

DEATH OF A LOVED ONE

by Dr. Van Beveren

I'm really sorry about your loss. I wish I could do something for you but the only thing I can do is to help you as much as possible. And while it's not very pleasant to hear right now – this is real life AND you need to take care of yourself first. First you need to take time to accept death. Facing and accepting death remains a necessary condition to continuing your own life. And those with the most trouble accepting the possible dying of others – are themselves not ready to let go of life. We often ask why it should happen but it is really not important that we find an answer to that question because the answer is rational and grief and hurt are emotional in nature.

One of the most difficult human experiences is the process of letting go. Yet from birth to death life is a series of letting go – sometimes temporarily but most often permanently. Letting go means adjusting to the new reality in which a loved one is no longer present – whether by death or divorce – or by just moving away. Letting go takes place when we are able to substitute the memories of our loved one for their physical presence. Letting go reminds us that we are not in control. Letting go occurs when we are able to endure and accept the feelings that occur naturally when we are able to tolerate the helplessness and insecurity; when we are willing to face the fears, to wait, to trust – and then to hope again.

The greatest need of those that grieve is to have someone to share their pain, their memories and their sadness. Sharing memories and feelings with others who are grieving also is often helpful because it helps one to see that feeling of grief experiences are not odd and scarce – but normal and frequent. I wish I could share your memories of the old days in Poland. All bereaved people need someone to give them the time and space to grieve and to be aware that there are many different ways of coping and sharing.

And as we review our own life and all our relationships there will always be things we could have, should have and would do different – things that were less than ideal. We need to learn to accept our own imperfections and make peace with ourselves – then only can we be at peace with the dying of others. So many try to judge their yesterday with the yardstick of today. Sometimes we elevate those that are dying so that we idealize them: they have not all of a sudden become holy. Just because they are dying we sometimes think our love for them was not perfect. Remember that the relationship included our weakness AND theirs. Remember our

loved ones as they were – and not judge ourselves by how we would have liked them (or us) to be. Put life into perspective and accept what has been. The past is not regrettable.

Take time to feel good about yourself. You are not sentenced to unhappiness. We learn to be happy by the way we adjust to both life and death and we are to utilize the opportunities life gives us – no matter the crisis. Death of a loved one affects our self image and we often have to start rebuilding the process of self-confidence and the ability to find joy in life – long before the event actually occurs. We need to affirm ourselves – pat ourselves on the back for everything we did for them. We grow beyond where we used to be and develop a new confidence in the person we are re-inventing – this time by incorporating death itself.

Take the time to laugh friend. There are as many reasons to laugh as there are to cry – but this time you're allowed to do both. Grieve his death but celebrate his life. In grief there is a time when our tears come with less frequency and intensity. We can learn to remember without tears. Laughter, however, helps us survive. We need to smile at the memory that comes up. Laughter helps to define our movement from helplessness to hopefulness. For someone who has been sad and depressed – there is no better medicine than to smile at the flowers, the sun, the grass, the water, the trees and yes, other human beings. Make this a transformation time. Learn to smile again. Then to laugh, then to roar...

People turn away from grief when they feel wanted and needed by the living. Being able to help someone doesn't just feel good – it gives us meaning and purpose. It makes us realize that there is no better option than to help others smile and laugh and even giggle. Getting involved with others gives us the feeling that life goes on and take us away from the self-pity in which we often indulge.

Remember that you take time to believe. Believe in life and in the sky and in the universe and in the planets and in the curves under which they all must live and die. To survive is to find meaning in suffering. This meaning does not just "happen" – it takes time, openness and often faith in the goodness of all to find redeeming values in one's own experience. I hope this helps.

Warmly,

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