

*Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak
whispers the o'er-fraught heart, and bids it break.*

~ Shakespeare's Macbeth



Understanding & Experiencing Grief and Loss Following the Death of a Loved One

Patricia K. Gleich
Associate for National Health Ministries





For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:38-39 (NSRV)

Understanding & Experiencing Grief and Loss Following the Death of a Loved One

This resource is designed to answer basic questions about the process of grieving and to provide comfort to those who have lost someone dear to them. It may also be helpful to someone who is supporting someone who is grieving, providing insight into that very unique and human process.

Loss

Experiencing loss and the emotions that accompany loss are an essential part of the normal process of acknowledging the death of a loved one and starting to rebuild a life without that person. Grieving that loss is an individual process. Each person's experience is different, depending on many factors such as age, health, cultural and religious background, and whether or not the survivors have other close family members. The important thing to remember about grief is that it is normal and essential, and that there are as many ways to experience it as there are people.

Grief counselors usually acknowledge that the loss of a spouse/partner, the loss of a child and the loss of a parent are possibly the most difficult to face. However, it is important to realize that no death is insignificant. Losing a dear friend can also be devastating. If a death is sudden or unexpected, it may be more difficult and may require a longer grieving period than a loss that is expected, such as one following a long illness.

It is also important to remember that each person, each member of the family impacted by a death, is likely to grieve differently. There is no one right or appropriate way to grieve. Grief is intensely personal. The family relationships, too, reflect differences.

Physicians explain that the emotional stress of dealing with death actually suppresses the body's immune system, increasing your susceptibility to illness and often causing severe physical symptoms such as tension headaches, stomach aches, nausea, and increased blood pressure. To counteract these problems, try to eat balanced meals, to exercise regularly, to get enough sleep or rest, and to find time every day to do something you really enjoy, whether it is working in your garden, reading your favorite author or taking a hot bubble bath.

Everyone copes with death in a unique way. There is no one grieving process that applies to everyone. Try to determine which healthy way works best for you and your situation. If you feel your grief reaching unhealthy levels, consider obtaining help.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-4

1 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: 2 a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; 3 a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; 4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance. . . (NSRV)



After the Funeral

Immediately after the death and funeral, you will likely feel a sense of numbness and disbelief. Shock is a temporary anesthetic shield — your body's way of helping you through the first stage of grief. At this point you may even doubt the reality of what happened. Or, you may accept it intellectually even though you cannot yet accept it emotionally.

Following the departure of family and friends after the funeral, depression, loneliness and a sense of isolation can occur, especially for those responsible for taking care of the paperwork and details, wills, hospital bills and funeral expenses. One may experience loss of appetite, insomnia, headaches or other physical symptoms. Depression is a normal, healthy byproduct of grief and one of the first signs that you have begun the healing process. It is important not to try to avoid the pain with use of alcohol or even over-the-counter drugs. If you are having trouble sleeping or other physical problems, consult your health care provider for assistance.

If a religious organization to which you belong - or your church or synagogue - has a pastoral care service, care circle or other ministry/service that provides continued support for people who have lost a loved one, take advantage of it. The grieving process continues long after the crisis which often signals friends' assistance, and continued support is very helpful as you heal.



This Season Of Grief

*It hits like the first blast of winter.
Icy fingers spreading within, numbing, the mind,
heart and soul.
Shrouding us in a protective haze.
Seeing, but not seeing
Knowing, but not knowing
Here in this season of grief.*

*The first hint of spring arrives, and the tiny seeds,
well planted, begin to stir.
They take root and begin their journey of growth,
spreading throughout.
So begins the seeing and knowing this season of
grief.*

*The heat of the summer brings with it the storms.
The raging, the floods, the calm before.
All that was growing is entangled with weeds, slowly
suffocating all that it needs
Here in this season of grief.*

*The coolness of autumn settles within.
Silently taking all that had lived.
The garden lies empty, barren and cold.
No place to hide.
For now we must know
Now we must see
That we have become this season of grief*

*The spring bursts upon us
The untended garden no more
For we have come through the winter
We let grow all the seeds
We weathered the storms and let ourselves bleed
For we began a new garden without even knowing
the scars on our soul no longer openly showing*

*One day we look back and sigh with relief...
For we have survived this season of grief.*

by: Kathie Simensen © 1997



Responses to Loss

Thinking about the death of someone you love is always difficult. It brings to mind not only the loss of a cherished family member or friend, but it also reminds us of our own mortality. Sooner or later, everyone has to deal with the death of someone close to them.

Loss Of A Spouse/Partner

While many of your friends and family will expect you to return to your old self after your spouse/partner dies, you will not be the same, nor should you expect to be. Over the years, you and your spouse/partner grew to complement each other in every aspect of your lives. Now you must learn to function independently.

If you have minor children, you will have to assume the responsibility of two parents and spend more time with your children than you did before. The search for the right child care for your dependents will be critical for you and your children's well-being.

Some of your married friends will drift away from you in time because you have less in common with them than before. This is a normal process, and you should not take it personally when it occurs. You must build new friendships based on your new circumstances.

For all of us, every ending also implies a new beginning. In this case, the process may be slow, but it surely will occur. For some, responsibilities of the new life will fill time quickly. For others, the new beginning will bring anxious moments and fear of the unknown.

Remember that whatever your age or situation, you have skills, knowledge and love that you can use to fill your life and others' lives as well. Respect, love and remember your past but look to the bright days of possibilities ahead.

You may experience difficulty in concentrating, forgetfulness and the inability to make decisions once the reality of the death begins to take hold. If you are employed, be sure your supervisors know of your loss, especially if grief begins to interfere with your work. Most employers are understanding because it is likely that they, too, have suffered loss.

Many adult children taking care of ailing parents suffer intense guilt when the parent's death relieves them of the burden of care. Feelings of guilt may include regret over things said or done in the past, or of questioning why your loved one died and you did not. You may also feel guilty because the death removed you from an unhappy or stressful relationship. Recognize guilt as a normal phase of grieving, but try to put it behind you. Focus on the positive side of your relationship with your loved one.

You may feel cheated or abandoned because someone you loved died and left you to resolve their personal or financial problems. You may be angry at friends and family for not understanding what you are experiencing. This misdirected anger is normal and usually signifies the emotional release necessary to begin to adjust to the death and to begin a new life.

Knowing What to Expect

When a death takes place, you may experience a wide range of emotions, even when the death is expected. Many people report feeling an initial stage of numbness after first learning of a death, but there is no real order to the grieving process.

There is no hierarchy of mourning. The death of a spouse/partner, sibling, parent, cousin, grandparent or close friend impacts everyone who knew and loved that person. Each individual's response to death is different and each may express grief in a unique way. It is important to remember that grief is an essential part of the healing process after a loved one dies, but there is no right way to grieve that works for everyone. In addition, death brings with it many legal and financial concerns that survivors must address.



Mourning A Loved One

It is not easy to cope after a loved one dies. You will mourn and grieve. Mourning is the natural process you go through to accept a major loss. Mourning may include religious traditions honoring the person who has died, or gathering with friends and family to share your loss. Mourning is personal and may last months or years.

Grieving is the outward expression of your loss. Grief is likely to be expressed both physically and psychologically. For instance, crying is a physical expression, while depression is a psychological expression.

It is very important to allow yourself to express your feelings. In our society, death is a subject that is often avoided, ignored or denied. At first it may seem helpful to separate yourself from the pain or ignore your feelings, but you cannot avoid grieving forever. Someday those buried feelings will need to be resolved or they may cause physical or emotional illness.

Many people report physical symptoms that accompany grief. Stomach pain, loss of appetite, intestinal upsets, sleep disturbances, and loss of energy are all common symptoms of acute grief. Of all life's stresses, mourning can seriously test your natural defense systems. Existing illnesses may worsen or new conditions may develop.

Profound emotional reactions may occur. These reactions include anxiety attacks, chronic fatigue, depression and thoughts of suicide. An obsession with the person who has died is also a common reaction.

Understanding Grief

Grief is a personal response to the loss of someone or something. The loss may involve a loved one, and/or a way of life. Anyone can experience grief and loss. It can be sudden or expected; however, individuals are unique in how they experience this event. Grief itself is a normal and natural response to loss. There are a variety of ways that individuals respond to loss. Some are healthy coping mechanisms and some may hinder the grieving process. It is important to realize that acknowledging - giving oneself permission to experience, feel and express grief - promotes and assists the healing process. Time and support facilitate the grieving process, allowing an opportunity to appropriately mourn this loss.

Denying the feelings and failing to work through the stages of grief is often more difficult on one's body and mind than going through them. When people suggest looking on the bright side, or other ways of cutting off difficult feelings, the grieving person may feel pressured to hide or deny these emotions. This impedes the healing process.

2nd Corinthians 1:7

Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation.

(NSRV)



Common Reactions to Loss:

Individuals experiencing grief from a loss may choose a variety of ways of expressing it. No two people will respond to the same loss in the same way. It is important to note that phases of grief exist; however, they do not depict a specific way to respond to loss. Rather, stages of grief reflect a variety of reactions that may surface as an individual makes sense of how this loss affects them.

A Prayer for Strength

I lift my heart and mind to you, living God of never failing love. Give me strength for this day, to weep when I should weep, to accept the comfort that memories bring, to face decisions with courage, to meet people - those love me, those who want to help me, those who want to comfort me but don't know what to say. Thank you for them all. O God, help me so that having your peace, I may be able to comfort others.

Prayer for Warmth

My Creator, you are the giver of all life, I thank you for the love I have known and the joys and sorrows shared. Please bring gentle healing to the hurt that comes with parting and the warmth of your compassion to embrace me in this moment.

Experiencing and accepting all feelings remains an important part of the healing process.

Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, in her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*, delineated five stages of the grieving process many people experience following a serious loss. As each person approaches grief in his or her own unique way, the process moves differently for each person. The final stage of the process is acceptance - accepting the death of a loved one and letting go of pain.

It is worth understanding the stages of grief. This should not mean that we treat grief lightly as if it were just a phase that somebody was going through. Progress is not automatic and somebody may still be grieving deeply after 20 years if they have not been helped through the process of bereavement. One never recovers from bereavement, and yet there should come a time when we are able to live with our loss.

Stage 1: Denial and Shock

The bereaved person is in a state of shock and unable to accept what has happened - everything seems so unreal. This is a necessary defense mechanism. Bereaved people often refer to somebody who has died in the present tense as though they are still alive. A common remark may be: It's not really sunk in. I can't believe it. I keep thinking that he is going to walk in the door as usual. Maybe after the funeral it will seem as though it has really happened. We may feel tightness in the throat or emptiness in the stomach. There may be tiredness or inability to breathe. When we are with people in this stage of grief there is no need to say something clever, it is enough simply to be there. The bereaved person may simply want to talk about the one who has died, to reminisce. They need to know that it is alright to be upset and express their grief. Some other faiths and culture are much better at this than Christian England. One day reality hits home and, despite the pain which it brings, this is progress.



Stage 2: Bargaining

Sometimes people will try to look for a way out of the situation. I cried all last night and prayed that God would take me too. There can be a movement between fantasy and guilt: I think that he may come back. Some people are sure that they have seen their loved one on a bus or in a crowd, even that they have seen a ghost. Others never touch a room or refuse to throw anything out, in the hope that somehow they may be able to preserve things the way that they once were. During this stage, people sometimes engage in magical thinking – trying to reframe events in order to affect a different ending.

Stage 3: Anger

The question which may overshadow everything is, Why me? Many expressions come out such as, it makes you wonder sometimes, and she was so young and never did anybody any harm. Then you see all those rapists and murderers and nothing happens to them. I can never believe in God when he lets that sort of thing happen. There may be anger at God for having allowed this to happen. There may be anger at the doctors or the hospital, indeed anybody who can act as a scapegoat. This is natural outrage - there is no need for anybody to try to make excuses or give rational explanations or theological argument. Neither is there any reason for those who are upset to feel guilty about their anger! This is a natural part of the grief process. All that is required is assurance and the understanding that grief brings a genuine burden, which can be very painful. It may be that the person with whom we are most angry is ourselves as we think of things in the past, missed opportunities or things we wished had never happened.

Stage 4: Depression

There can be a deep sense of regret over lost opportunities in life, or there could also be a sense of guilt: Perhaps if we had tried a different doctor. Guilt, in its many different varieties, is a normal part of grief and it can cause depression. It may be that it makes us feel that we do not want to go on. It is important to realize that this is something we all feel, sometimes for a considerable length of time. It is important to find people to talk to. Grief needs an outlet and we must be able to cry and express our emotion. Of course we also need to be reminded that we can talk to God.

Stage 5: Acceptance/Learning to Live Again

The time comes when we are able to 'let go' of our loved one, leave them in peace and to experience new life again. It is the time when memories can be treasured without a terrible sense of pain. Of course, this may be a long time away. Learning to live again means adjusting, in a sense, to being a different person.

Loss Of A Parent

Although most people expect their parents to die before them, few are really prepared for the loss. Unfortunately, others may criticize the adult who grieves the loss of a parent and feel they should get on with their lives. The rationalization, especially if the parent is elderly, is usually that the individual lived a long, full life or was released from pain and suffering. Such rationalization does not make grief any easier to bear.

Losing a parent means losing your history – losing someone who has known you longer than anyone else. The parent-child relationship is a bond you cannot replace that forms the basis for all your other relationships. A parent's death is also a not-so-subtle reminder of your own mortality. Most adults are in midlife when they lose their parents. The death reminds them of changes in their own lives and health problems due to age.

Family relationships are complex and unpredictable. The death of a parent often serves to bring unresolved issues among family members to a crisis, resulting in either continued estrangement or reaffirmed solidarity as a family. Coping with these issues, along with the normal processes of grief, puts the survivors under stress.



Losing somebody is like having a part of oneself cut off. It takes time to reaffirm life and invest in new relationships and responsibilities. It is like learning to live all over again. We are all different and can experience different things at different times. Nevertheless, one thing that the bereaved nearly always have in common is that it takes time to recover. We need to be able to give time to express ourselves and understand a little of how we feel, as this will help us not to get stuck in the bereavement journey. Acceptance is not disrespect for or devaluing of the person who has died. Acceptance is gaining closure and incorporating the importance of the life and death of a significant individual into the whole of one's life.

If you have felt the pain of bereavement, then eventually you may be able to help somebody who is going through the same pain. Often what we need most is simply somebody to listen and love.

These feelings that are part of the grieving process are normal and common reactions to loss. You may not be prepared for the intensity and duration of your emotions or how swiftly your moods may change. You may even begin to doubt the stability of your mental health. But, be assured that these feelings are healthy and appropriate and will help you come to terms with your loss.

Remember, it takes time to fully absorb the impact of a major loss. You never stop missing your loved one, but the pain eases after time and allows you to go on with your life.

Suggestions for Coping With Grief

Take it one hour at a time, one day at a time.

Maintain a normal routine. Keep doing your regular activities. Get enough sleep or at least enough rest.

Regular exercise, even walking, helps relieve stress, tension and will improve your mood.

Eat a healthy balanced diet. Limit high calorie food especially junk food and comfort food binges.

Drink plenty of water.

Avoid using alcohol, medications or other drugs to mask the pain.

Talk to others, especially those who have lived through and survived similar experiences. They may provide valuable insights for coping.

Talk about feelings, even painful feelings. Talking will help the pain go away.

Feeling guilty or angry is a normal part of the process and you need not deny these feelings.

Give yourself permission to enjoy other people and life's experiences - to laugh. This does not mean the person who died is loved or missed any less.

Be with those who comfort, sustain and recharge.



Remember other past losses and the coping strategies you used to survive them. Draw on these inner strengths again.

Be a name dropper! Mentioning your loved one's name during conversation gives others permission to talk about your loved one, too.

Be honest. Don't say that you're okay when you're not.

Ask for help and be specific. Ask a friend to hold your hand while you go through a loved one's closet, or make a dreaded phone call. Grief shared is grief diminished. Remember that most people want to help, but do not know what to do or what you need, and some are not even certain how to ask.

If possible, postpone making difficult or life-changing decisions until after the first year.

Start a grief journal and write out your feelings.

Write a letter to the person who has died if you did not have time to say goodbye. Take the time now and write them a letter telling them everything you feel you need and SEND it symbolically, or particularly if you have unfinished business, and read it aloud by the graveside.

Do not hide your true feelings for fear of being judged. Support groups, counseling, and workshops are all aimed at discovering and completing the unfinished emotional business that fuels the isolation. If it's been six months or longer, consider joining a grief support group.

Spend time each day outside. The sun and fresh air will lift your spirits and cause your body to produce melatonin.

Breathe deeply. The shallow breathing that comes with grief can cause chest pains, headaches or other health problems.

Pray for God's strength and comfort.

Grief in Same- Gender Partnerships

When a same-gender partner dies, his/her trauma is often exacerbated by the lack of mainstream cultures' recognition of the relationship, his/her loss, and societal acknowledgement of the status of widow/widower. All surviving partners, regardless of sexual orientation, experience certain psychosocial reactions. In addition, same-gender partners face unique stressors that complicate bereavement.

Institutions of our culture offer little opportunity for the overt expression of grief and bereavement in general, and even less opportunity for same-gender partners. Sexual orientation has nothing to do with the dynamics of grief, though the ramifications of homophobia can greatly complicate the grieving process of a same-gender surviving partner.

One dynamic unique to the surviving partner of a same-gender relationship is that his or her relationship is often not universally recognized, validated and valued. The heterosexual widow or widower who loses a mate receives a level of social support and condolence. Same-gender surviving partners may be more apt to encounter family alienation, scorn, ostracism, fear or blame. This has been described as disenfranchised grief, explained as grief that occurs when 1) the relationship is not recognized, 2) the loss is not recognized, and 3) the griever is not recognized.

Lack of legal status may further complicate the grief process of a same-gender surviving partner.



The Death of A Child

No death is more agonizing or more misunderstood than the death of an infant or child. Even if the child is an adult, the parent somehow feels cheated because parents expect to die before their children. A child's death can put a terrible strain on your family and may even result in divorce or separation.

Friends and family frequently fail to understand the intensity of parents' grief when a very young infant dies, or the couple suffers a miscarriage or stillbirth. Because the child never lived or lived such a short time, they think the parents should recover quickly. But most parents begin bonding with the unborn child early in pregnancy. For them, the child was alive, and their loss was very real.

The death of a child is especially troubling because children represent your hopes and dreams for the future. Loss of the child represents a lost future which can never be replaced, even by another child. The death may leave you feeling empty, lifeless and hopeless, and very vulnerable to other tragedies. Feelings of intense guilt are common following the death of a child because most parents feel they should have died instead.

It is common for parents, especially the mother, to wonder if she did or did not do something that caused the death. Most parents feel a great need to understand why the child died, although sometimes there is no answer, especially in the case of miscarriage or stillbirth. Seeking answers and talking openly with your physician about possible causes for the death may help in the healing process.

Because grief is a very personal emotion, individual parents frequently experience the death of a child differently. Their grieving processes may differ significantly. One parent may try to express emotions, while the other will not communicate. One may need to seek counseling, while the other wants to grieve alone. It is critical for couples to share with each other what they are feeling, so they can move through grief and avoid misunderstandings. A child's death will add stress to a marriage; spouse/partners should try to support each other during difficulties.

Most parents will continue to experience grief on special days, such as the child's birthday, on holidays or when another child is born. This is natural, and others should encourage the family to include memories of the child in special family events.

Coming to grips with the death of a child is not easy, and it involves all the normal stages of grief and recovery. Because it is such a traumatic loss, families may need professional help as well as support from family and friends. Parents need to talk about the baby and their grief, and need to know they are not alone



Culture and Response to Grief and Mourning

Grief felt for the loss of a loved one, the loss of a treasured possession, or a loss associated with an important life change, occurs across all ages and cultures. However, the role that cultural heritage plays in an individual's experience of grief and mourning is not well understood. Attitudes, beliefs, and practices regarding death must be described according to traditions and mysteries surrounding death within different cultures.



Individual personal experiences of grief are similar in different cultures. This is true even though different cultures have different mourning ceremonies, traditions, and behaviors to express grief. Helping families cope with the death of a loved one includes showing respect for the family's cultural heritage and encouraging them to decide how to honor the death. Important questions that should be asked of people who are dealing with the loss of a loved one include:

- a. What are the cultural rituals for coping with dying, the deceased person's body, the final arrangements for the body, and honoring the death?
- b. What are the family's beliefs about what happens after death?
- c. What does the family feel is a normal expression of grief and the acceptance of the loss?
- d. What does the family consider to be the roles of each family member in handling the death?
- e. Are certain types of death less acceptable (for example, suicide), or are certain types of death especially hard to handle for that culture (for example, the death of a child)?

Death, grief, and mourning spare no one and are normal life events. All cultures have developed ways to cope with death. Interfering with these practices may interfere with the necessary grieving processes. Understanding different cultures' response to death can help physicians recognize the grieving process in patients of other cultures.

Grief and the Grieving Process are Unique

While there are certain stages common to the grieving process most people experience, there are also many variables and individual differences that account for the dissimilarities in the individual experience and expression of that process. The following very personal prose story describes one person's journey and contains suggestions for coping and healing.



Who Am I Now?

by Darcie D. Sims

Why am I a thousand-piece puzzle when everyone else is already put together? Why is the rest of the world a size 10? Why do their kites fly so high? Why does the grass grow greener next door? Because I am a thousand-piece puzzle.

Who am I now? Who am I, now that my loved one has died? Who am I, now that I have survived the holiday season and find myself deep into the gloom of winter? Why do I feel so scattered? Why am I a thousand-piece puzzle when everyone else is so put together?

Why does January seem so empty? Why do the seasons reflect my moods and why do I take on the cast of the weather outside? Just as the world is stiff and frozen outside my window, I feel dead and cold and scattered inside myself. Who am I now?

I managed to make it through the holiday season, though the hows of that feat are truly beyond my recollection. I can't even remember eating the holiday meals. In those glittering days I managed to smile and even to find a few moments of peace and joy; but here in the gloom of January, all I seem to see are the scattered pieces of my life...cast before me on the card table, waiting for me to pick them up and make the picture.

But what picture do all these pieces form? I used to think I knew. I used to know who I was and where I was going and how I was going to get there. But now, now in the chill of January, I can't even remember where the puzzle begins and I end.

I think I'm still grieving, and that surprises me. It's been...(too long regardless of the time frame you insert), and I should be getting better. Why do I still ache from a sunburn I got years ago when we were together on the beach? Why is there still sand in my shoes and why does your name still stick in my throat? Who am I now that the memories grow cold in January's chill?

Am I still a mother if there is no child to tuck in at night? Am I still a dad if there is no one to loan the car keys to? Am I still a wife if there is no one to snuggle up to in my bed? Am I still a husband if there is no one waiting at home for me at the end of the day? Am I still a sister or a brother if there is no one to tease? Am I still a child if my parent has died? Am I still a human being, capable of loving and being loved, if the one person I loved more than anything has become frozen in time? Who am I now that my loved one has died?

The gloom has permeated even my toes, and my whole body seems icy. Why can't January be warm and gentle--especially after the struggle of the holidays? I need some sunshine, some warmth, some help in turning over the puzzle pieces and putting them back together. I need some spring.

But spring is a way off and I must (somehow) get through these days. If you're feeling like I am, perhaps these few suggestions will help you find the pieces to your new puzzle. Identify specific feelings. Do not generalize. Try to figure out exactly what's bothering you. Look for the tiny grains of sand that are still hiding in the bottom of your shoes. Acknowledge them. Be honest with those feelings, whatever they are. If you're angry, be angry. If you're sad, be sad. Be specific in your sadness!

Pick your worries. Focus on only one worry at a time. Give up being worried about being worried.



Prioritize your worries. This helps combat feelings of being overwhelmed and you can decide which worries to keep and which to send to your: 1) mother; 2) children; 3) family; 4) neighbor; 5) enemy.

Keep a picture or two of the sand castle where you can enjoy it every day. You may decide not to make a shrine out of your memories, but don't lose the joy that you had in making that marvelous moat! Keep the sand you found in the shoe--you just don't have to keep it there! That's what memories are for--a place to stash the important stuff that we need.

Become as informed and as knowledgeable as possible about this new world in which you live. We fear what we don't know, what we can't see, what we can't touch. Read, listen, learn all you can about grief. It's not where you planned on being this winter, but it is where you are. Look around. Listen to everyone. You will receive enough advice about how to do it (grief) to sink a fleet of battleships.

Be grateful...at least someone is talking with you! But, FOLLOW YOUR OWN MUSIC.

Be kind to yourself. You survived the holiday season, and now it is the beginning of another season, another way of living. Learn to forgive yourself for living.

Set small goals first. Accomplish them. Then, set bigger goals. Try starting with getting the garbage out on the RIGHT day. Then, open the closet...the drawers...the heart. Try going out. The next time you might be able to get farther than the driveway. TAKE YOUR TIME. It's a long way to the beach. You'll get there again...someday.

Remember that life requires effort on your part. Make friends with the vacuum, the checkbook and the car. Become determined to learn to remove the box before micro-waving the dinner.

Don't wait for happiness to find you again. Make it happen. Build another sand castle, maybe on a different beach this time. Don't lose the memories just because they hurt. Look at the pictures, listen to the song, remember the love...you haven't lost that. How could you possibly lose the love you shared?

Keep turning the puzzle pieces over. But don't keep trying to put them back into the same picture. That picture is gone. There is a new picture to be made of those scattered pieces. Search for that scene. Search for the new you...search for the new person you are becoming.

Don't forget how to dream, how to laugh, how to dance. The music is different but so is the season. The room may be empty, but the heart is not. The spirit may be filled with sand, but the shoes remember the steps. One day at a time is OK if you can manage it, but know that some days all you can manage is one minute at a time. But minutes add up to years, eventually, and each grain of sand adds to the strength of the castle. Build the sand castle again...if only in your memory. Just because it's January doesn't mean the beach is closed forever. Build your new castle in the middle of the winter. Find the new occupant...the new you.

Be gentle this winter season. Turn the pieces over slowly, experiencing each piece as a newly found treasure. We can fill our days with bitterness and anger that the picture will never be the same. Or, we can hope for the spring that will surely come if we let it.

*Printed with permission by: Bereavement Publishing 350 Cradle Drive, Carmel, IN 46032



Factors that Influence Coping after the death of a loved one

Age

Age makes a difference in our perspective as we understand death, dying, and the future. Age can affect our mobility and ability to get out to seek support and to take care of the details of living; i.e., go to the store, meetings, church, etc.

Gender

Men may grieve quite differently from women due to old stereotypical roles/rules: men don't cry; men/women may not know how to shop for food, do the laundry, etc; women/men may not know how to pay the bills, do the taxes, fix the car or sink, etc.

Life Experiences

People dealing with their first major loss do not have the same experience and perspective as those who have lost other significant people in their lives.

Individual Personality, Coping Style

Some people are very comfortable expressing their feelings and emotions, others are not. Some people seek help others prefer to work through their grieving process on their own.

Family Communications, Attitudes About Loss Or Death

In some families, death and dying are discussed openly, while other families prefer not to verbalize end of life. Families may articulate differing beliefs in life after death.

Family Cultural Background

The grieving style of your family and significant adults around you will make a difference as to how you allow/expect yourself to grieve now.

Health Status

Poor health can deplete one's emotional energy and make your grieving process more difficult. Grieving can also affect one's health and compound existing conditions and issues.

Resources Available

Does your library or church library have tapes and books for those who are grieving? Does your community have trained grief counselors who offer individual, family and/or group therapy? Are your funeral directors supportive and informed to assist you with the many details?

Financial Resources

The struggle to cover medical and funeral bills can compound the process of grieving.

Relationship With The Person who has Died

The degree of closeness to the person who has died will affect the grieving process. If there is unfinished business, resolution and closure must also be reached.

Nature of the Death

The time place and suddenness of the death will impact the grieving process. The shock of a sudden death can delay the process of healing. Death following a prolonged period of caregiving could also include feelings of guilt on the part of the caregiver.



We Need A Sign Of Our Grief, So Others Know We Are Not Crazy*

by Molly Sower Sugarman

Widow's weeds were a good idea. I wish they'd come back into fashion.

Or at least a black arm band for those mourning the loss of someone close; it wouldn't have to be limited to widows. And it wouldn't have to be worn every day. Just those days when you are feeling particularly insane, depressed and lost.

To those who have not experienced the death of a loved one, the armband would be a warning: Beware, this person may not act rationally. It might prepare them for the distracted huh? following clear instructions, the befuddled look when trying to do a common task, like filling out a check, or the irrational irritability over a dropped dime or simple human error.

To those who have been bereaved and bereft, the black armband would let them know that here is a person in distress whom they might comfort with a sympathetic look or word of understanding.

It would let everyone know that the person standing in the produce department with tears running down her face, is not insane, merely realizing that she doesn't have to buy figs anymore because the man who ate them is no longer there. Or she's at a loss as to how much to buy for one person.

Widows with whom I've spoken lately recount times when they have sat in tears on the living room floor, overcome by the simple tasks that used to be joint efforts. It's not that the task is beyond the ken of the woman, just that it is no longer a shared, enjoyable task.

Sometimes the task is beyond our ability. For years, I was a single mother, in charge of doing everything on my own, from rewiring lighting fixtures to chopping kindling, from managing my money to getting the car fixed.

But that was in different houses, with different standards of operation. Now I am trying to do as he would have done and I am at a loss; I lived in this house only a few years, years in which our focus was not on maintenance of the house, but maintenance of health.

I don't know how to use some of the tools because I never saw them used and the instruction books are hidden in some well-organized drawer. The right tool for each job exists but the garage is a mystery, having been efficiently and happily presided over by my husband.

Others I have talked to never had to fend for themselves. Married all their adult lives, they and their husbands each had their own tasks. As a widow - or widower - the whole bundle drops on the back of the one left behind, who may not have any idea how to chop kindling or maintain the deck or cook dinner.



We are lost in our own homes.

We may also be lost outside of them.

What used to be enjoyable events have become opportunities for old memories to rub salt in a still open wound. Some restaurants, shops, trails, holidays are too dangerous still. Let the black armband warn our friends that old haunts may be haunted.

The person wearing the warning armband could be volatile because she has, for the first time, opened mail addressed to her husband or signed papers taking his name off official documents. Maybe she just did the first load of laundry that needed no sorting because it was all hers. Maybe she is remembering last Christmas, wearing silk and eating Italian pastries together.

A poem by W. S. Merwin, as quoted on a New York subway sign, said it well: Your absence has gone through me like thread through a needle. Everything I do is stitched with its color.

We mourners are a hodge-podge of contradictions. Sometimes we don't want to leave the house, sometimes we can't bear to come home. We want to be with people but cannot carry on a conversation. As C.S. Lewis wrote in his book, *A Grief Observed*, There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps, hard to want to take it in. It is so uninteresting.

Things that once brought laughter, pleasure, repartee now seem vapid, empty, tasteless. We are numb. When the black armband goes on, friends and relatives would know that nothing seems as important as the fact that our loved one is gone and we are befuddled by the fact that the sun continues to rise and set.

Or maybe we are just sleep deprived. I've met my daughter in the hall at 3 a.m. as we both roam the house, unable to sleep, walking off our grief.

The best efforts at getting on with life do not obviate the need for the armband. Going back to work, doing volunteer work, or joining a bereavement group may fill the time, but not the hole in one's heart.

That repair job seems to take longer and may occasionally crack even years later. Ten years after her husband died, one woman I know - happily remarried - still wears her dead husband's shirt once in awhile, just for the comfort it brings her.

Some of us can't clean out the clothes in the closet; it's too much like getting rid of the one we loved, too much like deliberately shattering the mosaic of sights, sounds, smells, habits that made up our life.

Yet others who were also wounded by the loss may move on with their lives and become impatient with our erratic grief. Our fear is that they will leave us behind, slowed as we by a tangle of emotions that trips us up as we stumble along seeking another life-design.

As I talk to people struggling to repair their hearts, I find our common wish is to be allowed to patch the heart-hole in whatever fashion we wish, at whatever speed we can. The stitches may be uneven and



weak, the patch askew, not quite centered. It may all come apart when tugged just a bit. We with the black armbands are not yet adept at this ancient art.

Most of us voice a second wish, that friends and relatives will not give up on us -- irritable, morose, unpredictable and illogical as we may be.

***Reprinted with permission from Phoenix5 (P5) © 2002 by Robert Vaughn Young**



Questions on Grief Recovery

Does time really heal all wounds?

It is important for a person to grieve and complete their relationship to the pain and unfinished business caused by a death, divorce or any other significant emotional loss.

When is it time to do my grief work?

This is the most difficult question facing grievers. Part of the problem stems from the biggest single inaccurate idea that we were all socialized to believe: that time heals all wounds. Time does not heal. Actions can help discover and complete unfinished emotional business.

What are some indications that unresolved grief is the cause of my discomfort?

Unresolved grief tends to take people out of the moment, that is, to cause you to be off in conversations with people who are no longer physically there with you. Assuming that your physical health is okay, unresolved grief tends to drain you of energy. Unresolved grief tends to close our hearts down. Since we're incomplete with a prior loss, we almost automatically protect ourselves by not loving again. More accurately, we limit our loving exposure and thereby doom the new relationship to fail.



Going On

Within this benevolent universe there are diseases, earthquakes, the birthing of children, and Christmases. Shouts of laughter as well as pain, and both grief and joy, happen every day. Our theology says that grace happens - the grace that brought Jesus into this world, the grace that brought the exiles home from Babylon, the grace that gives us breath and sight and memory, and that brings us through today and into tomorrow.

Death Is Nothing At All

I have only slipped away into the next room. I am I, and you are you. Whatever we were to each other, that we still are. Call me by my old familiar name, speak to me in the easy way which you always used. Put no difference in your tone, wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow. Laugh as we always laughed, at the little jokes we enjoyed together. Pray, smile, think of me, pray for me. Let my name be ever the household word it always was, let it be spoken without effect, without the trace of a shadow on it. Life means all that it ever meant. It is the same as it ever was; there is unbroken continuity. Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight? I am waiting for you, for an interval, somewhere very near, just round the corner. All is well.

Henry Scott Holland 1847-1918 Canon of St. Paul's Cathedral.

Helping Children Grieve

Children who experience a major loss may grieve differently than adults. A parent's death can be particularly difficult for small children, affecting their sense of security or survival. Often, they are confused about the changes they see taking place around them, particularly if well-meaning adults try to protect them from the truth or from their surviving parent's display of grief.

Limited understanding and an inability to express feelings puts very young children at a special disadvantage. Young children may revert to earlier behaviors (such as bed-wetting), ask questions about the person who has died that seem insensitive, invent games about dying or pretend that the death never happened.

Coping with a child's grief puts added strain on a bereaved parent. However, angry outbursts or criticism only deepen a child's anxiety and delays recovery.

Instead, talk honestly with children, in terms they can understand. Take extra time to talk with them about death and the person who has died. Help them work through their feelings and remember that they are looking to adults for suitable behavior.



Common Myths about Grief & Grieving

Here are eight of the most common myths and realities about grief. Knowledge of these issues is extremely helpful for both the person who is bereaved and those who want to help him/her. The person grieving can gain assurance that his/her responses to the death of a loved one are quite normal and natural. Simultaneously, family, friends, religious leaders and other caregivers have the correct information about grief, thus enabling them to respond more patiently, compassionately and wisely.

Myth #1: It's been a year since your spouse/partner died. Don't you think you should be dating by now?

Reality: It is impossible to simply replace a loved one. Susan Arlen, M.D., a New Jersey physician, offers this insight: Human beings are not goldfish. We do not flush them down the toilet and go out and look for replacements. Each relationship is unique, and it takes a very long time to build a relationship of love. It also takes a very long time to say good-bye, and until good-bye really has been said, it is impossible to move on to a new relationship that will be complete and satisfying.

Myth #2: You look so well!

Reality: People who are grieving do look like people who are not grieving - on the outside. However, at the interior, they experience a wide range of chaotic emotions—shock, numbness, anger, disbelief, betrayal, rage, regret, remorse, guilt. These feelings are intense and confusing.

One example comes from British author C. S. Lewis, who wrote these words shortly after his wife died: In grief, nothing stays put. One keeps emerging from a phase, but it always recurs. Round and round. Everything repeats. Am I going in circles, or dare I hope I m on a spiral? But if a spiral, am I going up or down it?

Thus, when people comment in astonishment You look so well, people who are grieving feel misunderstood and further isolated. There much more helpful responses. Simply and quietly acknowledge their pain and suffering through statements such as: This must be very difficult for you. How can I help? What can I do?

Myth #3: The best we can do (for the griever) is to avoid discussing the loss.

Reality: People who are grieving need and want to talk about their loss, including the most minute details connected to it. Grief shared is grief diminished. Each time a griever talks about the loss, a layer of pain is shed.

When Lois Duncan's 18 year-old daughter, Kaitlyn, died as a result of what police called a random shooting, she and her husband were devastated by the death. Yet, the people most helpful to the Duncans were those who allowed them to talk about Kaitlyn.

The people we found most comforting made no attempt to distract us from our grief, she recalls. Instead, they encouraged Don and me to describe each excruciating detail of our nightmare experience over and over. That repetition diffused the intensity of our agony and made it possible for us to start the healing.



Myth #4: It's been six (or nine or 12) months now. Don't you think you should be over it?

Reality: There is no quick fix for the pain of bereavement. Of course, grievors wish they could be over it in six months. Grief is a deep wound that takes a long time to heal. That time-frame differs from person to person according to each person's unique circumstances.

Glen Davidson, Ph.D., professor of psychiatry and thanatology at Southern Illinois University School of Medicine tracked 1,200 mourners. His research show an average recovery time from 18 to 24 months.

Myth #5: You need be more active and get out more!

Reality: Encouraging a person who is grieving to maintain their social, civic and religious ties is healthy. Grievors should not withdraw completely and isolate themselves from others. However, it is not helpful to pressure them into excessive activity. Erroneously, some caregivers try to help people who are grieving escape from their grief through trips or excessive activity. This was the pressure felt by Phyllis seven months after her husband died.

Several of my sympathetic friends who happen to have not yet experienced grief first hand have suggested that I interrupt my period of mourning by getting out more, she recalls. They say, solemnly, 'What you must do is get out among people, go on a cruise, and take a bus trip. Then you won't feel so lonely.'

I have a stock answer for their stock advice: I am not lonely for the presence of people, I am lonely for the presence of my husband. But how can I expect these innocents to understand that I feel as though my body has been torn asunder and that my soul has been mutilated? How could they understand that for the time being, life is simply a matter of survival?

Myth #6: It was the will of God.

Reality: The Bible makes this important distinction: life provides minimal support, but God provides maximum love and comfort. Calling a tragic loss the will of God can have a devastating impact on the faith of others.

Consider Dorothy's experience: I was 9 years old when my mother died and I was very, very sad. I did not join in the saying of prayers at my parochial school. Noticing that I was not participating in the exercise, the teacher called me aside and asked what was wrong. I told her my mother died and I missed her, to which she replied: 'It was the will of God. God needs your mother in heaven.' But I felt I needed my mother far more than God needed her. I was angry at God for years because I felt God took her from me.

When statements of faith are to be made, they should focus upon God's love and support through grief. Rather than telling people it was the will of God, a better response is to gently suggest: God is with you in your pain. God will help you day by day. God will guide you through this difficult time.

Rather than talking about God taking a loved one it is more theologically accurate to place the focus upon God receiving and welcoming a loved one.



Myth #7: You're young, you can get married again. Or, Your loved one is no longer in pain now. Be thankful for that.

Reality: The myth is that believing such statements will help those who are grieving. The truth is that clichés are seldom useful for the grieving and usually create more frustration for them. Avoid making any statements which minimize the loss such as: He's in a better place now. You can have other children. You'll find someone else to share your life with. It is more therapeutic to simply listen compassionately, say little, and do whatever you can to help ease burdens.

Myth #8: She cries a lot. I'm concerned she is going to have a nervous breakdown.

Reality: Tears are nature's safety valves. Crying washes away toxins from the body which are produced during trauma. That may be the reason so many people feel better after a good cry.

Crying discharges tension, the accumulation of feeling associated with whatever problem is causing the crying, said Frederic Flach, M.D., associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Cornell University Medical College in New York City.

Stress causes imbalance and crying restores balance. It relieves the central nervous system of tension. If we don't cry, that tension does not go away.

Caregivers should get comfortable at seeing tears from those who are grieving and be supportive of crying.

*Adapted from Victor Parachin, a grief educator and minister in Claremont, CA.

Psalm 16: 1 - 2

1 Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge. 2 I say to the Lord, You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.

Psalm 139: 1 - 18

1 O Lord, you have searched me and known me. 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. 3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. 4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. 5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. 7 Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? 8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. 9 If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, 10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. 11 If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night, 12 even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. 13 For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. 14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. 15 My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. 16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. 17 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! 18 I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you. (NSRV)



Checklist - Things TO DO During the First Month

[] Contact a funeral provider to plan the funeral.

Contact the Funeral Consumers Alliance (FCA) for information on choosing a dignified, affordable funeral. FCA, 33 Patchen Road, South Burlington, VT 05403-5705,
Phone: 800-765-0107

You will need information about your spouse/partner including:

Social Security number · Driver's license number · Passport number · VA claim number ·

Member numbers in major organizations · Name, address and phone numbers of selected mortuary and cemetery · Location of burial plot and deed

[] Provide information for the death certificate and the newspaper obituary.

Your funeral director will gather information and file the death certificate with the proper authorities.

You will need:

Date and place of birth · Date and hour of death · Place of death · Gender · Race Social Security number · Occupation · Employer · Marital status · Name of surviving spouse/partner and other survivors · Name of father and mother · Immediate and underlying cause of death and whether an autopsy or biopsy was performed

[] Locate a copy of your spouse/partner's will or living trust.

[] Make or locate a complete list of bank accounts, stock, bonds and other investment records.

[] Contact a qualified attorney to explain your spouse/partner's will, file it with probate court and outline tax implications.

[] Look for your spouse/partner's letter of instructions indicating funeral wishes, contacts and location of documents.

[] Order 10 certified copies of the death certificate from your county clerk's office, Health Department or funeral director. Companies and financial institutions will generally require certified copies of the death certificate and letters testamentary to settle accounts.

[] Contact your spouse/partner's employer and all former employers for potential group life insurance, pension or other benefits.

[] Change medical, dental and other benefits, if appropriate.

[] Contact your spouse/partner's fraternal organizations for possible life insurance benefits.

[] Contact creditors about your spouse/partner's death for possible credit life insurance, accidental death insurance. Cancel individual credit cards.

[] Contact mortgage companies or real estate companies for possible benefits.

[] Contact the Social Security Administration (SSA) for survivor benefits. Phone: 800-772-1213·

You will need: a certified copy of the death certificate · Social Security numbers for your spouse, yourself and your minor children · Copies of your spouse's most recent W-2 forms or self-employment tax return · Name of your spouse's employer · Birth certificates for you and your minor children · Marriage certificate · Divorce papers, if applying as a divorced spouse.



[] Open a checking account in your name if you do not already have one.

Find all documents needed to itemize your estate's assets (real estate deeds, stock and bond certificates, checking and savings accounts and investment accounts).

[] Contact your auto and home insurance companies for possible benefits.

You will need:

Policy numbers · Your spouse/partner's Social Security number · Full name of your spouse/partner · Date and cause of death · Certified copy of the death certificate

[] Contact your life and health insurance companies for benefits.

If large sums of money are involved consider getting investment advice from a fee-only financial planner who does not sell investments on commission.

You will need:

Policy numbers · Your spouse/partner's Social Security number · Full name of your spouse/partner · date and cause of death · Certified copy of the death certificate.

Change documents and accounts that had your spouse/partner as a beneficiary. Send your spouse/partner's medical claims to insurance carriers. Assess your need for life and health coverage especially if you have minor children.

[] Check with your insurance agent about your auto and home coverage.

[] Review your taxes with a Certified Public Accountant.

Discuss transferring assets into your name or trust account.

AARP Coping with Grief / <http://www.aarp.org/life/griefandloss/>

Armed Forces TAPS: Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors /

<http://www.taps.org/>

A Time to Grieve... Bereavement Support / <http://atimetogrieve.net/>

National Hospice & Palliative Care Organization / <http://www.nhpco.org/>

Beliefnet: Grief & Loss / http://www.beliefnet.com/index/index_607.asp

Grief Loss Recovery / <http://www.grieflossrecovery.com/index.html>

The Bright Side - Wings of Support / <http://www.the-bright-side.org/>

The Bruderhof Grief Companion / <http://www.griefcompanion.org/>

Good Grief Resources / <http://www.goodgriefresources.com/>

Welcome to GriefNet / <http://www.griefnet.org/>

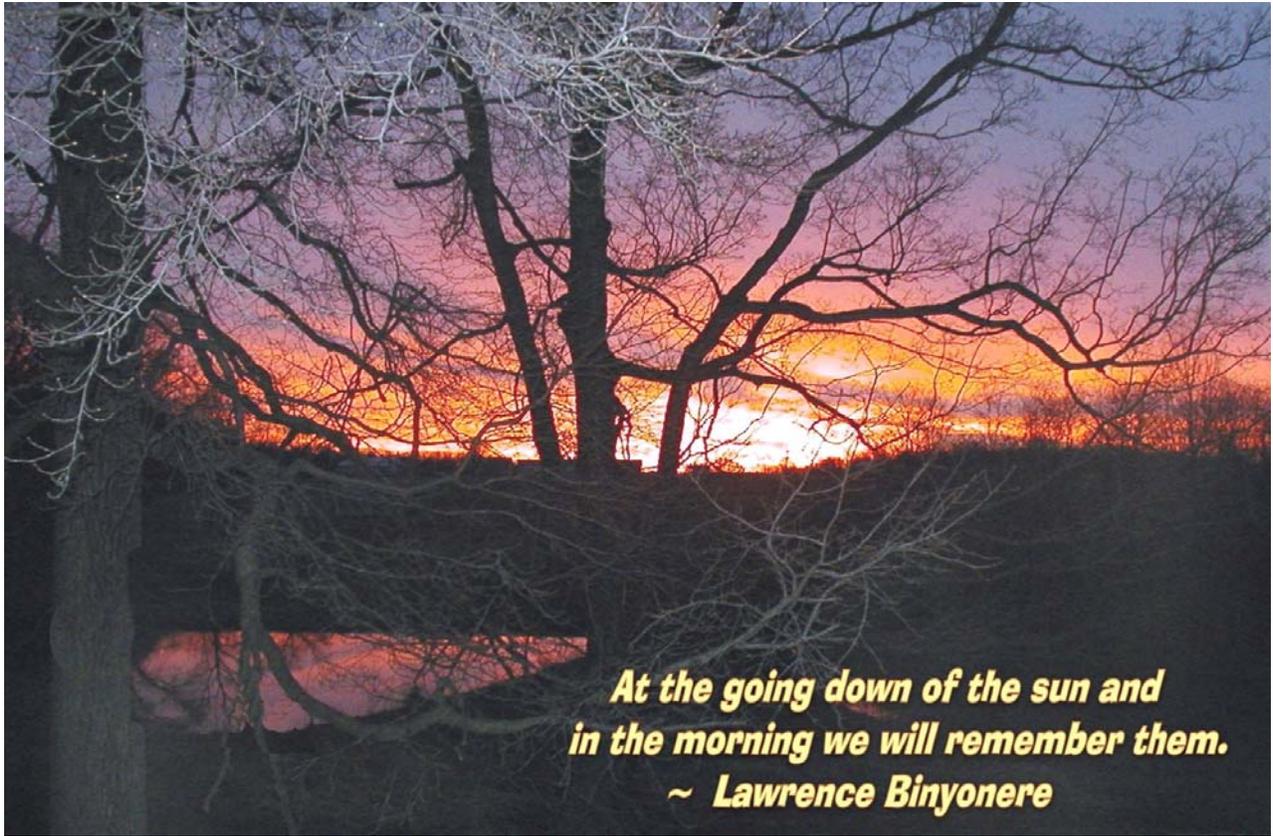
The Grief Recovery Institute / <http://www.grief-recovery.com/>

The Centre for Grief Education / <http://www.grief.org.au/>

Grief Support Services / <http://www.griefsupportservices.org/>

*These sites are presented for information only. The content is not endorsed by NHM.





**National Health Ministries
Presbyterian Church (USA)
January, 2007
1.888.728.7228
e-mail – health@ctr.pcusa.org
www.pcusa.org/nationalhealth**