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Saying Goodbye: Helpful Advice for Those Dealing with Loss

One of the obvious, but often overlooked, facts about life is that, at some point, we can likely expect to experience a significant loss. The death of a loved one, end of a marriage or other relationship, loss of a job, etc. can be considered major losses and stresses. Even those of us who have never experienced a major loss in our lives, have most likely experienced some form of minor loss, such as loneliness or disappointment.

What is Grief?

Grief and mourning are a group of feelings associated with loss. Although people may use different words to describe their feelings; the feelings are similar to everyone, with their intensity depending on the following variables:

- **Your style of coping with loss.** How have you managed and dealt with past experiences of loss?
- **Other stress that is present.** Does the loss of a spouse intensify other stresses surrounding the issues of child care, financial support, etc?
- **The quality of the relationship.** The death of a grandparent whom you seldom saw may not be felt as deeply as the death of a child, spouse or sibling.

The Phases of Grief

The mourning process is similar for all losses. The difference falls in the significance of the loss and its impact on our life. The five phases of grief that most people experience when a loved one dies are similar for the ending of a relationship or the loss of a job.

The first phase is surprise and disbelief. You are in shock—it's like being hit over the head. In the second phase, you start to feel the pain and you may find yourself saying things like, "*What now?"* or "*Why me?"* During the next two phases you will usually experience feelings of guilt and anger. Gradually, the fifth and final phases of grief come when you have accepted the loss and are able to face life with hope.

Long after the loss has occurred, individuals may suddenly react to the loss they felt they had accepted. For example, when a former spouse becomes involved with another person, remarries or has another child, it’s easy to find yourself experiencing any or all of the feelings of loss all over again. This can be confusing and unsettling. The effects of loss are indeed far-reaching.

Although the phases of grief are predictable, the feelings may not be in this exact sequence, and the duration of each can vary from person to person. It's important to realize that everyone in a family may not be experiencing the same feelings at the same time. In other words, grief is an individual process. A couple grieving the death of a child, for instance, may not be in the best position to help and support each other if one is in a state of disbelief, while the other is experiencing anger over the loss.

All of the feelings we experience during the grieving process have to do with accepting the reality of the loss and saying goodbye. It’s the denying of these feelings or not letting go that leads to problems.

How Can You Help Yourself?

If you are the one who has suffered a tragic loss, there are ways that you can work toward regaining your normal life. Consider the following coping strategies:

- **Vent your feelings.** Ask your friend if he or she will listen while you talk about your loss. Make sure your friends realize that you're not seeking advice. Tell them that their being there and just listening is enough to support you.

- **Join a support group.** People usually find it helpful to be with others who are going through a similar loss. People who have lost a child might want to join an organization for bereaved families. Those who have lost a spouse will find a number of self-help groups available for widows and widowers.

- **Learn something about grief.** All of the different feelings that are experienced during a loss can be frightening. Often, feelings are less frightening when we realize that others are experiencing similar feelings. It may be helpful to read books on the subject or discuss grief with a counselor or your family doctor. This will help you to recognize when your feelings are normal or when you may need help to work through them.

- **Identify what coping strategies have worked before.** If writing about your loss in a journal or talking about it with friends has helped before, the same thing may help when you are coping with loss this time around.

- **Think about helping others.** Sometimes, getting involved with a specific cause that may work toward the prevention of loss of someone else's life can help to redefine your loss. Families having lost a loved one in a motor vehicle accident involving a drunk driver have found comfort working with groups that attempt to reduce the incidence of such accidents for other families. When the loss of a loved one is due to a particular illness, people have found comfort in volunteering for related health organizations.

- **Take care of your physical health.** Coping with your feelings is always a little easier when you are in good physical health. Try to get adequate rest and eat a balanced diet.

How Can You Help Others?

If there is someone in your life who is experiencing a period of grief, here are some ways for you to offer your support:

- **Listen.** No matter how independent a person appears, he or she still needs the support of family and friends.

- **Provide practical help.** Something as simple as a home-cooked casserole or cookies is not only helpful, but it also lets people know that you care about them.

- **Make plans.** Help a bereaved person to make plans for getting through special occasions such as the first Christmas without his or her loved one. The anniversary of a loss is also an especially sad time.

There's no question about it that loss is a painful part of life. But perhaps what matters most is that there are ways in which we can help ourselves and others say goodbye, and deal with grief. It can be difficult to think about what to do when you are experiencing a loss, or want to help someone who is dealing with grief. Often, trying to make sense of loss is a daunting task for a person to do alone. Don’t be afraid to reach out to your family or friends for support.

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