Life is a Journey

As Susan settles in for a mid-morning coffee, the phone rings. She hears the unbelievable words: “Jack has been hurt. They’ve taken him to the Emergency.”

She gathers her coat, purse, and car keys, wishing that her thoughts could be gathered as easily. The drive to the hospital is like no other. Then Susan walks into the hospital and is ushered into a small office. Someone enters and she hears the words, “Mrs. M., I’m sorry…”

Your experience may have been similar to Susan’s, leaving you with no time to prepare for the death of a loved one.

Perhaps your experience was similar to Bill’s. Several years ago, Kay started to feel unwell and decided to visit her family doctor. Thus began the appointments with specialists, the many tests, and more appointments with specialists. Treatments were started. Some were unpleasant and Kay needed to spend time in hospital. Bill and Kay had good times, times they treasured together, but then things became more difficult. Kay faced many changes. Kay and Bill knew that they would not share many more days. Then one day Bill left the hospital for the last time, this time alone.
The death of someone you love affects your whole being. The pain of grief overwhelms you, making you wonder if you will survive. Grief can seem to go on for a long time, raising feelings and thoughts that you had not dreamed possible. Each person handles grief in their own way. However, your experiences will be similar to those of others. This pamphlet describes some of the things you may experience.

**Shock is the initial reaction.**

Regardless of whether the death was expected, numbness and disbelief will follow. Bewilderment, feeling like you’re “in a fog”, and watching events happen around you but not feeling connected — all of these feelings help to protect you during these difficult first days. As the fog lifts, the reality of your loss begins to sink in. You may be surprised by the physical changes in your body. Difficulty with sleep, a change in appetite, tightness in your chest, a lack of energy, dry mouth, feeling a “lump in your throat”, muscle aches and pains, restlessness, and tiredness, whether you are physically active or not, are all ways that your body shows that you are under stress. It is very important for you to look after yourself during this time.
Giving your body what it needs to function is important. Moderate exercise, a daily walk, a swim, whatever you enjoy doing or has been your habit, will give you physical and emotional release. Eating healthy foods will provide your body the nourishment it needs during this stressful time. Three meals a day may be difficult to manage. Try to choose snacks of fruits, vegetables, or cheese. Avoiding “junk” foods such as alcohol and caffeine, as well as nicotine, will help keep you in balance. You may feel unwell and this is normal. This is a good time to seek help from your family doctor.

As you become more aware of your loss, your emotions may seem overwhelming. Sadness may seem to fill your life. Tears may come easily, at times and in situations unexpected by you.

Crying is only one way to express your sadness. Sharing your thoughts with a supportive friend may help. Keeping a journal may help you find comfort as you put your thoughts and feelings into words. When your heart is broken, you will find ways to care for yourself. Think about what has been helpful to you in the past or try something new: a soak in the tub, a professional massage, or painting. You will figure out what works for you. These activities will not take away your grief, but they may give you needed breaks.
You may find yourself pining or yearning for the person.

You may find yourself looking for them in a crowd or expecting them to return home. At times these feelings may be so intense that you have the sense of hearing, smelling, touching, or seeing the person. These experiences can be comforting, as they remind you of the connection you shared. Some people may wonder if they are “going crazy”; others may wish to have these sensations but do not.

Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, anniversaries, and birthdays bring strong reminders of the loss you are experiencing. Seeing couples enjoying each other’s company, or parents and children sharing special times, may make you feel jealous. It is natural that these special days and times will bring many memories. Planning for these times may be helpful.

Some families continue with special days as they always have; others seek new ways to celebrate. Many find that the anticipation of the day is worse than the day itself. It can be a bittersweet experience to plan for and celebrate these days, as you remember the deceased person with love and affection.
You may feel angry, furious, or full of rage.

You may blame doctors and nurses for the circumstances of the death, funeral directors for not carrying out arrangements properly, family members for their lack of support, or God for allowing the death. These emotions are not right or wrong, good or bad. They are simply emotions. If you keep these feelings inside, you may prolong your sadness. Try sharing these feelings with a trusted friend or counsellor who does not judge you but walks this path of grief with you. These feelings will change in intensity and length as you work through your grief.

Sometimes you may feel that you didn’t do enough. You may think “If only I had made him go to the doctor earlier” or “If only I had stayed at the hospital longer.” These feelings of guilt are a natural response to your loss. You may feel guilty that you have survived, thinking “I was the one expected to go first.”

You may feel ashamed as you experience relief from caregiving, financial strains, increased responsibilities, or watching the person suffer. There may be other things you don’t miss, such as the overflowing ashtray, the “channel surfing,” or the unbalanced chequebook, and you may feel awkward about not missing them.
These feelings and thoughts are a natural response to your loss. If you are having these kinds of thoughts, be compassionate, gentle, and kind with yourself. Take the time to review your thoughts. Ask yourself, “What could I have done differently in that situation, knowing what I knew then?” Perhaps you could have handled things differently. However, you can’t change the past. Be gentle and forgiving with yourself as you think about this.

As the reality of what your loss means to you becomes clear, feelings of anxiety, panic, and fear may arise.

You may wonder, “How will I survive without this person?”; “Am I going to be next?”; “I can’t handle this”; “I’m so drained...how will I ever cope with this?” You have tremendous adjustments to make. These feelings of insecurity and fear are part of these adjustments.
If you discuss your feelings, you will begin to see ways of coping with the situation. In your fear, you will find strength to continue. The first steps may be small ones, such as finding the courage to go the motor vehicle bureau and change the ownership of the car, or getting a plumber to fix the leaking tap, but you will find that you are able to do these things and achieve what you want.

You may feel very lonely as you deal with all of this. If it is your life partner who has died, there is no longer someone with whom to share your thoughts, feelings, and accomplishments. If it is your parent who has died, the person who has known you since birth is not there to share memories and experiences with you. This pain is especially difficult to bear. Reach out to those around you who support you in a caring way, and who don’t tell you to simply “get on with it.” Gradually, you will be able to take part in social activities with friends.

This may be the time to rekindle old interests or to start something for which you have never had the time. You will find people who have had similar losses who understand how you feel. These people speak the “language of grief” as you do. Joining a support group may give you a safe place to share your grief.
Death brings many changes.

Families often find themselves “out of kilter”. Each family member mourns in their own way, and at times they may not be able to support each other as expected. Each family grieves in its own way and over time, will discover new ways to find comfort. Reminiscing together, looking at family photos, retelling family stories, telling the next generation about the deceased, and taking time to talk together allows family members to share their grief and also their healing.

Your faith may be a source of strength for you during this difficult time, or you may find yourself questioning many things. This wondering and questioning about the meaning and purpose of life are part of the journey of grief. Meditation, prayer, being part of your faith community, or finding new ways to experience your faith may help you on your journey.

Grief is hard work.

This is some of the hardest work you will ever do. You know in your head that the person has died, but understanding and accepting it in your heart may take weeks or months. Each time you think and talk about the person, their death will feel more real to you.
This is a painful but necessary process. You will feel many emotions and may feel drained. It is not selfish to care for yourself at this time and to find a safe place to mourn. Avoiding your feelings will only postpone the experience of the pain.

The time will come when you remember the person with love and affection, and no longer feel the pain of the loss as much. One day, for a brief moment, you will remember the person and the hurt will be less. You may laugh with a friend, enjoy the change of seasons, or see a new film and feel good. This doesn’t mean that you have forgotten your loved one — you are moving to a place where you can remember them lovingly. As you make this journey, you will find yourself changing as you learn to live without this person. This is one of the hardest parts of grief. You will survive. It doesn’t mean that you don’t love the person; you will use what they have given you in your new life.

You may discover strengths and abilities that you had not expected. You will develop a new sense of who you are without the person in your life. This does not mean that the person is forgotten — they will always be a part of you. You will remember them in a way that brings you comfort and peace.
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