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Along The Way

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Helping Yourself Recover

By John Kennedy Saynor

“Self discovery consists of looking at the same thing as everyone else and thinking about it differently.”
~ Albert Szent-Gyorgyi

In my work with bereaved people, I am often asked, “What do I have to do to get through this?” In that question there are two important words: “I” and “do.” The reason I say this is that grief is an intensely personal process that takes time, energy and determination. Although the support and encouragement of other people is necessary to resolve my grief, when all is said and done, it is up to me to take responsibility for working through my grief. There are

things that only I can do, and if I am willing to face the challenge the end result will be much more rewarding.

This article is about bereaved people taking responsibility for helping themselves. I would like to offer some ideas that will enable bereaved people to make a more successful journey through their grief.

Be willing to change the way you look at grief and your own life.

Death is one of life's great teachers. The period of grieving that follows a death has the potential to be a life-changing experience.

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The death of your loved one may be the most difficult and challenging experience you will face in your lifetime. Periods of confusion and a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness may follow it. However, if you can draw on your own inner strength during this period, it will be possible for you, over time, to begin to recover from what may seem like a "hell on earth." You will soon begin to make important decisions that will affect how you live the rest of your life.

Deal with the reality of your relationship.

There are many reasons why the death of a family member may be a relief. As a spouse, perhaps your marriage was very difficult yet, for many reasons, you chose not to end the relationship. As a child, perhaps the expectations of your parents held you back from doing what you really wanted to do with your life. This may carry on well into adulthood for the children. As a parent, you may have experienced the death of a child who was a big disappointment to you. Rather than placing the deceased person on a pedestal, it is important to deal with the reality of what your relationship with the deceased was like. Often a counsellor can help you work through some of the difficult issues that may remain.

Give yourself time to grieve.

We live in a world of the Internet and drive-thru banks, restaurants and dry-cleaners. We are used to getting things done instantly. Grief is not like that. People often say to me four, six or 10 months after a loved one has died, "I don't understand why I'm not over this yet!" My answer is always, "You shouldn't be."

It is essential for a bereaved person to understand that the grieving process takes many months or, depending on the nature of the death, years to work through.

Give yourself permission to experience your emotions.

A necessary part of the grieving process is expressing your emotions. If you feel like crying, cry. If you are having a bad day, let yourself have a bad day. Tomorrow you will feel better.

If you are angry with the doctors, other family members, friends, society or God, express that anger to someone. If you can talk through your anger, you will be freed from the paralysis anger can bring and begin the process of moving on.

Learn to spend time alone.

Being alone is especially difficult for newly widowed people. It may be that they are, in fact, living alone for the first time in their lives. If you have been recently widowed, then one of the most difficult lessons for you to learn may be that of living alone.

Being alone gives you important time to think. It is during times of being alone that you begin to understand what this death means to you personally. How does this death affect how you see yourself and your role in your family and community? It also gives you time to think about what you would like to do with what remains of your life.

Join a bereavement support group.

Although I have been leading bereavement support groups for over 15 years, I am still surprised by how well those in attendance have done. It is a wise investment of your time to take a few hours a week to discuss and learn with others about what this process means to you. It is often easier to be honest with those who are not close to you.

Create a suitable memorial for your loved one.

Most people are buried in a cemetery and usually a marker is placed on the grave. While some people find visiting the cemetery comforting during the first weeks or months, the frequency of their visits usually drops off after a while.

Doing something for the living is a wonderful way to pay tribute to your loved ones. Many towns and cities provide an opportunity for its citizens to place benches or trees in public places. Memorials such as these bring beauty and enjoyment to others who are still alive.

Remember that the greatest memorial you can create for your loved one is a life renewed and recreated by you to honour the memory of the one who has died.

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WAYS TO LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

Looking after yourself is a difficult concept for people who have spent most of their lives looking after others. If you have children and it is your spouse who died, you are one of those whose life has been spent caring for others. If your spouse was sick for a long time, you may have spent months or years looking after that person. Many people are taught early in life to look out for the other person first. While this is an admirable concept, there are times when we must care for ourselves. This is one of them. Here are some ideas.

Treat yourself occasionally. At first you won't feel like doing this, but soon you will feel interest in life begin to return just as springtime follows winter. Don't resist it! Do something that will bring you pleasure. Invite a friend for a meal to your home or a restaurant. If someone invites you to go on a trip, then go, if you would like to. Anything you can do to help yourself begin to move on is a positive step.

Make an appointment for massage therapy. If this is too expensive for you, there may be a school for massage therapy in your city. Supervised students will give you a massage at a discounted rate. Massage therapy will give you a sense of treating yourself and will help to relieve the tension that builds in your body during these days.

Make time to be in the outdoors. Nature has the power to heal. Look at the sky, listen to the wind, hear the birds, feel the warmth of the sun on your face. Be more mindful of the change of the seasons and remember it is all about life.

Listen to your favourite music. Some music may bring back memories that will upset you. Listen to music that calms you and brings you inner peace. If tears come, let them; they are healing and cleansing.

Nurture your spirituality. What helps you make sense of life? Has your view of God changed? Reading spiritual books and listening to spiritual music can be rewarding. You may find an inner peace you have never known.

What have you always wanted to do, but for many reasons, haven't yet done with your life? Many bereaved people would have been perfectly happy to carry on with life as it was. A woman in one of my support groups told me soon after her husband died that she was going to Mexico for the winter. When I asked if this is what she and her husband used to do, she replied, "No way! He would never come south with me, but now I can go and so I'm going!"

Perhaps you have wanted to travel, golf, study, take cooking lessons or learn to garden. Life has changed forever. Now is the time to do things you have always wanted to do.

Set goals for yourself. Where would you like to be in a year or two? What would you like life to look like? Begin to set goals and make plans for how you will get there?



Think about the gifts and abilities you have. What are your strengths? Make a list of these things.

Take a personal inventory. When a family member dies, the survivors have an enormous sense of loss. This is true when any member of the family dies. But when a spouse dies, the surviving spouse will often say, "I have lost everything. I have no future." This really isn't true. You haven't lost everything and while your future as you envisioned it is gone, you still have a future. But it is a very different one and is waiting to be created.

I suggest you begin to take a personal inventory of what is left. Include your family, your friends, your home, and if applicable, your financial resources.

Don't forget to include yourself! A newly bereaved person often feels insecure and vulnerable. But think about all you have learned, your life experience, how you have handled other difficult times. Think about the gifts and abilities you have. What are your strengths? Make a list of these things.

Remember to include the memory of the one who has died. What did he or she teach you? What did he or she give you in life that will help you to deal with this loss? What kind of advice would you get if you could just get through to your loved one for five minutes? Would your loved one tell you it is OK to move on with your life? Would he or she encourage you to learn new things and move in new directions? I think so.

Be open to meeting new people. As the fog of your grief begins to lift, you will have opportunities to begin to meet new people. Along with the support of family and friends, people who have no connection with your past can be an important part of you beginning to rebuild your life. They will bring new ideas and perhaps new activities that will help you recreate your life.

Be open to doing new things. When a spouse dies, the survivor is often left to learn to do things he or she never did while their spouse was alive. A wife may learn how to use the rider mower after being told for many years that it was "the man's

job." Perhaps a husband will begin to learn how to cook after being banned from the kitchen all during their married life!

I have met many bereaved people who have joined an organization known as Probus that has chapters all over the world. The stated purpose of Probus is to "stimulate thought, interest and participation in activities at a time in life when it is easy to become complacent and self centered." (Probus' website is www.probus.org or you may look for the local chapter's phone number.) Those who have joined this organization have found it very helpful in beginning the process of reaching out and meeting new people and learning new things.

When you have learned something new, be sure to tell someone and be proud of your accomplishment!

At the beginning of this article I wrote, "when all is said and done, it is up to me to take responsibility for working through my grief." I hope this article will encourage you to take that responsibility. If you are reading this early in your grief, then at least attempt to accomplish the first six points I have tried to make. If you can do that, the rest will follow – if you want it to.

- Be willing to change the way you look at grief and your own life.
- Deal with the reality of your relationship.
 - Give yourself time to grieve.
 - Give yourself permission to experience your emotions.
 - Learn to spend time alone.
- Join a bereavement support group.

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