

Transitions

Valentine's Day - Sadness May Hide a Broken Heart

by Russell P. Friedman & John W. James

The traditional Holiday Season, which begins around Halloween, continues through Thanksgiving, crests with Christmas and Hanukkah, and ends with New Year's Eve, can be a very difficult time for those who have lost a loved one. We might erroneously think that once the new year has passed that grieving friends will now have some relief from the constant reminders that someone they love is no longer alive.

Oops! As soon as each New Year has checked in, the marketing machine begins for the next cycle of cards and gifts - Valentine's Day. For new widows and widowers, this can be one of the most painful of all holidays. From pre-school onwards we begin making and sending Valentine's cards to friends and family. One of the most personal and loving traditions between married couples is Valentine's Day. The symbol of this wonderful tradition is a heart.

When someone we love dies, our heart is broken. The heart, the very symbol of the Valentine's Day celebration, is the emotional aspect that is most damaged by the death of a spouse. Yet, there is very little consciousness at Valentine's Day for

those who are experiencing their first Valentine's Day alone in 30, 40 or 50 years. Even surrounded by family and friends they may feel isolated, alone, and as if no one understands.

Grief is the feeling of reaching out for someone who has always been there, only to discover when you need them one more time, they are no longer there. Some days and some events are larger reminders of the fact that someone is missing in our life. Valentine's Day, like birthdays and anniversaries, is one of those very special days, which can create an immense amount of emotional energy.

When a grieving spouse talks about their sadness they are often met with comments like, "Don't feel sad, you should feel grateful you had them so long." It is probably accurate to say that one of the feelings a grieving spouse might have is gratitude. But gratitude is unlikely to be the most current and pressing feeling at holiday events. Sadness, loneliness, and confusion are more likely to be the emotions that well up in a grieving person on any special occasion or holidays, especially for the first several events following the death.

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We all experience losses. Loss is not limited to death. Divorce is a momentous loss event for everyone involved. Moving with the automatic changes in everything familiar can produce tremendous feelings of loss. Major financial changes, either positive or negative, create feelings of loss. We all grieve. We grieve for all of the losses listed above, and nearly forty others. Yet grief is still one of the most off-limit topics for discussion in our society. It seems strange that one of the experiences that we are all going to have is the one experience we are ill-prepared and ill-equipped to talk about.

We have been taught to believe that "Time heals all wounds." So we tell the griever, "It just takes time." The grieving person believes we have told them the truth, and waits to feel better. But time is neutral. Time, of itself, does not do anything. Time passes. And painful feelings get buried.

Recovery from loss is achieved

by a series of small and correct choices made by the griever. Comments like "Don't feel sad, you should feel grateful you had them so long," and "Time heals all wounds," do not help lead grieving people to correct choices. Rather, the griever is led down a path that leads to more isolation and loneliness. While griever want and need to talk about their feelings, those around them tell them to not feel sad, and keep busy, and time will heal.

You do not need to become a trained professional to be more helpful to family and friends who are dealing with painful emotional losses. You first need to become aware that grief is the normal and natural reaction to loss of any kind. Since grief is normal and natural, you do not have to "fix" anyone. Sometimes all they need is for someone to listen, without judgement, analysis, or comment and guide them to the correct actions of recovery.



Russell P. Friedman and John W. James are co-authors of "The Grief Recovery Handbook" The Action Program For Moving Beyond Death, Divorce, and Other Losses (HarperPerennial, 1998). For information about programs and services, write to: The Grief Recovery® Institute, P.O. Box 461659 Los Angeles, CA 90046-1659 or Call: (323) 650-1234 or Fax: (323) 656-9248 or visit their website at www.grief-recovery.com.

Grief tips for those hurting

by Reverend Mary Bredlau

Experience your feelings... as fully and as often as you need, rather than stuffing them inside.

Express your loss... with a listening "sponge" who will just listen without giving advice.

Realize this death... may bring back other wounds which are unresolved.

Nourish yourself... with people and creative outlets that are "energy givers", not "energy suckers."

Accept your own healing process... your grieving, your timing, as uniquely yours.

Ponder the "Big Why" questions... as you try to understand the unknown, and discover some things are forever unknowable.

Use this painful time to search... for what has meaning in life for you.

Try your very best to ask yourself... "Now that this has really happened what shall I do?"

Be kind and gentle with yourself... seek out support groups, clergy, or counselors, whenever you feel "stuck."

A Death in the Family

When a family member dies, you may be reluctant to let your child see you grieve, fearing that the burden of your sadness will be too much for him. But in this situation, it's even more important to share your feelings. Your child is highly attuned to your ups and downs. Trying to hide your sorrow will be seen as desertion from the child's point of view.

Parents often ask me: "Isn't my child too young to learn about death?" I assure them that it is far better for him to learn the facts from his grieving parents than it is to experience their withdrawal without knowing the reason for it. A child's sense of death is more primitive than an adult's. He'll tend to equate it with being left alone, which brings on the fear of desertion. If parents simply withdraw without explaining what has happened or how they feel about it, the child's worst fears will be confirmed. For example: "Grandma died, and now Mommy is so sad that maybe she will die, too."

But when you let your child in on the experience, even let him see that you have unresolved questions about death, he will have the chance to explore "in safety" the kinds of questions that plague us all. He'll feel included in his family at an important time, and he'll also have a healing effect on the adults around him, giving them the sense of future and purpose they so desperately need.

I am constantly struck by how often a small child will attempt to comfort a grieving parent. I remember a young mother who had lost her new baby. As she was telling me about it in my office, she started to sob. Her 2-year-old, who was playing quietly in the corner of the room, got up when she saw her mother's tears and toddled over to her. As she crawled into her mother's lap, she reached up and clumsily patted her cheek to wipe the tears away. She said "Mommy, I'm here." Her mother looked down at her, smiled and drew her close. Her child had reminded her that there was a little someone she loved who could balance her grief. For the child, there was the rare sense of power in being able to make her weeping mother smile.

Anytime there is a death in the family, I would urge you to tell your children the truth. Tell him as much as you think he can understand, making sure not to frighten him with painful details. If you say something like, "Grandpa was getting so old that he wasn't able to do all the things he wanted to do" or "When you get old, you get pretty tired, and now he can rest", you will be helping to prepare your child for the conversations he is bound to overhear.

Naturally, he'll have questions and unhappy feelings: "Couldn't we help Grandpa to rest at our house?"

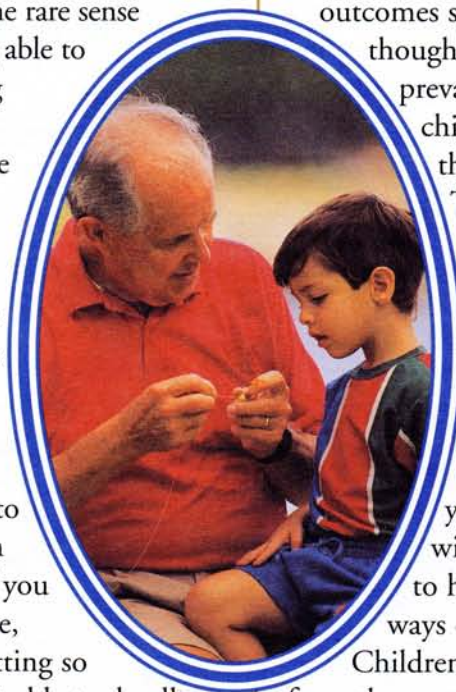
or "I miss him and I want to play the games he played with me." Answer him honestly: "None of us knows why someone we love has to die and go away. Just like you, I hate to give up Grandpa, but what I plan to do is to remember all I can about him so we can keep him with us that way. Can you remember some special things about him to tell me now?"

Your child's next set of questions is likely to reveal his fears about being left by other members of the family. You'll also see indications that he is wondering whether his own thoughts or deeds brought on the loss. Because "magic thinking" (the notion that you can affect

outcomes simply by your thoughts or wishes) is prevalent in early childhood, children feel that they are to blame. They need repeated assurances that bad things or behavior do not carry with them this kind of retaliation; they did not cause the death.

Of course, share your religious beliefs with your child and talk to him about your own ways of dealing with grief.

Children love to hear stories from the past about when their parents were children and their grandparents were young. Make your life as a child come alive for your own child. He'll get the point that our happy times with loved ones lived on, that our memories are never lost to us.






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February Issue

Q. How can I get to the place where joy and loss live together? How can I get past this pain?

A. First, we don't get past the pain. We must go through it. We can't go around it over it or under it either. The path to healing through loss, which means the path to wholeness, requires that we incorporate our pain. To incorporate means to literally take the pain into our body (corps). We get to that place where joy and grief can live together by becoming whole. The process of healing, whether from a physical illness or from a catastrophic life disturbance is a transformational journey. We are changed in the process. The goal is not to be the "way we were" once again, the goal is to be more than we were before, to include more of life. Ultimately the goal is to include loss in our love and trust of life.

Q & A by Deborah Morris Coryell, author of "Good Grief: Healing Through the Shadow of Loss" www.goodgrief.org

"It is foolish and wrong to mourn the men who died. Rather we should thank God that such men lived." 

- George S. Patton, Jr.