieve and affected you in some way. As I said earlier, not all grief is the result of a death in the family. Other losses may include some of the following:

A family pet

A job you lost or failed to get

A move from a family home

A friend who moved away

A lost friendship

Your self-image

Dreams that failed to materialize

A love that wasn’t returned

Take a minute to think about the losses of your life and how they have affected you. What have you learned? How did they affect the way you have lived your life?

The point I’m trying to make is that all the losses in our lives, whether through death or the loss of a place or thing, affect who we are, how we see ourselves and how we live. So it is important that we pay attention to this thing called grief and learn how to work it through so that it becomes an asset rather than a liability in our lives.

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