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**Along The Way**

*Helping you understand your  
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# LET'S TALK

By Dr. Bill Webster



Perhaps the most helpful thing for people experiencing a loss is simply talking about it. There is an important principle that says, "That which cannot be put into words, cannot be put to rest." Simple, right?

But actually, talking about it can be the most difficult thing to do. Often in our culture, grieving people discover a "conspiracy of silence" surrounding death and grief. Within a very short time, they find that no one wants to talk about it, perhaps afraid that if they do, you will get "upset." After a few months, some may even say, "Are you still talking about that? You should be over it by now," because their world has returned to normal and they are getting on with life.

As Margaret Mead succinctly puts it: "When someone is born, we rejoice. When someone is married, we celebrate. But when someone dies, we pretend that nothing has happened."

One lady described her experience in the weeks after the death of her husband: "Alone in my house I longed for someone to call. I watched from the window hoping that every car that slowed down and every set of footsteps was someone coming to visit. Anyone would have done, because I wanted to talk. But when

they came they seemed to talk about every other subject than the one most on my mind. Then I longed just as strongly that they would leave."

It is not talking about it that upsets the grieving person. It is the fact that their loved one has died that causes distress. And when people don't talk about the person or the situation, it is disconcerting, because we don't want our loved ones to be forgotten.

All too often people rush in with "advice" or offer words trying to rationalize or make sense of the experience of loss. Clichés suggesting that somehow this situation is "good" or "meaningful" bring little comfort. You don't want to hear answers, because you cannot see anything positive or that "makes sense." For you, this is the worst thing that could happen.

What people do need to do is to talk, for doing so helps begin the process of making sense of something that at that moment makes no sense. And grieving people need to talk and talk and talk. Often they will repeat the same story or sequence of events over and over. That is good. Each reliving of the person's life and death enables us to come to terms with this new life the death has thrust us into.



So, let's talk. It is essential to recognize that healing cannot take place unless you express what you are thinking and feeling as a result of your loss. "That which cannot be put into words, cannot be put to rest."

### 1. Let's talk about the facts.

After a death, it just seems so unbelievable. I remember going through the days and weeks after Carolyn, my wife, passed away as if I was in a fog. I simply couldn't believe she had died. "This can't be happening; it has to be a mistake; this must be a nightmare." I didn't want to believe it, perhaps desperately hoping that if I refused to believe it, it wouldn't be true.

What helped me come to terms with the reality of what had happened was meeting for lunch every week with my friend Gerry, who simply allowed me to talk about what had happened. Carolyn's unexpected death had come as a shock and it helped me to verbalize the facts of what had happened, leading up to, at the time of, and in the aftermath of her death. That is what made it more believable for me.

### 2. Let's talk about the feelings.

Grief is emotional, and the way to deal with our emotions is to get them out by talking about it. Hopefully, like me, you have friends who will walk with you through this, but there are support groups and other resources that can also facilitate that process. Ask your funeral director, doctor or local hospice for information on support near you.

It is important to talk about the person, their life as well as their death. But facts should get us to feelings. Feelings have to be expressed. So often we feel one thing, but when people ask us how we are, we say "I'm fine."

Be honest. Talk about what you miss about them and some of the emotions you feel like confusion, anxiety, sadness, irritability, loneliness, anger and guilt. Even when there is some negativity about certain aspects of the life shared, it is important to verbalize your anger or regret about what you lost, never had, or about what could or should have been.

*There are some very real consequences from not expressing feelings. Studies clearly show that mortality rates are higher among those who do not articulate their grief. Grief is a healing process – but we have to embrace it and understand its lessons rather than stoically resist it.*

Someone said recently, "I'm learning that grief is good for the body, mind and spirit. It's just not so great for the image!" But get those feelings out anyway, because holding them in can be harmful.

### 3. Let's talk about the future.

There are some very real consequences from not expressing feelings. Studies clearly show that mortality rates are higher among those who do not articulate their grief. Grief is a healing process – but we have to embrace it and understand its lessons rather than stoically resist it.

But you may ask, "How long should I talk about this? What is normal?" This concern is often motivated by the fact that as we have already noted within a few months others seem reluctant to talk about it. After all, their life has returned to normal.

You need to talk about it for as long as you need to talk about it, for some months, for others years, because you are coming to terms with a new life and a new world.

Talking about things that trouble you will help clarify them and put your life as it is now in a more positive perspective.





# ***LIVING WITH*** By Dr. Bill Webster ***DECISIONS***

**I**t has all added insult to injury for Teresa.

Her husband was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer in the summer. The disease progressed quickly and Rick died in late December, leaving Teresa and their two teenagers facing a multitude of issues.

During the months of his illness, Rick and Teresa discussed at great length many practical issues about what she should do after his death, including selling his business, the children's future, and her own financial situation.

One of the major concerns was what to do with the family cottage which had been in the family for three generations, and knowing his wife was facing an uncertain financial future, Rick suggested it would be best to place the property on the market for sale. Being in a prime location, an offer to purchase came quickly, "conditional" on the purchaser selling their own home after necessary renovations. Rick and Teresa signed an agreement just a month before he died, with a "closing date" in the spring.

But, several months after Rick's death, with spring on the horizon and the sale on the verge of finally closing, Teresa had second thoughts about the transaction, not helped by the fact that one teenager desperately wanted to keep the cottage that holds so many memories of childhood, while the other wanted nothing more to do with it.

Teresa called her lawyer to see what could be done and discovered it was out of his (and her) hands, and legally the sale could only be cancelled if the buyer was willing to agree to withdraw from the contract.

The purchaser was not willing. She called the buyer, pleading with them to "let her off the hook"; even offering to pay for the

renovations they had done on their home they were selling. She has talked to everyone seeking "advice" when in fact there is no advice available except, at this point, "what will be, will be."

It's a mess! And worst of all, 100 per cent of Teresa's attention and emotional energy is being focused on the cottage, which in fact is not the real issue on her heart (although of course she is not able to see that right now). The real issue, of course, is coming to terms with the death of her soulmate, as well as facing the reality of being a single mom to two teens, never an easy task in the best of circumstances.

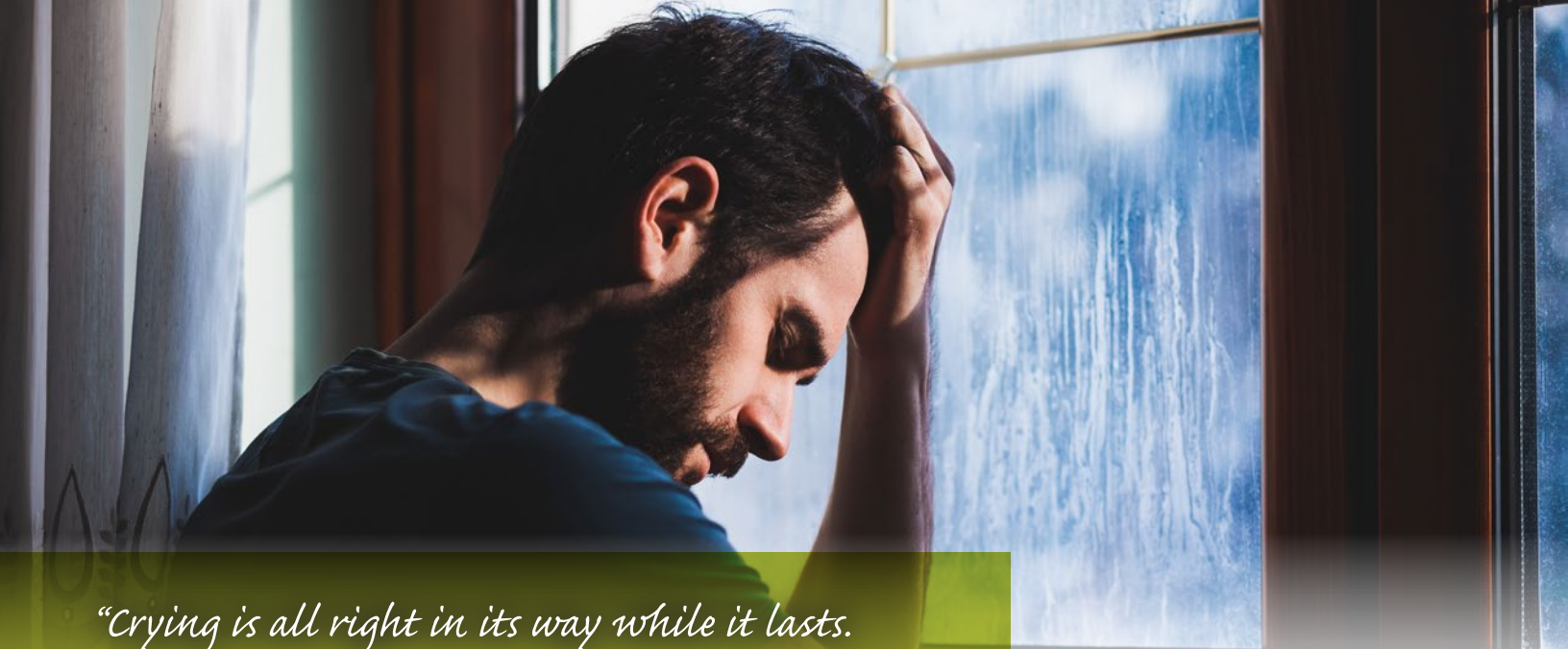
But with all her energy being poured into desperately trying to keep the cottage, she is not facing the emotional task of coming to terms with her new world that arrived with Rick's death. Much of Teresa's decision-making power is being used up ruminating on something she doesn't have the answer to, and which quite honestly, at this point, is out of her control.

And maybe that is exactly what makes it so difficult.

The old principle of "don't make major decisions for at least a year" is still relevant, even though in this situation, it feels like closing the barn door after the horse has bolted. We can sympathize with those who find themselves feeling they have to rush into making decisions while still frozen in a state of shock, barely able to believe (much less able to make any sense out of) what has happened to them. Being emotionally raw and vulnerable is never the best frame of mind to be making major decisions such as selling property or the like.

But do these decisions have to be made or can they be delayed?

This may sound harsh, but in one sense, perhaps Rick should not have been the one making this decision. After all, now that he



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But you have to stop sooner or later, and then you  
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is gone, it is the survivors who have to live with the decision. Opinions, recommendations and feelings are beneficial, and it is usually helpful to know the dying person's wishes.

But the wisdom of today is always transformed by the uncertainty and reality of tomorrow.

One widower stated, "I felt the urge to act on things right away and sadly, some of my decisions turned out wrong later on down the road. Bad decisions can be made when emotions cloud your judgment, and grief is the most intense emotion I have ever experienced."

My concern as her counsellor is that Teresa is expending all her emotional energy on something that can't be changed. In her mind, perhaps it is easier to try to change something that can be changed, and that she feels is still within her power (she could buy her way out of the contract or appeal to the buyer's compassion for the bereaved) than to face something that she realizes is beyond her power, namely to have her old life back.

In a nutshell, people usually question all their decisions because they don't really know what they want in the first place. So when all is said and done, the issue really is not about the cottage. Teresa really wants the one thing she cannot have ... her husband back.

Perhaps the lesson for all of us is that in such situations we should make decisions based on future considerations rather than on present circumstances. Who has to live with those decisions should be paramount. Perhaps it is better to make decisions, or suggestions that can be reversed, as the future unfolds. No one knows what they are going to do or want, or even how they will feel until they actually find themselves in the situation.

Sometimes it doesn't matter which side of the fence you get off on. What matters most is just getting off. You cannot make progress without making decisions and then living with them regardless.

As C.S. Lewis put it: "Crying is all right in its way while it lasts. But you have to stop sooner or later, and then you still have to decide what to do."

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