



Losing Someone Close

by Dr. Robert DiGiulio

You are never prepared for the death of a loved one, even when that death comes after a long and serious illness. And when the loss is sudden and unexpected, as it was for me, the shock can be overwhelming. No matter the circumstances of loss, there is always sadness, heartache, and emptiness.

As you struggle to go on with life after your loved one has died,

CareNotes^{TM.}

*Take One—and take heart.
Give One—and give hope.*

you face painful questions: How can you handle the anguish of grief? How can you find peace and joy and meaning in life? How can you learn to trust life and love again?

Working your way through

One fateful day years ago, a state trooper told me that a car accident had taken the lives of my wife, Chrissie, our oldest daughter, Christine, and my wife's parents, who were visiting at the time.

After the accident, in trying to help my two surviving daughters understand what had happened, I realized that I was utterly vacant, unsure, and angry. I experienced deep depression for the first time in my life.

In a real way, though, my need to help Aimee and Katie sort through their feelings and questions helped me sort through my own. Although I have never come up with any simple answers or solutions to the pain of loss, I do have some thoughts about grieving. I hope they will bring you strength and aid as you cope with the loss of your loved one.

■ ***Accept your feelings.*** Whether your loss has come in a swift and dramatic fashion or was long expected, your feelings are no doubt intense and painful. Along with sadness, you may be hit by a flood of other, sometimes conflicting, feelings: anger, helplessness, fear, guilt, regret, loneliness, despair.

I discovered that it does no good to fight such feelings. Pushing them down only seems to make them come back with even greater fury. Instead, I

had to learn to respect these feelings as part of me—a testimony to my intense love and loss. And I needed to give them time and space to express themselves. Only when I was able to accept and even embrace such feelings as natural and normal and an integral part of my healing process was I able to work through them.

Remain open to the hurt within you. At times you may want to suppress or avoid it with distractions and busyness. That's understandable, and may even be necessary sometimes, but eventually your emotions will surface; grief will demand your attention. Give it that attention willingly and you will make the process easier.

■ **Let people know what you need.** In their efforts to comfort me, well-meaning people sometimes actually caused me discomfort. Their words about “God’s will,” or about how they knew “just how I feel,” or about how things “always work out for the best,” rang hollow. I found that the best solution was to tell them gently but honestly what I needed from them: “Thank you, but I need to grieve in my own way and on my own timetable. Mostly, I want you to just be with me.” When someone’s attempt to comfort you only deepens the hurt, remind yourself of that person’s good intentions and forgive him or her for not understanding.

If you find yourself over-

I hear you stumbling for words. Relax. There are no words...I hear you remembering a funny story about my loved one and looking embarrassed because you are laughing. Share with me. Let me laugh. It gives me something to hold on to in the middle of the night when I feel only pain.... Be your happy self—and let me be me. On days when I can laugh, I will. On days when I can speak of my loved one, I need you to share my memories.

—Jacqueline L. Rogers
*I Want to Help But I
Don't Know How*

whelmed by life's daily responsibilities, as you surely will at this stressful time, call on those around you for assistance. Don't be afraid to ask for what you need—people will respond with amazing generosity. Friends and family often want to help, but don't know how. If you let them know specific ways they can help, you will be doing them, as well as yourself, a favor.

“Be open to the pain of your broken heart. God enters through its brokenness.”

—Karen Katafiasz
Grief Therapy

■ **Treasure your relationships.** Death makes life all the more precious. I felt so fortunate to have my daughters to hold on to through the pain. But I know that many people who lose someone close feel abandoned and alone—as if they have no one or nothing to live for.

If you feel this way, try being with people who are also grieving, in a bereavement support group, for example. As you tell your stories, you will share an understanding of the heart deeper than words. The survival of those who have found healing after loss is reassurance that you, too, can endure.

Find people with whom you can laugh and cry and share new experiences. They will help you mend your shattered life. They will reflect back to you your own goodness. And they will plant new seeds of love for you to harvest.

It's hard to take the risk to get close to people again. Many times I just wanted to be alone, to grieve privately. Yet I know that my family and friends have been priceless. I have thrived simply on the fact that they have been there for me, and we have kept good company.

■ ***Draw on faith for healing.*** Life now may seem unreal and terribly wrong. You may feel cheated. As you struggle to make sense of your tragedy, reassure yourself that it's okay to be angry with God. But also realize that your loss is not God's punishment or an attempt to test you. God shares the hurt in your heart and wants to lead you to new hope and peace.

I can't say what it was that gradually dissolved my own bitterness toward God. Time? My angry "prayers"? God's own workings? I only know that God's goodness—visible in other people, in the world, in myself—became too apparent for me to ignore or deny. And I began to trust life again. That, after all, is what it comes down to: trust. Trust that life doesn't end with death. Trust that loved ones who have died are forever with God and that God is forever with us, too.

A supportive faith community, pastoral leader, or spiritual counselor may be able to help you, over time, to reconcile your loss and pain with your belief in a loving, faithful God.

If only someone whom I respected had sat me down after Martin died and said, "Now, Lynn, bereavement is a wound. It's like being very, very badly hurt.... You will grieve, and that is painful. And your grief will have many stages, but all of them will be healing. Little by little, you will be whole again. And you will be a stronger person. Just as a broken bone knits and becomes stronger than before, so will you."

—Lynn Caine
Widow

■ ***Be patient with yourself.*** Grieving has many stages, which might include shock, numbness, denial, depression, confusion, fear, anger, bitterness, guilt, regret, acceptance, hope. These stages may come in any order, any number of times. Give yourself time to move through grief at your own pace and in your own individual way.

Anniversaries and holidays—times that used to mean joy and celebration—can be among the toughest days of the year. You may want to forgo certain traditions or obligations if they seem too burdensome, or possibly create new traditions that memorialize your loved one.

You may feel overwhelmed as you try to adjust to the day-to-day changes the loss of a loved one can bring. My wife's death thrust me into new, awkward roles and responsibilities. I tried not to expect too much of myself too soon, just to start with the small tasks first, to be patient with myself and my mistakes. I discovered that the routine tasks of maintaining my job and family helped restore in my life that familiar structure which the chaos of grief threatened to destroy.

Maybe you feel like you don't have anyone who needs you anymore. Maybe you don't have

Sources of additional help

Books: *Living When a Loved One Has Died* by Earl A. Grollman, Boston, Beacon Press, 1997. *Life After Loss: Conquering Grief and Finding Hope* by Raymond A. Moody and Dianne Arcangel, HarperSanFrancisco, 2001. *Healing After Loss* by Martha Whitmore Hickman, New York, Avon, 1994.

CareNotes: *Five Things to Help You Heal When Grief Is New* by Rob Zucker; *Healing Thoughts to Soothe a Grieving Heart* by Peggy Ekerdt; *Putting Your Life Together After a Loss* by Jim Auer; *Setting Realistic Expectations for Yourself After a Loved One's Death* by Carol Luebering; *Taking the Time You Need to Grieve Your Loss* by Kathlyn S. Baldwin; *Walking With God Through Grief and Loss* by Joyce Rupp; all from St. Meinrad, Indiana, Abbey Press.

young children or a job to give you an anchor in life. But whatever personal attributes you have that made you so dear to your loved one are still there, waiting to be tapped to bring joy to others. The world needs the gift of you!

Take heart

The one that you have loved and lost will always be with you, in memory and in prayer, for the love between you is a spiritual bond that death cannot sever.

As impossible as it may seem right now, a time will come when you will be able to think of your loved one, and feel the sacred connection between the two of you, without the pain and emptiness you feel right now. A time will come when you will want to laugh and live and love again.

Let yourself heal—in your own time and your own way. The one that you have loved and lost would want it that way. ■

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