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“Embracing Your Grief”

By John Kennedy Saynor

For years I have been involved in the business of trying to comfort people when someone in the family has died.

I have found my work to be rewarding and personally fulfilling. I am still surprised when people say to me, “How do you do this work? It must be so depressing!” Well it is hardly ever depressing. It is sad, but not depressing.

What makes it rewarding is watching people rebuild their lives after the upheaval they experience when a loved one dies. For those who will accept the challenge, it is the beginning of a new adventure that often leads them down roads they never dreamed they would travel. They have learned how to embrace their grief.

Most people don't think of grief as a friend or something you would want to embrace. However, I have observed people who have resisted their grief, and have been overwhelmed by it. Others have moved into their grief and embraced it.

Those who do so, stand a better chance of a full recovery than those who resist.

Can grief be a friend? If someone comes into your life and takes you on a journey of self-discovery, growth and positive change, would you consider him or her a friend? I think you would. Then maybe it is possible to see grief as a friend. What does it mean to embrace your grief?

Understand the depth of your loss. By that I mean, sit down and take an inventory of what you have lost. When a spouse dies, you may have lost your best friend, your lifestyle, your financial security, your lover, someone to argue with. If the relationship was an unhappy one, you may have lost the opportunity to make things right, the chance to regain the respect you think is coming to you, or your hopes and dreams. If you can grasp what you have lost, you begin to understand how this death is affecting every aspect of your life.



Many become locked in their grief because they fail to accept it as an important part of what life has for them.

To embrace your grief means paying attention to it, listening to your pain and learning from the experience.

Move into your pain. For example, loneliness is a part of the pain that newly bereaved people feel most acutely. You may feel it with an intensity you have never known. Jean Vanier wrote the following in his book *Becoming Human*: “Loneliness can become a source of creative energy, the energy that drives us down new paths to create new things or to seek more truth and justice in the world.” For many this is a new way of understanding loneliness. It is hard to believe this loneliness that paralyzes us could become a creative force in your life. So, it helps to embrace your loneliness...to let it teach you and guide you to the reality and truth of your loss - and your life.

Slowly begin to adjust to life without your loved one. I can hear someone say, “But I don’t want to move on!” In the weeks and months following your loved one’s death, you will want to stay where you are, living with your memories and wishing deeply you could go back in time. This can be expected! However, one day you will begin to feel a change - a rebirth. You will begin to feel like being more sociable. You may want to begin to do some volunteer work. You may want to redecorate your home. Something will say, “It’s time to get on with life.” Don’t resist this movement. It is part of the transition. Don’t be afraid of losing the memory of the one who has died. Helen Keller said, “What we once enjoyed and deeply loved we can never lose, for all that we love deeply becomes part of us.”

Begin to gradually explore your new life. This is a process that involves leaving the old life and moving on to another. It is slow and sometimes painful. It involves looking deep within to try

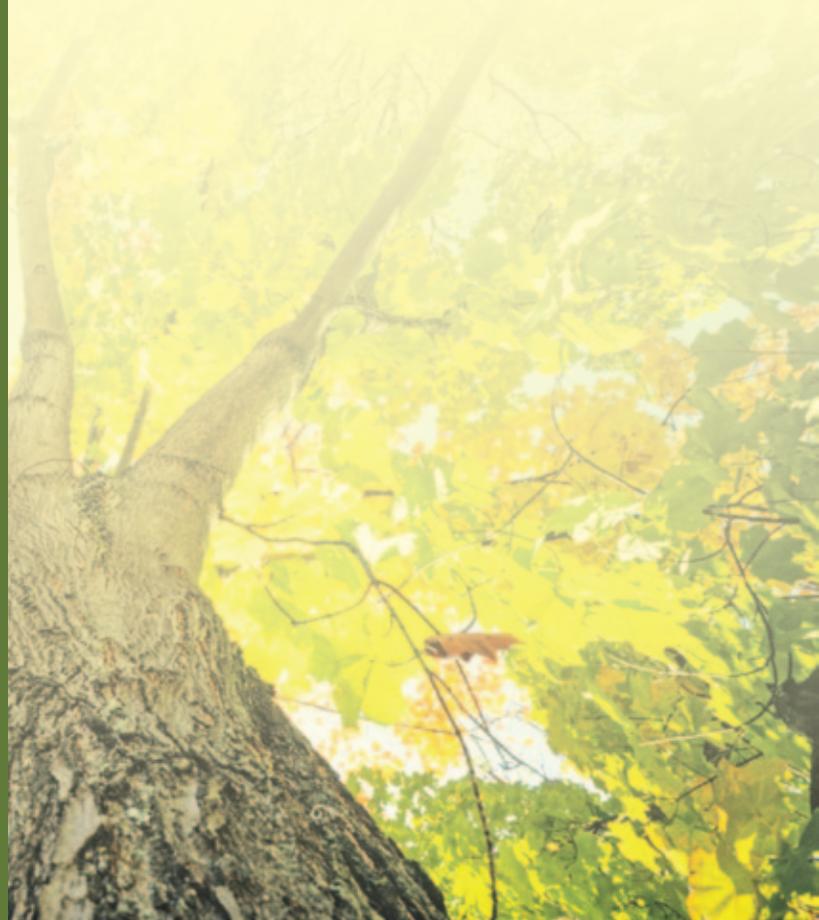
to understand how this death is affecting you. It means looking back at what your life once was. It also includes examining the values that have guided your life this far and reassessing them. Doing this is a great catalyst for change!

Ask yourself what you gained from your relationship with the person who has died? Now that he or she is no longer with you, what is left in your life that will help you move on. Now ask yourself, “What is possible for me?”

Recently I met a retired schoolteacher whose wife had just died after a lengthy illness. He was numb and completely without direction when I first met him. Then, gradually he became aware that life still held possibilities for him. He is selling his house and moving to another community where he and his wife had friends. Besides, there is a university in that city and he is going back to school! Here is a man who has embraced his grief and let it teach him that there is something left in life. He has learned to re-evaluate his life, to decide what is important to him and then act on it. More significantly, he has learned a lot about himself.

While the notion of embracing your grief may be new to you, I believe it is worth considering. Many become locked in their grief because they fail to accept it as an important part of what life has for them. To embrace your grief means paying attention to it, listening to your pain and learning from the experience. Slowly but surely you will begin to live again and life will regain the joy you once knew and still long for.

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The Keys to Recovery

John Kennedy Saynor

She wept as she recounted the unexpected death of her mother. It wasn't supposed to happen. She had looked forward to her mother's visit for weeks. Little did she know she would travel to the East Coast for her mother's funeral.

When she finished telling her story, she looked at me and said, "So what do I do now?"

When someone asks me that, I think they are looking for a quick solution. But there isn't one. Working through one's own grief takes time and involves a lot of reflection. There are many keys to working through your grief. Here are four. You will find others that open the door to healing.

Key #1: Integrity

To live with integrity means facing life honestly. It means dealing with the good and bad of life and sorting things out so that life is ultimately better.

When someone we love dies, it is important to assess the loss honestly. Fortunately most people die and leave good memories. They are honest, kind, and loving. Most of our family members

and friends contribute something positive to our life. When they die, there is a hole - a hole that will never be filled.

Occasionally someone dies and the memories are not happy. We may even say it is a relief the person is dead, that life will be better. This happens when the person is abusive to other family members. It may be the death is a relief if the behaviour of the person became an embarrassment to the family.

Although dealing honestly with the negative aspects of a person's life and death is difficult, it is an important part of grieving. If the reality of the loss is dealt with, the grief can be resolved. If the negative reality of the loss is ignored, resolution of the grief will be complicated.

Key #2: Emotion

We are created emotional beings. To suppress our emotions is not only unhealthy, I believe it is harmful. It is important to express our emotions! It is common for someone to say to me, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to cry!" Crying is great therapy. It is cleansing. It is a release. Crying helps us express the pain we are feeling.

Expressing anger is often the first step in using the first key. Anger may help you identify what was wrong about the relationship. Putting it on the table helps you deal with it.

If you are afraid of the future, it is good to express that fear so that you can begin to understand what you are afraid of, if there is anything to be afraid of and what you can do to calm your fear.

Key #3: Community

To live without the support and encouragement of others means missing one of the great blessings of life. This is especially true when we are mourning. Sharing our grief with others gives them an opportunity to offer their insights. When we open up to others, they begin to share our sorrow and we know we are not alone. When others share our grief, they join our journey. They can guide us and help us over the difficult places.

Where do you get this kind of community? Often people find they don't get the support they thought they would from family and close friends. This may be because other family members and friends are also dealing with their grief and don't have much to offer. The support may come from people who are either not closely connected to the one who has died or who didn't know the person.

Bereavement support groups are places where this support can be found. These groups offer you a safe place where you can honestly say what you are thinking and feeling. Nobody will ask you when you are going to "get over it" and you will receive useful insights in talking to other people whose experience is similar to yours. Your local funeral director or clergy may be able to help you find such a group.

Key #4: Hope

Hope is an important key in recovering from the loss of your loved one. How do you find hope in the midst of this crisis? First, take time to look back on your life and see how many times you have overcome difficulties that seemed insurmountable. Have you done it once? You will do it again!

Think about all your loved one gave you. What did you learn from the relationship? What did your loved one give you that will help give you strength to carry on? How does your spirituality



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give you hope? This may be the first time you have had to take seriously your beliefs about life and life after this life. Let your faith in these things be a source of hope for you.

Imagine, if you can, that your grief is a house you have happened on in your life's journey. The only way around the house is to go through it and you can't go out the back door until you have visited every room. Every room is locked and you have to find the key to enter. There are many keys to your grief house. I have mentioned just four and you will learn what others are. There are different keys for each person's grief house. When you get out the back door, when you move through your grief, the road continues. It is a new road, a new journey. But it is a good one. You will find new meaning. You will have new experiences. You will live and love again. And in a spiritual way, your loved one will continue on the journey with you.

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