

## Grieving Affects Our Wellness

Grieving and wellness may seem unrelated. But anyone who has recently lost a loved one soon recognizes that their sense of being “well” has changed. Grieving people often “feel run down,” “have no energy,” “don’t feel like eating,” “are too tired to exercise,” “can’t sleep like I used to,” “just don’t feel like being around people.” Some grieving people develop physical symptoms similar to those of their loved one. Some people develop physical symptoms they usually experience in times of stress. Others just feel tired and have low energy. Feeling depleted physically, emotionally, mentally, socially and/or spiritually is common when one is grieving. Consequently, taking good care of yourself is an essential task on the grief journey.

Wellness can be defined as a lifestyle in which our physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual dimensions are balanced. This balance helps us use our life energy effectively to pursue our goals. Taking care of ourselves in each aspect of wellness helps us feel better, more balanced, and able to carry on with our lives. This newsletter explores wellness and ways to care for ourself in each dimension of wellness.

### PHYSICAL WELL-BEING

For years, physicians have observed that illness is more likely to occur following highly stressful events in people’s lives. The death of a loved one is a major emotional and stressful situation, and it requires more adjustment by the bereaved than other life events. When patients suffer major emotional upsets, many physicians see an increase in diseases susceptible to emotional influences. Such diseases include stomach ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease, and headaches. Physicians also see an increase in infectious diseases, backaches, and even accidents. Many doctors believe that stress may be the greatest single contributor to illness.

Having a thorough physical examination within three to four months of a loved one’s death is a good recommendation. If you have any physical symptoms, tend to them. Do NOT write them off to being in grief - being upset - being stressed. Now is the time to see a doctor who can offer emotional support and tend to your physical needs. You need all the support you can get right now. See your doctor if you have any physical symptoms that last more than a few days.

Exercise regularly. Exercise can meet your social needs and your physical needs. Find a friend with whom you can walk, bike, swim, play tennis, or golf. Do something you enjoy. Remember to build exercise into your regular routine by parking a little further from a building you are entering or taking the stairs instead of the elevator. Exercise also helps you emotionally. It burns up extra energy created by anxiety and anger. Exercise increases your strength and endurance, improves blood pressure, and helps improve your self esteem.

Eat well. For those of you who are widowed, eating by yourself is another big adjustment. Suddenly, eating is a big task and cooking for one never tastes the same. Cooking for yourself is not as enjoyable as cooking for others. Yet, eating well-balanced meals is an important part of maintaining your total health. An appendix on “Cooking for One” is enclosed. It will hopefully make cooking for yourself easier.

## EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

Emotions are feelings. We all experience feelings the moment we are born. Feelings can be intense, wonderful, painful, or frightening. Feelings occur as an instantaneous response to our immediate situation. That is why we may cry when watching a TV commercial, feel angry when we hear of an injustice, or feel frightened when we hear a bang in the night. Feelings just happen. They are not good or bad. Yet, they are often misunderstood and misjudged.

There are four basic feelings: mad, sad, glad, and scared. We feel pretty comfortable with the glad feelings. However, most of us have received messages over the years that mad, sad, and scared are not “good” feelings. When we feel sad, mad, or scared, we often believe that something is “wrong” with us rather than “wrong” with our situation. We question whether or not we “should” feel what we are feeling.

Actually, our feelings are a good barometer for measuring what’s happening in our lives. When we feel sad, we need to examine our lives and find out what makes us feel sad. When we feel mad, we are often being violated in some way. Again, looking at our situation can help identify what is out of kilter. Feeling frightened is also a clue that something is not right in our current situation. By trusting our feelings and using them to evaluate our situations, we can come to know ourselves better and take steps to be more comfortable.

However, if we don’t trust our feelings and deny their existence and meaning, we can create problems for ourselves. Feelings that are not recognized and acknowledged can become increasingly intense and “erupt” when we least expect. Temper outbursts, depression, and even some physical symptoms result when feelings do not get attention. When we believe that something is “wrong” with us because we feel a certain way, we begin to feel bad about ourselves. Our relationships with ourselves, family and friends are affected - often in a negative manner.

Pay attention to your feelings. At least once a day ask yourself, “What am I feeling?” Acknowledge your feelings and accept them. If you feel uncomfortable with your feelings, talk to someone you trust about how you feel. If your feelings seem overwhelming, seek professional guidance with either a Hospice Bereavement Counselor or a Mental Health professional. Remember that feelings occur in an instant. They are signals to you about your life at that moment. They do not last forever.

## MENTAL WELL-BEING

Mental well-being has to do with how you think and the impact your thinking has upon your overall well-being. In the Wellness Workbook, Regina Ryan and John W. Travis write about the brain:

*Thinking is the art and the craft of the human brain. Like the lungs, heart, and stomach, the brain’s work is one of transforming energy. We feed the brain with the nutrients carried by the blood, as well as by the energy of great ideas -- what we read in books, watch on television, learn from other people, and experience in sights, sounds, and movement. Some of this data is filed away as data for later use. The rest is available for signaling the body, for creating dreams, and for making connection for thinking.*

*Few would argue that what goes into the mouth will affect the overall health and well-being. Fewer seem convinced that what goes into and comes out of the mind is every bit as important. ...The images, the energies, which fill our minds will change the body physically, influence the people around us, and move the world at large.*

This is a time to carefully monitor what you read, what you watch on TV, what movies you attend, what gossip and rumors you listen to, and how you think about your life situation. Read uplifting, supportive books and magazines - ones that give you hope, that lighten your day. If the newspaper has only "bad" news, give yourself permission to avoid it. Avoid watching TV shows and movies that make you sad -- unless watching one (on occasion) helps you shed tears that won't come any other way. If conversations turn negative, excuse yourself. As much as possible, surround yourself with positive, comfortable images.

If you find yourself dwelling upon how "awful" or "terrible" your situation is since your loved one died, try to find something positive in your life today. If you continue to dwell on the "awfulness" of your situation, your situation will only worsen. Learn to substitute pleasant memories of your loved one for the unpleasant memories of illness and their death. For your situation to improve, you will need to focus on what is "right" about it. We all reap the fruits of our thoughts. Pessimists find things that confirm their pessimism. Optimists find things that confirm their optimism. Thinking as positively as you can will improve your overall sense of well-being.

## SOCIAL WELL-BEING

Our satisfaction with our involvement in meaningful social activities and with our personal relationships is how we measure our social well-being. The death of a loved one almost always prompts us to reevaluate our relationships. Often our closest relationships are most affected. Sometimes we recognize that we have not valued our relationships enough and now devote more time and energy to them. Some relationships will become more intense - close. Some people feel that their family members are too close. In an effort to care for the surviving person, family members become almost too vigilant, too "parental." On the other hand, some family members seem to distance themselves from the grieving person. This distancing usually occurs because they are uncertain how to respond to your grief. They may be grieving so intensely themselves that they cannot help anyone else.

The death of a child always seriously impacts a marriage. Both parents are bereaved and consequently have less energy to devote to this most primary relationship and to their other children. Each person's grief reaction will be different because they are individuals with unique beliefs, values and needs. Men and women do express their grief differently. Each may be uncomfortable with the other's grief response. Each may not be able to understand and nurture the other one. This is a time when couples need to openly communicate with one another and to accept one another.

Widows and widowers often find themselves feeling isolated and out of place as an individual in a "couple" society. Participating in activities you always did with your spouse can be very awkward and uncomfortable at first. Living alone takes some adjustment to avoid the loneliness, some people become involved in a new intimate relationship. New relationships can be dangerous. Grief time is a vulnerable time. Loneliness can affect how realistically a new rela-

tionship is evaluated for its enduring qualities. Make friends. Have some fun. But wait for your healing to be more complete before making new lifetime commitments.

A good rule of thumb during this time is:

Be where you want to be  
Doing what you want to do  
With whom you want  
When you want to be!

## SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING

Spiritual well-being refers to your sense of connectedness with the universe, your God (higher power), the ultimate, the transcendent. Spiritual well-being also refers to your concerns about the essence of life, the meaning of life, and your purpose, values, and beliefs. Affiliation with a particular religious denomination can be a part of spirituality.

The death of a loved one often prompts reevaluation of your values and beliefs, sense of connectedness, and purpose. This is especially true when the death is perceived as untimely such as the death of a child - even an adult child. Deaths that result from accidents, murder, or suicide often intensely challenge our belief systems.

You may find yourself pondering such questions as: What is the meaning of my life? My loved one's life? What is my purpose? What is important? Why did this happen? Why do I doubt the things I always believed? What do I believe about life, death, and the after-life? How am I connected to family and other people? Where do I fit into my world? What unfinished business do I have with others? Exploring these questions can be unsettling and yet doing so is often a necessary part of the grief journey. Remember, your life has been altered by the death of your loved one, and you are essentially creating a new life. Some of your beliefs and values, your sense of connectedness, your sense of meaning and purpose may change.

Caring for yourself spiritually will include:

- ♥ Allowing yourself time to think about spiritual issues.
- ♥ Reading/rereading scriptures from your religious tradition.
- ♥ Reading articles/books that deal with spiritual issues.
- ♥ Talking with your spiritual advisors - pastors, rabbis, teachers, friends.
- ♥ Prayer and meditation.
- ♥ Journaling - writing down your thoughts helps to clarify them.

A spiritual practice that can be uplifting is to list five things for which you are grateful. After a few weeks, you will find your mood lifting. You will view your life more positively.

*Recognize that as a newly grieving person, you may find it difficult to care for yourself WELL at all times.* As you are able, do what most needs doing. Striving for perfection is not the goal. The goal is for you to feel as well as possible given your situation. Be gentle with yourself.

*Those who do not know how to weep with their whole heart don't know how to laugh either.*

## Tips—Cooking for One

Today's lifestyles find many people eating or cooking alone. No matter what our circumstances, eating well is important to our health. Cooking for one is a challenge, but it can be a positive experience. Here are some tips to make the task manageable.

1. First and foremost is to apply the Basic Four Food Groups to your daily food selection. Adults should have the following each day:
  - Meat (including fish and poultry) 2 servings
  - Bread and Cereal - 4 servings
  - Fruits and Vegetables - 4 servings
  - Dairy Products - 3 or more servingsLook for foods that are low in salt and fat. Beware of highly processed foods.
2. If your schedule allows, eat the main meal
  - at a cafeteria where you work.
  - as a business appointment.
  - at a meal site such as Congregate Meals.
3. In your home, a little extra freezer space and a microwave oven make cooking for one easier. Prepare a dish, eat one serving, and freeze the remaining food for later. Reheating in the microwave is safe and tasty. If you do not have a microwave, consider boiling bags.
4. Split or share purchases of perishable foods with a friend.
5. Cook or eat regularly with a friend.
6. When purchasing food at the grocery store:
  - buy the smallest size that's also economical.
  - buy frozen vegetables that are easy to break apart into individual serving sizes.
  - purchase fresh meat at butcher-type counters.
7. Store food items in the refrigerator or freezer to extend life:
  - Refrigerator: peanut butter, coffee, nuts, salad oil
  - Freezer: flour, cereal, cheese
8. Cook in quantity and store for convenient use at a busier time.
9. Use powdered milk for cooking, it is nonfat and less perishable.
10. Quick freeze food items by the loose pack method (on a cookie sheet).  
Then wrap appropriately.
11. Be willing to experiment when reducing a recipe; make notations for future revisions.

## Suggested Amounts for Single Services

- Meat
- With no bone, 1/4 - 1/2 pound
  - With some bone, 1-1/2 pounds
- Poultry
- Chicken, with the bone in, 1/2 pound
  - Turkey, with the bone in, 3/4 pound (both cooked, 3-4 ounces)
- Fish
- Boneless, 3/4 pound (cooked, 3-4 ounces)
- Vegetables
- Raw, edible vegetable after waste, 1/4 pound (cooked, 1/2 cup)

## Resources

- Microwaving for One & Two*  
by Barbara Methven  
*Cooking for Two . . . Or Just for You*  
Sunset Books
- Cooking for Two; Dieting for One*  
*Meals for one or Two*  
*Microwave Cooking for One or Two*  
Better Homes and Gardens
- Microwaving for One or Two*  
*Cooking for One and Dinner for Two Cookbook*  
Betty Crocker