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When Grief Goes Off the Road

By John Kennedy Saynor

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Have you ever been lost when you were on a road trip? Soon after my 40-year-old father died, my mother, my sister and I set out from our home in Hamilton, Ontario to visit friends in Cleveland, Ohio. About an hour after we left home, we came across a sign that read, "Hamilton 45 miles." Much to our relief, we discovered it was only a few miles back that mother had taken a wrong turn. We made a hasty retreat and were soon on our way again.

The journey through grief is fraught with many potential wrong turns. When we know what they are, it is easier to avoid them thus making our journey a bit easier. Let's look at some of the things that may lead people down a wrong road or a dead end in their journey through grief.

Overwork. Work is highly valued in our society. So, if you as a bereaved person are seen to be working hard, people assume that you are "doing very well." When people begin to think this

of you, you will notice they tend not to ask you how you are doing or to give you opportunities to talk about the one who has died. They think you have "gotten over it" and that you no longer need the support a bereaved person needs.

Working hard soon after the death of someone close to you, whether it be at home or at your job, is potentially dangerous because it may mean you have little or no time to yourself. Time alone gives you the opportunity to begin to process what this loss means to you and what direction you want your life to take. If you spend a lot of time at work, you may become exhausted. This alone will hinder your ability to make your way along your journey through grief.

Increased activity. This is similar to overworking. I meet people who say to me, "I deal with it by keeping busy." They find things to do outside the house and fall into bed exhausted at the end of the day. Busyness can be an avoidance tactic. "If I keep busy, I won't think about it," people say to me.



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Grieving in private. Some of us are private people who don't want others to know how we are feeling. We wear a smile and we avoid any mention of the one who has died. We avoid any situation where memories may cause some emotional response because, of course, we don't want people to see us crying.

A person who grieves in private is one who is less likely to make an appointment with a bereavement counsellor or to attend a bereavement support group. If you are a person who grieves in private, you may have the attitude that you can do it yourself without the help or support of anyone else. While it is true that many do make it on their own, it is also true that the counsel and support of others may make it a much easier journey.

Alcohol or drug abuse. This is perhaps the most dangerous pitfall of the journey through grief. The abuse of alcohol completely limits our ability to think clearly about what has happened to us and to make important decisions about our future.

While I often encourage clients to seek the help of their doctor when encountering physical and emotional difficulties during this time, the abuse of prescribed drugs can be just as dangerous as the abuse of street drugs. In short, the abuse of drugs and alcohol will lead you down a dead-end road.

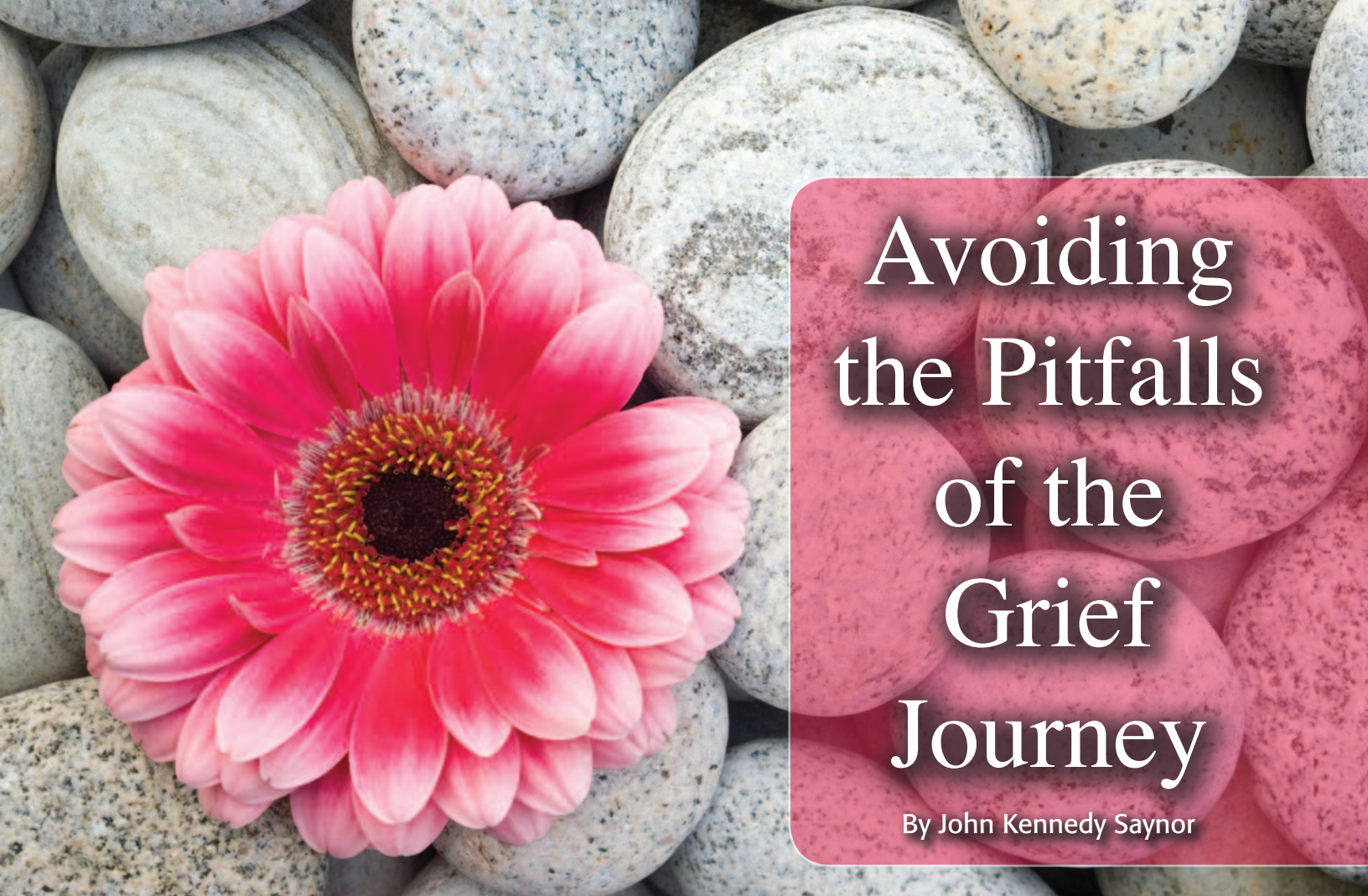
Denying certain realities around the death.

It is important to live all of life with integrity. At the time of a death, it is often common for the bereaved to deny certain realities about the one who died or details surrounding the death. I often encounter people who are hesitant to tell me the person who died committed suicide. There are times when it is difficult for me to figure out what it is that is really bothering the survivors and then I learn that the one who died was an alcoholic or abused the surviving spouse or children. When denial exists to this extent, the reality of the loss isn't faced and an important task of the journey through grief isn't accomplished.

Delaying the final arrangements.

This is a very sensitive topic. But let me try to explain what I mean. Everyone moves through the first few months at a different pace. It has been my experience that when survivors delay the final disposition of cremated remains, there is a delay in the grieving process. The same is true if a family delays for years placing a monument on the grave. What happens here is that we are unable to release the one who has died so that we can move on. People say to me, "It is too painful to go to the cemetery. I can't face placing the monument; it seems so final." Again, this delays the ability of the survivor to accept the new reality of his or her life and move into the future.

If you are thinking you may have got off track in your journey through grief, it is never too late to get back on the right road, just like my mother did that day on the way to Cleveland. I hope the following article will help you know what you can do to avoid the pitfalls of the journey through grief.



Avoiding the Pitfalls of the Grief Journey

By John Kennedy Saynor

I suspect many of us have times in our lives when we realize we may not have made a best choice. When we realize that, hopefully we have the courage to make new choices to set us on a right road. This is often true of the journey through grief. People sometimes come to me years after the death occurs and say, "I'm not getting anywhere. I'm stuck and don't know how to move on." From their perspective, the task of moving on seems insurmountable. However, to me, what has gone wrong is often not that complicated and they simply need someone to help them turn around and go in a new direction. The following are some suggestions that may help you get a fresh start in your journey.

Determine who your support system is.

It often happens that those most seriously affected by a death put on a brave face. A woman said to me recently, "I want to be strong for my children." I am sure her children are saying, "We want to be strong for mother." When they get together, they all put on a brave front and in reality they all just want to sit down and scream.

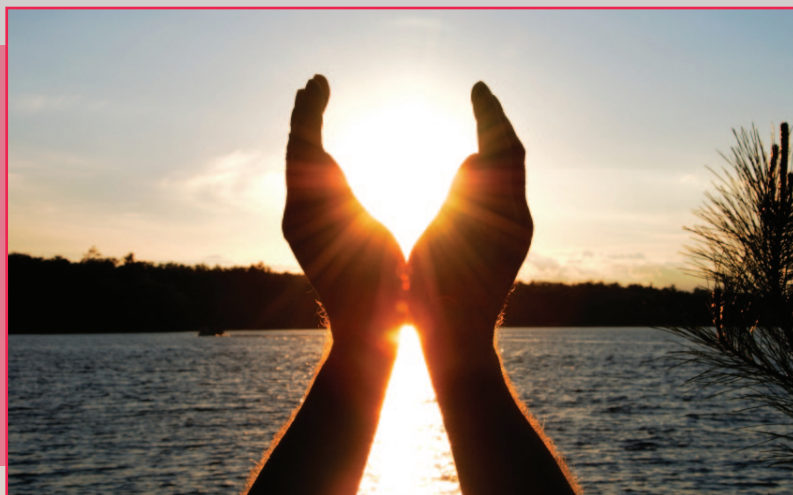
If this is your story, then I think it would be helpful to sit down with your family and friends and tell them you are not doing as well as they think and you need to talk. You will soon find out

who wants to talk. It can open up a whole new level of understanding and deepen your relationships.

You will also find it helpful to join a support group. Meeting with people who are in the same situation and discussing how you are dealing with this loss has been an important time for many people.

Make time for yourself. At first this will be painful. Being alone will be a stark reminder of your new situation. However, time alone can be very beneficial. It will give you an opportunity to realize at a deep level, what this death means to you: what has been lost, what change is taking place and what may be possible for your future.

It takes time – months and sometimes years – to come to a place of resolution. However long it takes, it is an opportunity for you to do a number of things including adapting to the fact that the death has occurred, beginning to intentionally share your sorrow with others, and forgiving yourself and the one who died for things that may or may not have happened. This time is also a time for you to learn to do things you never thought you would do (pay the bills, cut the grass, arrange to have the furnace



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served, cook dinner.) It is important during these times to recognize your own strengths and to feel good about yourself and your ability to get through this. It is also a time to laugh and to enjoy the simple things like children, pets, flowers, apple pie and so much else there is to enjoy even in the midst of grief. Then it is a time to meet new people, to set new goals and to begin to give to others again.

Gradually make the necessary decisions.

The decisions I'm talking about are those related to the death. Within a few months, I think it is important to bury or scatter the cremated remains. It would also be a good thing to put a monument on the grave or to have the name and/or date engraved on an existing stone. These are things that often get delayed and the longer they are left, the more difficult it is to do them. By not doing them, we "hang on" to the one who has died in an unhealthy way.

It is also good to dispose of the clothing of the deceased person as soon as you feel comfortable doing it. But you may have to give yourself a push. One person told me that she included some of her clothing with her husband's items and that helped her not feel so badly about giving his things away. Disposing of clothing is a way of releasing the one who has died and a visible sign at home that things have changed.

Give yourself permission to move on.

Every once in a while I meet someone who thinks it is disrespectful to the deceased to begin to move on. Well, I think it shows great respect to the one who has died to continue to live. Think of what the person who died gave you that will help you to carry on. Would your loved one want you to remain stuck in your grief? I don't think so. What have you always wanted to do: travel, play golf or redecorate the house?

Sometimes there are things we want to do but don't because our spouse doesn't want to. You would gladly continue the way you were if you could have your loved one back, but he or she is gone and there are new opportunities for you to do things you have always wanted to do.

Only you can do some of the things for yourself that need to be done. But it is important to take responsibility for your journey through grief and not just "muddle" through as some people try to tell me they are doing. If you can do that, your journey will take you to a new place with new opportunities and, yes, new life. It is much better than, years later, finding out you were on the wrong road all those years.

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