

Expectations and Needs

You will recall that last month's bereavement newsletter focused upon children's grief. This newsletter brings you back to your own personal grief journey. The one-year anniversary of your loved one's death is approaching. This newsletter explores the impact of unrealistic expectations you may have of yourself and others as well as expectations others may have of you. The newsletter outlines the needs of grieving persons throughout their grief journey.

Expectations are positive forces in our lives. If expectations are clearly stated and realistic, they provide guidelines on how to effectively relate to your family, friends, work, and other areas of life. Expectations help you determine what tasks and decisions to carry out and how and when to do them. Expectations help you know when you have gone "too far." Clear and realistic expectations assist in how you view yourself.

Unrealistic expectations can hurt you. If you expect something from yourself that you cannot do, it is easy to become anxious. For example, sometimes we expect ourselves "to be strong and not cry" or "to handle this problem alone." When you do not feel better, it is easy to become disappointed in yourself. You think less of yourself, view yourself as weak, and begin to feel as if you have failed.

People in our society are not very patient with uncomfortable feelings, especially feelings that accompany grief. Bereavement leaves-of-absence from work is often just one to three days. Employees are expected to return to work and their regular schedule immediately after the funeral. Family or friends unwittingly place expectations on the grieving person.

"It has been three weeks now (or three months or ten months). Surely you feel better by now. . . ." These expressed or unexpressed sentiments put undue pressure on the bereaved. As a result, you may expect yourself to be at a certain point on some ill-defined timetable for grief. If you are not feeling better, you may view yourself as a failure. As one widow said, ". . .if I read that one stage of grief takes a certain length of time and I wasn't there yet, I would panic."

Unfortunately, many grieving people find that those they expect to be most supportive often move away just when grieving people need them. This bewildering experience can be attributed, in part, to their general lack of knowledge and skill in responding to grief, their own feelings of grief, and their feelings of vulnerability related to their loved one's death. In their own discomfort, they distance themselves from others who are also grieving.

Since some old friends often just want you to return to your old self, you may find help by communicating about your loss with someone new. (Grinnell Regional Hospice offers two ways to do that very thing. Bereavement Support groups are offered two to three times per year. Meet-and-Eat, a social group for bereaved persons, meets monthly. Watch your bereavement newsletters for meeting notices. Interested persons may also call 236-2418 for more information.)

As your grief journey nears the first anniversary of your loved one's death, you and your support family may expect your grief to be resolved. Such an expectation, in fact, is often unrealistic. Actually, you may feel more intense grief than you have for a month or two. Anniversaries of important deaths in our lives are painful even after many years have passed.

Remember, grief recovery does not have a fixed timetable. As long as you live each day as well as you can, it doesn't matter if your grief is resolved in three months or two years. The journey through grief is a time of healing and growth. Continue on your timetable of healing, not the timetable others expect. You alone know the depth of your grief. However well meant, other people's agendas are not what you need. Be kind to yourself.

Needs of Grieving Persons

In his book, *The Journey Through Grief; Reflections on Healing* (1997), Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., describes six needs of grieving persons. Those needs are:

- ♥ **Acknowledging the Reality of the Death.** Dr. Wolfelt talks about the difference between acknowledging the death of a loved one in your head vs. acknowledging that death in your heart. Coming to terms with the reality of your loved one's death can take months. For example, one woman whose son died while he was away at college, felt for several months that he would soon be coming home for a visit. She would come home from work and somehow expect his car to be in the driveway. Though her head knew he had died, a part of her had not yet fully realized the loss. One day you may feel that your loss is bearable, and the next, you may feel devastated. Gradually, your loss will become an accepted fact of your life.
- ♥ **Embracing the Pain of the Loss.** Dr. Wolfelt writes: "Unfortunately, our culture tends to encourage the denial of pain. We misunderstand the role of suffering.....Actually, doing well with your grief means becoming well acquainted with your pain." Certainly, you cannot spend long periods of time with your pain and find life bearable. Sometimes you need to distract yourself from your pain. But you will benefit from allowing time to feel that pain and allow it to be.
- ♥ **Remembering the Person Who Died.** Memories of the person who died can sustain you and help you with your grieving process. They allow you to remember the influence that person had in your life. Memories and special objects that belonged to that person can help you feel connected to them. Do not let others rush you in deciding what things to give up and what to keep. Sometimes we tend to idealize the person who has died. Remembering their faults as well as their lovable characteristics will help you build a more realistic future.
- ♥ **Developing a New Identity.** Your relationship with your loved one helped you define who you are. Now that they have died, you will find altered your sense of self. For example, some people struggle with being labeled a "widow" or "widower" rather than as a "wife" or "husband." Rather than doing things as a couple, you now are a single person. Are you open to new relationships? Are you going to remain a "widow?" If you have lost a child, the question, "How many children do you have?" becomes an issue. These are a few issues you will confront as you struggle with a different identity.

- ♥ **Searching for Meaning.** Losing a life partner, child, parent, or close friend usually prompts us to reexamine our life's meaning, purpose, and belief system. We ask such questions as, "How could God allow this to happen?" "How will I live without him/her?" "Am I doing with my life what I want/should be doing?" Death of a loved one is a strong reminder of your own mortality. You may feel very vulnerable and uncertain. You may doubt your faith and belief system. You may feel rage at times. All of these questions, doubts, and feelings are normal. Gradually, with patience, you will find your answers.
- ♥ **Receiving Ongoing Support From Others.** This is not a time to tough it out alone. Seek support from people who understand your need to grieve and can be there for you. If your family and friends cannot provide the support you need, find a grief support group or go to a professional counselor. As Dr. Wolfelt states, "People who see your mourning as something that should be 'overcome' instead of experienced will not help you heal." Getting help is not a sign of weakness, but of strength. A person who gets the help he or she needs is wise.

Dr. Wolfelt's book is available in the Grinnell Regional Hospice Library. You may also order it directly from Companion Press, The Center for Loss and Life Transition, 3735 Broken Bow Road, Fort Collins, Colo., 80526. (Phone: 970-226-6050)

*Grieving is as natural as
crying when you are hurt,
sleeping when you are tired,
eating when you are hungry,
or sneezing when your nose itches.
It is nature's way of healing
a broken heart.*

*There is a bridge of memories
From earth to heaven above.
It keeps our dear ones near us
It's the bridge that we call love.*

*It takes us back to brighter years,
To happier, sunlit days
And to precious golden moments
That will be with us always.*

*When someone lives in your heart,
it is impossible to lose them.*

*When my heart aches
I'll do what it takes
To care for me
Tenderly, carefully,
With loving kindness
And hopefulness.*