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Along The Way

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DEATH THE GREAT INTRUDER

By John Kennedy Saynor

There are many intrusions in our lives aren't there? Possibly you have experienced one today. It may have been a phone call, a knock at the door, the boss coming into your office with something else for you to do, or the cat knocking over a jug of milk. We are used to these kinds of intrusions, and they don't really interrupt the flow of our lives.

The one intruder we don't know how to deal with is death. Death is the intruder we hope doesn't visit our family. Death is an assault on every aspect of our life. It affects the way we think, feel and act. The following is a list of some of the ways death invades our lives:

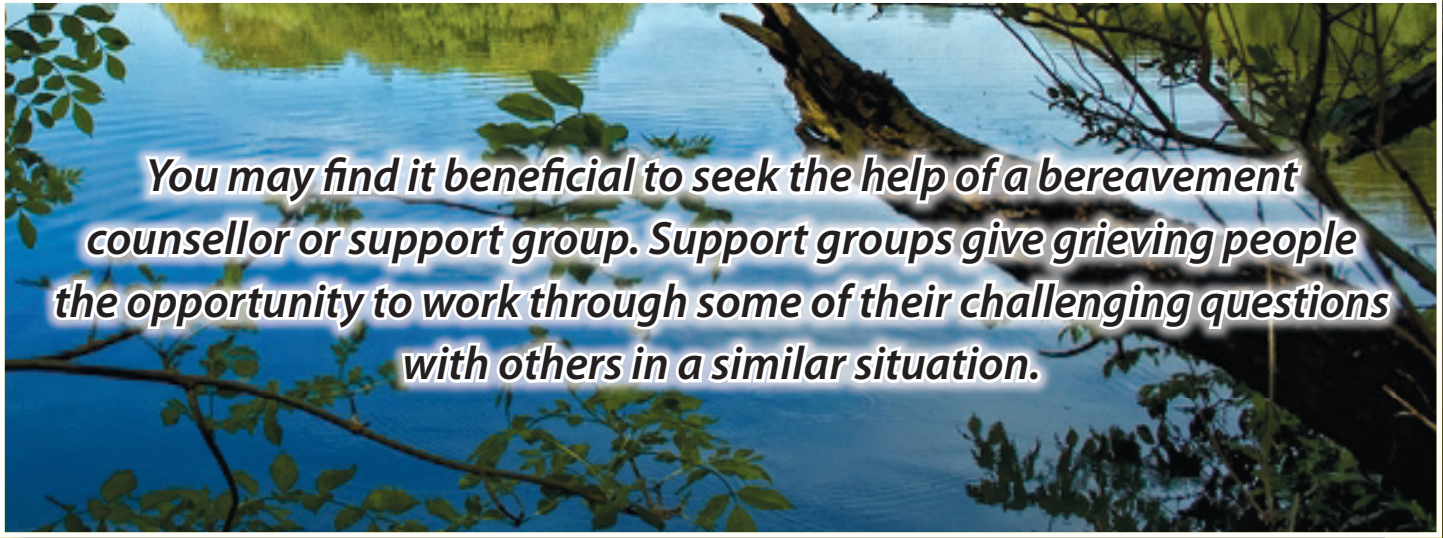
Death interrupts our hopes and dreams. Few people include death in the plan for their life. We plan and dream and hope as if we are going to live forever. Death changes that and we are in a position where we have to dream new dreams if life is to take on new meaning for us.

Death is the beginning of a new life we don't really want. In a bereavement support group I led, one of the participants

stated in his evaluation, "We have learned to create a new life." This was a significant lesson for them to learn. It takes some time to come to this point, but it is an important part of the grieving process.

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Death increases friction that already exists in the family. A death in the family brings about the need for family reorganization. When a member of the family circle dies, frequently conflicts are intensified. This itself makes the grieving process more difficult.



You may find it beneficial to seek the help of a bereavement counsellor or support group. Support groups give grieving people the opportunity to work through some of their challenging questions with others in a similar situation.

Death challenges the status quo of our life. Everyone's life is guided by certain values and priorities. When a death occurs in a family circle or circle of friends, those who are left are forced to look at their lives and re-evaluate. Some people make radical decisions affecting how they spend the rest of their life.

Death destroys much of the safety and security we have known. We naturally become comfortable with those we love. When someone we love dies, we may become insecure about who we are or about our role in life. It is a true identity crisis! This is a frightening experience and is the reason why many wonder if they can or want to carry on.

So you can see that death is the great intruder. Yet we have all known others who seem to have recovered. How did they do it? Where did they get the strength? Here are a few ideas.

Often survivors begin by fulfilling the dreams they shared with the deceased. I heard recently about a widow who had planned with her husband to take their motorhome across Canada and come home through the United States. When he died unexpectedly, it looked as if their dream wouldn't be fulfilled. She fulfilled it, but in a different way from what she had planned. She bought a dog and together she and the dog set out to fulfil the dream! New dreams and hopes will eventually be created.

As difficult as it is, realize that every ending brings a new beginning. This death is a new beginning for your life. Draw on your own inner resources, on the resources passed on to you by the person who has died and on the resources of your spirituality.

Family tensions are difficult at any time. Death irritates existing tensions. You may find the death in your family makes it necessary for a major overhaul in the way family members relate and even in some of the basic rules of

your family. If your family is having difficulty adjusting to the absence of your loved one, seek outside help. The insight of an outsider can often prove invaluable.

A death in the family or in our circle of friends is a time when those who are left assess their lives and ask themselves if they are happy with the way their life is going. The lessons we learn from the circumstances around the death may make a difference to how we live the rest of our life. One young man I recently met was angry because his father had spent so little time with him when he was a child. After his father died, the son changed his schedule and lifestyle so he could spend more time with his family.

Many people find after a death that their role in life is changed. They have different responsibilities. With these new responsibilities comes new freedom . . . freedom to grow, freedom to change and freedom to make the decisions that need to be made now that your family has changed.

These changes take a long time. If you are thoughtful and careful about how you do it, you may find your friends saying things like, "When are you going to get on with your life?" These well-intended questions usually aren't helpful. You may find it beneficial to seek the help of a bereavement counsellor or support group. Support groups give grieving people the opportunity to work through some of their challenging questions with others in a similar situation.

One final word. Above all, remain hopeful. Try to look beyond the cloud that hangs over your life. Know that out there the sun still shines, and inside you the sun shines. And when the clouds of uncertainty, fear and sorrow part, you will once again walk in the sunshine.

HELPING OTHERS THROUGH GRIEF

Grieving can be a profound and a painful process. It is also a natural healing process. Most grieving people do not need professional help. But all grieving people can benefit from loyal and abiding friends. Here are some ways you can help as a friend:

Be There. Presence can be more precious than advice. Those who stay for the long journey offer hope without words.

Initiate and Anticipate. When a person is grieving they often don't know what help to ask for. Make suggestions of things you will do and times you will be with them.

Listen. To listen without judgment is to be a healing presence. Be a sponge that absorbs; a mirror that reflects.

Avoid Cliches and Easy Answers such as: "I'm sorry" or "I care." "You're in my thoughts" or "Tell me more about..." may be better responses.

Silence is Golden. Sometimes there are no words. Silence can demonstrate your trust in the other person.

Accept Feelings. You can reassure the person that feelings are neither good nor bad but are like barometers that indicate our internal weather and needs.

Help The Person Find Support and encouragement if needed. Most of us need a variety of support persons and activities. Give suggestions that are open and promising.

Believe in the Person's Ability to recover and grow. Your hope and faith may be needed when theirs is failing. If you have concerns for your friend, seek wise or professional counsel for yourself so you can decide how to be the best and most honest friend possible.

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A Prescription for Grief?

By John Kennedy Saynor

When was the last time you visited your doctor? My visits to the doctor are usually prompted by a complaint. When I get there, he asks me the symptoms. Then he asks how I am feeling. More often than not, I leave the office with a prescription in my hand. The doctor assures me that with the use of the prescription and my own common sense, I will be "back to normal" within a few days.

I often feel like Dr. Grief when someone who has experienced the death of a loved one comes to visit me. They tell me the symptoms - sleeplessness, loss of appetite, confusion, hopelessness, fear of the unknown, lack of direction, long bouts of crying, and general loss of interest in life. They are feeling sad, lonely, angry, guilty, depressed ... you name it! Then people begin to tell me how their grief is affecting them. They have begun to withdraw, preferring to be alone rather than

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-Rabbi Harold S. Kushner

with family and friends. They can't concentrate at the office or in the home. They have become forgetful – locking keys in the car, leaving their purse in the house, walking out of the grocery store and leaving their groceries at the counter!

Then the question comes, "How soon will I get over this and how can you help me?"

There is no magical prescription for healing grief. I can't open my drawer and hand you a bottle and say, "Take two of these with meals every day for two weeks and you will be better." It isn't that easy.

But there is a prescription for grief. It is a combination of patience, perseverance and hope. Here it is.

Try to understand the grief process. There are two important words that describe the grief process. They are: transition and transformation. In many situations, even before the death occurs, family members begin to realize that a change is taking place in their life. This becomes more obvious after the death occurs and they begin to realize that life will never be the same again. As a result of this transition, they themselves sense a personal transformation taking place. By that I mean valuable, new insights are gained as to the meaning of life that will affect how they live the rest of their life.

Be patient with the process. Grief is a process that takes a long time. In this age of instant bank machines and drive-thru doughnut shops, we aren't used to taking time for anything. Grief is different; we must take time and be patient with ourselves and the process.

Take time to feel the pain. Recently I had minor surgery and the hospital gave me a prescription for painkillers. They worked wonders. As long as I didn't feel the pain, I forgot about the surgery. When I felt the pain, I had to deal with the reality of my surgery. There are some painkillers for grief: alcohol, drugs, overactivity and absorbing yourself in work, to name a few. But eventually the reality must be faced and part of that is feeling the pain: the crying, the loneliness, the despair. As the emotions of grief are experienced, healing begins.

Tell your story to someone. You may have a close friend or you may discover a support group where you can tell your story. Someone recently told me that "talking and feeling brings healing." It's true and when we tell our story to someone who listens and who cares, healing begins to take place.

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