

Helpful Reflections when you experience the death of a loved one

Forward

One of the most universal of experiences in life is death and with that death the grief that accompanies it. Indeed, the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes in Scripture states this best when he reflects:

To everything there is a season
And a time for every purpose under heaven ...
A time to be born and a time to die ...
A time to mourn and a time to dance ...

Introduction

Grief is natural. To mourn is normal. To cry is healthy. It is not wrong or bad to grieve, rather it is only wrong not to grieve. Grief is nature's way of assisting us to cope with the loss we have experienced and to take the love and emotion that we had in the person whom we have lost and to reinvest it in the living around us.

This process however, takes time. Our lives have been disrupted and we are anxious over the lack of control that we have. Often our sorrow seems overwhelming and we may feel that we will never recover from it. Yet, the experience of countless generations testifies to the reality that eventually we will be able to work through our feelings and arrive at a state of acceptance. The healing power lies within ourselves, within the very wound itself. So, to grieve is a very human, healthy and necessary response to loss.

Grief is not tidy, It does not travel smoothly along smooth straight roads but rather is akin to an emotional roller coaster ride of bumpy ups and downs. No two people grieve the same. Some are able to display feelings quite openly and freely while others check their emotions. Some may be able to articulate their grief and readily talk and share, while others express themselves in activity and work.

Grief is also a time of turning inwards. By necessity we must take the time necessary to process through our various feelings. We need to make sense of our changed reality. Although we would wish the deceased to come back we know that we must deal with this most ultimate of separations if life is to go on.

Death often means changes will occur in our lifestyle, in our daily routine, in our pattern of interaction. With such changes often come stress as we develop the abilities to cope. Such adjustments and the strain that accompanies it can also lead to other conflicts and tensions.

Many cultures have prescribed rituals or symbols, religious rites and cultural practices to help individuals deal with their grief. The wearing of black, the attendance of memorial

services at certain set periods and the reception after the funeral services were completed, are but just a few. These actually gave the individual something to do and helped them regain some sense of control and direction. The further back in history one goes the more elaborate were some of these practices. Certainly, at the very least one can say that some of these past cultures were more death accepting than ours.

This booklet is intended to assist in the grief process that you are experiencing. It may prove useful in helping to reflect upon what you are experiencing and some of the questions and decisions that you may face. It is offered as a meditation on what you may be experiencing at this moment. Benjamin Franklin once said, "Those things that hurt, instruct." We can actually learn and grow from the grief we experience so that we may eventually come to that place of acceptance.

What is Grief?

Grief is natural and because all people experience death, to experience the accompanying grief is also normal. This is most important to understand as society has a tendency to deny death and grief and to look upon any expression of grief as something that is either inappropriate or that is seen as weakness. Our feelings are valid for us and express the sorrow that we are experiencing. They are neither right nor wrong, neither good nor bad. They just are and therefore should not be judged by ourselves or others.

A simple definition is that grief is an emotional reaction that we experience when we suffer a loss. Although we tend to associate grief with the ultimate loss that occurs when someone we love dies, we know that there are other losses that happen in our life as well. Losing a job, moving to a new neighbourhood, or experiencing a divorce are just some of these.

We can share our pain and be supported by others in our loss. We may also access our faith and turn to God for support. But we cannot escape the pain, nor should we try. The grieving process is something ultimately that we must do on our own, but we do not have to do it alone or unsupported. It is only by working through our loss that we can finally come to a state of balance, peace and acceptance. If we try to deny or suppress our grief it often comes back in the future in some other form that can render us dysfunctional or even ill.

The Stages of the Grief Process

There are several stages of grief that we experience when the death of a loved one occurs. These tend to parallel the stages of the dying process itself. The writings of Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and other professionals have educated us to these. However, it is important to understand that these stages are meant as a model to help us understand grief. They are not meant to be strict and inflexible statements. No two people experience these stages at the same pace. Sometimes we may experience

more than one at the same time or may not stay long in a stage. At other times we may even seem for a time to slip back into a stage that we have already seemingly left.

Also, the depth of our grief and the length of time that we grieve are dependent on how significant our loss was to us. To lose an acquaintance or a friend at work is less sorrowful than losing a child, spouse or parent.

One can find different listings of these stages and sub-stages in numerous books dealing with grief. Rather than formulate yet another list, a simple reflection on some of these might prove more helpful

Denial

One of the initial feelings we experience at the time of a death and often for a few days to a few weeks afterwards is that of denial. We simply have difficulty believing and accepting that the death has even happened. If the death is sudden, our denial may be even more pronounced. But even when we know that the death will occur, as with someone who has a terminal illness, we still can feel this strong refusal to accept the inevitable loss, when it actually happens.

This accounts for some of the behaviour that can happen in the months to follow. It is not unusual for a widow to think that she heard her husband's voice in the other room or his footsteps on the pavement outside. Often times parents will keep a child's room just as it was when the child died. Queen Victoria is perhaps a classic example of denial that became frozen in the grief process after the death of her consort, Prince Albert. Every morning she would have his clothing laid out for him to dress and fresh water poured in his wash basin. Although we may not be as extreme as this it is not unusual to catch ourselves setting an extra plate at dinner or making plans that include the person who is deceased.

Shock

Along with denial comes shock. We can often feel numbed and overwhelmed by the loss. Sometimes we act and react slowly, or we may become confused or unable to function in our usual way. Nothing may seem real, especially our loss.

This first stage is simply nature's way of protecting us at the time of our initial loss. Shock cushions us and insulates us. In turn this helps us to deal with the reality of our loss as we attend to the various tasks surrounding the funeral arrangements and the notifying of family members and friends. It provides the internal buffer zone that we need to be able to cope. Just as a tortoise that is threatened will retreat into its shell for a period of time until it feels it is safe to venture out again, so too do we emotionally retreat for a time in order to cope.

Guilt & Anger

Within the initial period of our grief we may experience guilt or even anger. Often the "if only I had" phrase is invoked over and over. We may blame ourselves or the doctors or even God for the loss of our loved one and then become angry and upset.

Guilt is actually another expression of denial since somewhere within our psyche we blame ourselves for the death and feel that we might have prevented it "if only" we had followed or not followed some particular course of action. We do not always comprehend in our grief that there is no real correlation in reality between the death and our own action or lack of action. So, we tend to say things like:

If only I had not given him permission to use the car...

If only we had gone to another doctor...

If only I had been a better wife/mother/husband/child ...

Sometimes the guilt may come from even more specific circumstances. We may also feel guilt because of unfinished business or an argument that was had prior to the death. If a husband dies of a heart attack at work, the widow may feel guilty if that very morning there was an argument and words were exchanged. Or, two buddies were involved in a boating accident and the driver of the boat survives while his friend does not, guilt may engulf the survivor. In both examples, because of the circumstances, guilt may be overwhelming, even if there is no actual causal relationship. Blaming and punishing oneself over such incidents are unfortunately all too common.

The anger comes from the fact that we are hurting so much that we want to find something or someone to lash out at and to blame in order that we can express our pain and rid ourselves of the guilt. It is not unusual to become angry at the same people that we blame for our loss: i.e. ourselves, the doctors, or even God. We may even be angry at the deceased, for "abandoning" us, or for not following the diet and routine that the doctor gave them. If the death was the result of a suicide than we may feel even more rage at the senselessness and selfishness of this act. It is not wrong to feel anger even at the deceased or God. This is again a natural expression of our pain and sorrow. It is only by expressing and sharing our grief that we are able to ventilate and unburden ourselves and thus, continue healing. Even a scar or wound needs to bleed and may scar up, then bleed, and then scar up again, on its road to recovery.

Depression

Usually, after a few days or weeks, the initial shock begins to wear off and we then begin to experience the significance of our loss. The funeral itself is over and family and friends have gone back to their homes and lives. This is when the loneliness often begins to set in.

Accompanying this loneliness we may also experience a variety of other emotions, such as: anger, despair, guilt, or denial. These can leave us frequently depressed. We may experience difficulty in thinking clearly or be easily distracted. Often we become inert

and unmotivated, or touchy. We may talk incessantly or be uncommunicative. Often we spend hours in silence, remembering and revisiting the events that led up to the death of our loved one or the events of the funeral itself. Tears or distress may be common during this period as well as a general feeling of exhaustion. We may have difficulty in sleeping or eating or performing even simple tasks.

Again, all of this is perfectly normal and accompanies the grief process. Such behaviour should not be suppressed or denied by either the individual experiencing it or "well meaning" family or friends.

We may ask the eternal question 'why?'. Why did my husband, my child, my sister have to die? Death can seem so unjust and cruel and it is not unusual for even one's very faith to be tested. Again, it is natural to seek answers and explanations. We should not be surprised however that at times we do not feel God's presence or comfort. Our faith tells us that God is always with us but often it is hard to feel or sense God's Presence when we are in the midst of grief. It is here where one's faith might be accessed and many find comfort, support and meaning from their religion or priest, pastor, rabbi or elder.

Time

The grief process takes time. It cannot be rushed but rather has to run its natural course in which gradually a healing of emotions occurs. Although the immediate impact of one's loss usually lasts up to several weeks, the gradual acceptance and adjustment to the loss may take a couple of years. But this is not a hard and fast rule. In truth we grieve our whole life and never really stop loving or missing the person who has died. It is the first couple of years, with their cycles of birthdays, anniversaries, and season holidays, that can be the most difficult. Although there are some things that we can do to ease the pain we feel, it is the actual coping with the repetition of these events over several years that help us move eventually to acceptance.

It is not unusual to often pause and reminisce. Objects, smells, or music are especially powerful triggers and we can often find ourselves lost in a memory of a moment shared or a celebration enjoyed. We may even find comfort in talking to the deceased, whether at their grave or just in our homes. Such conversations are natural and not bizarre or inappropriate. Tears or the need to talk often about the deceased also are normal and healthy ways of expressing and articulating our sorrow.

It is also important for us to realise, that although we must go through our own grieving process, we do not have to grieve alone. We should not shut out the help and support offered by family and friends and thus rob them of their need to be present to our sorrow. We also should not hesitate to call upon them for assistance or company. There is another old saying, "A sorrow shared is a sorrow halved." Any burden is made lighter when carried by two or more.

Various professional groups and support services are often available in your community. Some of these are listed in the back of this booklet and your funeral director, clergy person or even a phone book may be able to assist you in finding which ones exist in your community. There is no need to go it alone when support is often but a phone call away.

There is an old saying that "time heals all things." But this statement is conditional for it is only valid if we do the grief work that is necessary.

Physical Reactions

Our bodies also articulate our grief. It is not unusual to suffer sleeplessness, loss of appetite, breathing difficulties, a tightness in the chest, headaches, blurred vision, sudden weight fluctuations, low energy, general aches and pains, or a depressed immune system that invites a succession of colds and flu. These physical symptoms are not imaginary but very real. It is most important to try to take care of one's physical health as well during the time of bereavement. Eating and sleeping according to our usual pattern can help us to maintain our health. Certainly we should not hesitate to contact our doctor when such symptoms persist. If grief is not addressed or dealt with more serious illnesses can occur. The old maxim of a healthy mind and healthy body are still realistic norms to aim for.

Acceptance

Eventually, we arrive at the point of acceptance. It seems that one day we wake up with not a sigh but a smile. We are more interested in the world around us and have a renewed confidence in our ability to go on with our lives. It is at this point that we have arrived at a place of peace and acceptance.

It is not that we cease to forget the deceased but rather we can now think of them in ways that are cherished, so that their memory does not bring us pain but rather happiness and inspiration.

The healing process results in acceptance when we have done our grief work. It is through such that we come to acceptance and are able to again take up our lives and activities and emerge with purpose and direction. We still may have some ups and downs but in general we feel at peace.

We know that we can go on again with our lives in new directions, able to deal with the changed pattern that we now embrace. Our memories of the deceased now nourish our resolve rather than impede them with pain, and we have been able to let go and to bring closure. We have found peace and acceptance. We have finally said good-bye.

Children

Children also grieve and need to express their sorrow. Sometimes well-meaning parents wishing to spare their children the pain of grief will try to shield the child from what has happened. They may use death-denying or inappropriate language, which often can cause more problems and concerns for the child than the truth would. "Grandpa went away on a trip" or "Your brother fell asleep and the angels took him to heaven"; may cause a child to become apprehensive when anyone goes away on a trip and fearful to fall asleep lest the angels come for him next. Children need to be loved and reassured often to feel secure.

Children are observant of their parents and adults. They intuit much of what is happening around them but because of their lack of life experience they may not always be able to translate what they observe into an authentic understanding of the situation. As well, children live in a 'semi-magical' reality where cause and effect can be viewed in a simpler and unsophisticated way. They may blame themselves for the death of their brother, sister or parent; "if I had behaved better and not fought with him, than my brother would not have died." Obviously they may take upon themselves guilt for something that they are totally innocent of.

The best way to deal with the topic of death with children is simple, straightforward statements of truth. Obviously, one may have to guide and educate them as they attempt to process this knowledge. Using their level of vocabulary and language is also important. Take your time with them and allow them to ask whatever questions they have, even if they might seem odd or unrelated. Sometimes younger children may even exhibit a morbid curiosity while teenagers may be fascinated. It is important to keep a child at home and in the normal routine and pattern of activity as much as is possible to underline their sense of security. Allow them to play and even to laugh and carry on as usual. This may be hard for a grieving adult but it allows the child a safe environment to process their loss in their own way.

The topic of death itself should not be taboo in the home but rather openly discussed as part of the natural fabric of life itself. This helps them to understand that death is not something to be feared. The loss of a pet or the way death is pictured on TV. can provide an opportunity for growth and insight into this ultimate rite of passage. Again, it is important that the adult answer honestly any questions, gauging the complexity of their response to the maturity and age of the child. Burying a bird or puppy who has died allows the child to participate in the grief work of bringing closure to their loss, thus establishing a pattern and understanding of the ritual surrounding the saying of good-bye.

Often parents are uncertain whether to allow a child to view the deceased or to attend the funeral itself. The general response to this question is that it is really up to your child. Certainly, they could go to the funeral home during a viewing time and be given the option of coming up front to see the deceased or staying in their seat or in the foyer with another adult. Naturally, they should never be forced to view against their will, but almost always, if allowed to choose at their own pace and on their own terms, they will

satisfy their natural curiosity and join the others by the casket. At this time it is appropriate to engage the child in a conversation where the adult can explain death again and where the children may ask any further questions they might have. As for attending the funeral itself, this is more a question of age and behaviour. If they are capable of sitting through a service without being too disruptive than they may be given the option. With smaller children, whose attention span may be shorter, the private viewing usually suffices.

Whatever the level of involvement that your child chooses, it is always most important that the parent sit down at home with the child and explain beforehand what will happen when they go to the funeral home to view, or to attend the funeral, or to visit the grave. Again, any questions they may want to ask should also be answered at this time as well in the same simple but honest manner mentioned earlier. The child will feel more confident when he knows what to expect.

Children have a need and a right to grieve. They also experience the similar stages of grief that adults do. So, it is important that they be allowed and encouraged to express their sorrow and have their questions answered. It is entirely appropriate for them to draw a picture, write a letter or bring a small favourite toy, to leave in the casket with the deceased. These small tokens and gestures become part of their 'grief work' and help them to feel that they are involved and contributing. Many funeral homes provide complimentary colouring books that can be taken home and used by parents as a form of engaging the child in conversation about death while they are at play.

In some cases, is not unusual for a child to exhibit inappropriate behaviour at school or home, following the death of a parent, relative, or significant relationship. Bed wetting, fights with brothers, sisters or school friends, stealing or lying, are but a few that may occur. Constant reassurance and conversation can help restore a sense of security, as well as more quality time given to the child. If problems continue there are services and counsellors that should be used to assist the children to work through their feelings.

Losing A Spouse

Losing one's spouse is a great tragedy for the survivor. No two situations are the same and each can bring particular difficulties. Normally we tend to think of death coming during old age and the survivor, usually the widow, having to adjust to being alone and handling all those tasks that were formally taken care of by the deceased husband. Statistically, we know that wives do outlive husbands five to eight years longer and more and more often for even several decades. However, we know that young people lose partners as well and a young wife or husband may find themselves alone with several babies and fewer resources or while trying to hold down a job at the same time.

So much of social life circulates around being a couple that it is not unnatural to feel awkward or excluded from daily events. Often the widow may feel abandoned by once numerous friends. Adding to this loss is the pain that loneliness can bring. A couple

married for thirty, forty or fifty years have obviously established strong routines and patterns. When they abruptly cease it takes time to develop new ones to replace the vacuum.

There may be a temptation to retreat and to stay in one's shell or to become over dependent or overly demanding upon one's children. Either are forms of escape and can become disruptive to family systems. Facing one's needs square on and doing as much as possible by one's self or with the aid of support groups helps nourish the feeling of control and reintegration into daily life.

Often there is a tendency to canonise the deceased, to remember only the good things and none of the bad. Their belongings can likewise become "holy relics" and their rooms "sacred shrines." Although none of this is necessarily bad in itself, eventually time brings a perspective that allows one to disengage and begin the process of sorting through belongings. There can be a danger of making sudden decisions such as selling the house or even in extreme case wanting to get remarried as soon as possible. A good rule of thumb is to make no major decisions for at least a year.

A less discussed issue is the fact that the death of a spouse can bring freedom and a new lease on life for those who feel trapped in a loveless or problematic marriage. It is important to note this because as genuinely tragic and sorrowful as a loss may be there is often a feeling of relief and independence as well. Sometimes one may then in turn feel guilty about enjoying such a sense of relief. Likewise, if one has been the caregiver for a terminal spouse the ensuing liberation that comes with their release from pain and suffering and your own release from the stress and work of tending to them can be almost euphoric.

Losing A Child

To lose a child is perhaps one of the most painful types of grief. We can accept death much more easily when it comes at the end of a long and well-lived life. To lose a child after a number of years; or a baby merely hours, days, weeks or months old; to suffer a still birth or a miscarriage; these are terribly difficult. Not only is there a loss of someone we have loved but there is also a loss of all that might have been. The present is lost by the death of a child, but so is the future. Parents will never see their child graduate, attend their first dance, get married, and have their own families. The tendency to blame oneself for the death is great and the "if only I had" statements stronger.

Parents and grandparents, and other family members undergo profound grief. The shock seems more intense and the anger, guilt or other feelings accompanying such a loss seem more extreme. The eternal question "why" is often asked and one's faith can be severely tested. Certainly the help of clergy may be especially beneficial at such a time, as it is not unusual to feel anger even at God over the loss of one's child.

If the death is that of a baby, whether stillborn or only hours or days old, it is also important to take time to see and touch and bond with your baby. These days most hospitals are extremely aware of this and encourage the parents to spend time with the deceased baby. Examining the baby, noting family features and resemblance's, counting the fingers and toes, holding the infant are all strongly encouraged. Rather than being morbid such familiarity allows for some bonding to take place. This is most important as a memory of the baby is made in order for parents to let go and put closure on their loss. The taking of footprints, the snipping of a lock of hair, the saving of the hospital ID bracelet and especially the taking of pictures all created a souvenir, a tangible collection of remembrances, that say your child existed and did count. Most hospitals will automatically take such pictures and keep them on file if the parents say they do not wish them. The experience of such caregivers has overwhelmingly shown that these same parents will phone and ask for these pictures at a later date. Many parents create an album of such 'momentos'. Also, name the child whatever name you had planned to give it when you were anticipating its birth. Naming actualises the worth and identity of this child as a person who was valued and loved.

Studies have also shown that losing a child is just as difficult, even if that child is an adult or even an older person. To lose a child is to suffer a loss 'out of season', out of the natural pattern and rhythm of life. Parents expect to die before their children and not after, so such a loss seems abnormal and not according to the design of life.

Marriages may also be threatened if they are already weak or experiencing difficulties. But healthy marriages often become even closer and stronger as each partner tries to help the other with their sorrow. It is a myth that many marriages break up because of the death of a child. What studies have found is that marriages that were experiencing a great deal of difficulty often break up because such a death threatens an already shaky relationship. If the relationship is healthy and the communication between spouses is good, than such marriages become even deeper and stronger as each partner relies on the other for support.

It often takes a woman longer to get over the loss of a child, so strong is the maternal bond of the spouse who gives birth. Men may have greater difficulty expressing and articulating their feelings and their grief. Sometimes there is a tendency for each partner to grieve silently on their own, or for the man to busy himself in his work. It is important that such parents take the time and effort to communicate with and to support one another in their sorrow. They may seek help from their clergy or from a grief counsellor or therapist. There are special support groups such as Compassionate Friends or SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) Sharing one's sorrow helps one cope and resolve the grief better.

Sometimes friends or family do not know how to be supportive when a child dies and will either ignore the event or sometimes say things that may sound inappropriate. It is important to acknowledge that there is a need to talk about the loss. One of the most effective things you can do is simply to listen and to be present. Don't be afraid to use

the child's name. To say the name of the child is to say that the child existed and mattered, a hug or a simple "I'm sorry" is probably the best way to show comfort and support. Avoid all the cliches, such as "I know how you feel", or attributing the loss to "God's will." Besides being poor theology it really does not bring comfort. Especially avoid statements such as "You can always have another child." Allow the parents to talk about their pain and about their child. Help with meals, errands, chores or other children may be especially appreciated at a time like this. Certainly offer help in specific ways.

The question of having another baby and the timing of such is something that both partners must face and mutually decide upon. When the timing is right they will know but it is something that cannot be rushed or arrived at without reflection.

Suicide

The number of suicides, especially among the young, has increased over the years. There are a variety of reasons why some take this route, but for the survivors it can be most painful to deal with. Feelings of guilt are especially prevalent, as those left may blame themselves for not recognising the verbal or behavioural signs. The shock and denial can also be more intense than in other forms of death and for many there is still a social stigma attached to suicide. What has been said elsewhere in this book about offering support and being present is likewise important. If the deceased is a child or teenager rather than an adult, then the pain can be deepened by the loss of both present and future hopes and dreams.

Often a family might wish to hide the nature of the way their loved one died. Yet the more honest the acknowledgement of suicide the sooner the grief process can really begin. To admit this to others is to admit to oneself. Perhaps someone else might benefit from the education that such would provide and another suicide might be prevented because of it. Clergy, a grief counsellor, or a support group are particularly helpful in dealing with such a burden.

AIDS

One of the many fatal diseases becoming more and more prevalent today is that of AIDS. By taking a moment to reflect on this as a separate section, I do not mean to suggest that other diseases such as cancer, Parkinson's, or Alzheimer's, for example are less devastating or difficult to grieve through.

Society may attach a stigma to AIDS that can complicate the grieving process. Such a stigma or moral judgement is entirely inappropriate as Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome is a disease that anyone: male or female, adult or child, homosexual or heterosexual can contract and in a variety of ways. Furthermore, to suggest that such might be a punishment from God, for example, is to have not only a poor understanding of theology but also of the immense love that God has for his creation.

When AIDS also involves the question of being gay, some individuals or families may feel confused about how to go about arranging a funeral or memorial. As well, if the deceased was in a relationship there may be a partner to consider and include, unless such has already been appointed executor.

Your clergy person or funeral director will be able to assist you in these deliberations and help dispel some of the myths that abound. As well, there are many support groups within the gay community that could also be of help. Whatever assistance you seek will help you to deal in a sensitive and an appropriate way with your grief.

What To Do For Oneself

Although one's pain is unique and at times the ache and loneliness seem overwhelming, there are several practical things you can do to resolve your grief.

Do try to eat well and to sleep well. Maintaining as regular and normal a pattern as possible helps you to get through your grief.

Try to take interest in the day to day happenings and in the events of your extended family. Rely on the support offered by family and friends but do not become demanding and manipulative. Friends can be especially helpful. Be careful not to push people away when they offer help by saying "I'm fine, I don't need anything." Don't hold your grief in but rather communicate with your friends. Accept their interest and assistance in a gracious way.

If some friends are clumsy in expressing their support or noticeably absent in extending it, simply forgive them. Not everyone has learned how to express concern and offer help. Harboring ill feelings towards them will only hurt your health. Let go of such rancour and concentrate your energies in positive ways that help move you towards acceptance.

Try to do the same things that you used to do, the hobbies and interests. Do not be afraid to develop new ones. Doing and keeping busy help you to fill the loneliness but do not overstep and use frantic or exaggerated activity as a means of escaping and denying the sorrow. If you find there is much time on your hands then some type of volunteer work might be undertaken. Helping others is always a way of putting our own problems in perspective.

Anticipate the holidays. Birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas, Chanukah, weddings, and other family occasions, as well as the anniversary of your loved one's passing can become all too painful reminders of your loss. If you anticipate them with your own plan of action you will be able to feel some sense of control and perspective. Take Thanksgiving for example. Before other family members arrive you might want to take 15 minutes or half an hour to just be by yourself in private, reminiscing, praying or even conversing with the deceased as if they were there. Far from being strange or unusual this practice actually allows you the ability to share the holiday with your loved ones

while not excluding the deceased. Or you might decide to vary or change past patterns. Instead of hosting Thanksgiving as you always did you might want to allow some other family member to do so in their home so that you can be a guest. If you still decide to host the dinner than various relatives could each cook one of the dishes thus not overburdening you with all the work.

What To Do For A Grieving Person

The most important thing that one can do to support someone who is grieving is simply to be present. Friends do not avoid or forsake others when a death happens but rather show care with words as well as with specific action. Certainly a hug, a simple "I'm sorry" is appropriate at such a time.

Attending the funeral or memorial is a most significant way of showing concern as is offering your assistance by offering to do special tasks or help with specific needs. During the initial stages of a loss your friendship can be helpful but your support will also be needed in the days that lie ahead. Call them often and visit. Allow them to talk about their loss and to share stories about the deceased. It is O.K. to talk about the person who died and the need to do so is part of the natural grieving process. Simply listening is one of the best helps you can give; but listening in an active and empathetic way. Remember, sharing and even laughing over the memories and stories are healthy forms of articulation. Do not forget anniversaries, birthdays, holidays, and the anniversary of the death. A card, a call, a flower or a visit all show your continuing concern and help the bereaved feel supported.

Why A Funeral Service?

There is an old saying that the funeral service is really for the living more than for the deceased. Although the truth is that both are served by such a ritual, there is still much merit to this statement.

The funeral service not only provides a means for showing respect for the deceased but also for expressing social and emotional support for the living. The funeral is one of the key ways of saying good-bye, of letting go and of bringing closure in a therapeutic way that allows us to truly begin the grief process. Such a ceremony links the sacred, psychic, emotional and social needs of the bereaved within the context of the community. In doing so it offers respect to the totality of the personality.

To express it another way, the funeral is an acceptable way of committing a body to either burial or cremation while at the same time expressing the religious faith of the community and thus sustaining the bereaved. It also provides a means by which the community can show their concern for death and aid in the support and emotional adjustment of the bereaved. The funeral provides an emotional outlet and is a means of facilitating relationships: family, clergy, friends, funeral directors, all interact to offer

support. Thus, the funeral fulfils definite religious, social and psychological needs of the mourners while at the same time emphasising the dignity and worth of the deceased.

There is a value to human life and so it is only natural that human death be fittingly commemorated. The funeral turns one's attention on oneself and the crisis in one's experience. Often the resources, both divine and human, which are available for strengthening and stabilising life, are the most present at such moments. Religious attitudes and belief in life after death will often give perspective to the loss and support the grief, thereby making it more bearable and giving hope. However, for those who may not have a faith, a secular celebration of the life of the deceased also helps to affirm their worth and contribution.

Today the memorial service is also quite popular as a way of commemorating the deceased and celebrating their life. A memorial service differs from a traditional funeral in that there is no body present. The deceased may be represented instead by a picture or even their cremated remains. Such a service can also help in the psychological closure and expression of faith so necessary in the grief work of the bereaved. Even here however, it is still strongly recommended that a viewing of some type, even a private one for the immediate family, takes place separately from the memorial. Seeing the person in tasteful repose is helpful as the deceased becomes an object of focus for reality. In turn this aids in the recollecting of death and accepting the fact of death. The questions of whether to have a traditional funeral or a memorial service, whether to bury, cremate, entomb or inurn are all valid decisions where your funeral director can assist. Funeral directors are there to enact the wishes of the deceased and the family, but their guidance can be invaluable when faced with so many decisions.

Community Resources

You may feel the support of family and friends are not enough or you may be frozen in your grief at a particular stage. It is important to acknowledge that if we feel we need more help that such is available if we but ask. Your funeral director, clergy, or doctor could refer you to some of the support groups that exist in the community. Your phone book, local hospital or community mental health services also have such a listing as well as those counsellors who are trained in the area of grief and bereavement. Some of the types of better known support groups available in British Columbia are listed below. The main thing is not to be afraid of asking for help if you feel you need it. Naturally, smaller communities may be more limited in the resources available, but even these usually have a counsellor or doctor who can assist you in a supportive way.

ARK - Counsels children and teenagers who have experienced the loss of a parent through death or divorce

COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS - Supports parents who have lost a child

GRIEVING PARENTS - Self-help group for parents and family who have lost an infant

HOSPICE - Supports the dying person and their family, before, during and after a death.

S.I.D.S. - Sudden Infant Death Syndrome -Supports parents who have lost a child through crib death

SUICIDE ATTEMPT COUNSELING SERVICE - For family and friends of a person who has committed suicide

W.H.O. - Widows Helping Others - On-going support group

Suggested Reading

There are many books available on a variety of topics dealing with death and grief. The following are a few of my favourites.

Carroli, D. Living with dying: A loving guide for family and close friends, McGraw Hill, 1985.

Empty Arms: Coping with Miscarriage, Stillbirth and Infant Death. Wintergreen Press.

Freese, A., Living through grief and growing with it, Barnes & Noble Books.

Grollman, Earl A. Time Remembered: A Journal for Survivors. Boston: Beacon Press, 1987.

.... And any book by Earl Grollman

Helpful Information About Funerals. Publ. by the Funeral Service Association of British Columbia. (This complimentary booklet is available from your funeral director).

How Do We Tell the Children? A Parent's Guide to Helping Children Understand and Cope When Someone Dies, Dan Schaefer & Christine Lyons, Newmarket Press, NY, 1986.

Jackson, Edgar, You and Your Grief (New York: Channel Press, 1966).

.... And any book by Reverend Edgar Jackson

Kubler-Ross, Elizabeth. On Death and Dying (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1969).

....And any book by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross

Kushner, Harold. When Bad Things Happen to Good People. New York: Schocken, 1981.

..... And any book by Rabbi Kushner

O'Connor, N. Letting go with love: The grieving process, La Mariposa Press, 1984.

Ronald W. Ramsey and Rene Noorberrger, Living with Loss (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1981).

Singer, L., Sirot, M., Rodd, S. Beyond Loss: A practical guide through grief to a meaningful life, Dutton, 1988.

Temes, R., Living with an Empty Chair, Irvington, 1984.

Wylie, Betty Jane. Beginnings: A Book For Windows. McCelland and Stewart, 1985.