

Secondary Losses and Stress of Grief

This month the Bereavement Newsletter returns to the journey of grief. You have been on your grief journey approximately four to five months. By now, you are more aware of the impact your loved one's death has upon your life. You have lived without their presence and perhaps have realized ways they contributed to your day-to-day life that you did not fully recognize when they were living.

You miss their presence at the breakfast table. ☞ You don't get that good-night hug or kiss. ☞ They didn't pay the bills. ☞ You go to church without them. ☞ You don't have the reassurance of their returning home each day. ☞ The sound of their laughter is missing. ☞ They don't call you anymore. ☞ You can't turn to them for suggestions about how to handle problems that arise. ☞ They were not here for your birthday.

The death of someone close results not only in the loss of that person but a multitude of losses related to that death. Those losses may alter your sense of identity - of who you are in the world.

Looking at some common secondary losses may assist you with your journey.

- ❖ **Loss of primary roles** - For years you have been a wife, husband, mother, father, aunt, uncle, grandparent, or friend to your loved one. These roles carried certain responsibilities and privileges that enhanced and added meaning to your life. Your relationship to the person who died is forever altered. They are no longer here for "do for" or to be an active presence in your life. While you may still consider yourself a wife or husband, the world around you will begin to call you a widow or widower. These changes in your primary roles can make you feel "rootless," "at loose ends," uncertain what to do with your time and energy.
- ❖ **A change in financial status** - As a widow or widower, you may experience a change in income after your spouse has died. The change in income may alter your ability to maintain your style of living. You may need to give up your home. You may have large debt as a result of your spouse's illness. You may not be able to participate in activities you once enjoyed.
- ❖ **A change in social status** - Widows and widowers often feel isolated from married friends - out of place as a single person in a world of couples. Friendships are often altered by the death of a loved one.

- ❖ **Loss of help** - or added responsibility. You may deal with situations for which you are totally unprepared (i.e. a man who doesn't know the first thing about cooking or housekeeping, a woman who doesn't understand cars, furnaces, or plumbing.) Perhaps you are now a single parent.
- ❖ **Change in family relationships** - Distance and conflict in family relationships can occur right after the death of a loved one. Sometimes family members are not able to bear your grief because they do not know how to bear their own or how to be helpful to you.
- ❖ **Loss of personal belief system** - You may find that the death of a close loved one (a spouse or child) challenges your belief in God, your values, your sense of meaning. You may find yourself re-evaluating many facets of your life - relationships, work, sense of purpose.

Each of you will experience secondary losses in your own unique manner. Sometimes your loss will seem obvious. Other times you will be caught unaware by sad feelings, mad feelings, or confused feelings that appear to "come out of nowhere." These unexpected "side trips" can be very uncomfortable and confusing. Just when you think you are making progress, they strike.

When you are uncertain about the cause of your sadness, you are often experiencing a secondary loss you have not yet identified. Ask yourself, "What have I lost today?" The answer to that question will help you identify your sadness. The answers may be "small" like I saw my first robin today and can't tell him/her; I went to Dairy Barn alone today; I fixed a leaky faucet; The leaves are turning. These changes and the sadness are real.

Robert Obershaw writes in *Cry Until You Laugh*, "The journey of grief is about redefining yourself after you experience a loss." He says that grief is a process of working to discover what we have lost, the feelings that go along with our loss, and who we are now that we have experienced that loss. We must create a *new* self who lives in a *new* world. The new world includes our memories of our loved one and their place in our life without their physical presence.

Dealing with the many changes that accompany the death of a loved one is stressful. On many stress scales the death of a spouse or child is considered the most stressful event a person can experience. Coping with the death of anyone close to you adds stress to your life. This is a time to take especially good care of yourself - to effectively manage your stress. Here are some pointers for this part of the journey.

- ♥ **Get a complete physical examination.** People who have recently lost a loved one are more prone to illness. Monitor your health.
- ♥ **Get plenty of rest.** You may need extra amounts. Grief saps your energy. You need to replenish yourself.
- ♥ **Eat well.** Eat foods that nourish you. Watch your intake of caffeine, sugars, and alcoholic beverages. What you eat affects your mood. Eating well will help you cope.

- ♥ **Exercise.** Exercise helps you work off some of those uncomfortable feelings that accompany grief. Some exercise also temporarily diverts your attention. Exercise will increase your energy level and keep you healthy.
- ♥ **Create security for yourself.** Your regular routines will help. They provide structure for your life. Try to reduce financial and other stresses. Keep in contact with close friends who can help you with your grief.
- ♥ **Avoid making major life changes.** This is NOT the time to sell your home, change jobs, or end a primary relationship. Give yourself time to heal, to clearly look at your situation, and then make major decisions. Decisions made in the midst of early grief are often regretted later.
- ♥ **Set small goals.** Give yourself something to look forward to ~ Meeting a friend for coffee in a special restaurant ~ going to a movie ~ taking a short trip. These outings will begin to put meaning back into your life. At first, your enjoyment will not be the same, but gradually, your enjoyment will increase. As time passes, you will identify longer range goals that will give new structure and direction to your life.
- ♥ **Enjoy small pleasures.** A walk in the park, a cup of your favorite tea, a bouquet of flowers, sunsets, sunrises, your favorite food, a piece of chocolate, all are small steps toward regaining your pleasure in life. At least one a day is not too many!
- ♥ **Be gentle with yourself.** Treat yourself as you would your very best friend. Be patient with your feelings. Do not chastise yourself for not “being over it,” for “breaking down,” for “being weak.” Treat yourself kindly.

Remember that you are on a difficult journey - one that requires extra energy. Taking good care of yourself and minimizing your stress will make the journey more bearable and doable.

To find renewed meaning in life, I must commit to persevere. Perhaps only through determination do I reach a place within myself long enough to awaken the desire to turn toward the light of life. (p. 94)

My grief journey has no one destination. I will not “get over it.” The understanding that I don’t have to be done is liberating. I will mourn this death for the rest of my life. (p. 102)

*Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., (1997) The Journey Through Grief,
Fort Collins, Co: Companion Press.*

God, Grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change,
The strength to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.