

Building a New Identity after the Death of a Loved One

By Lou LaGrand

Most people who are mourning the death of a loved one are not aware that their difficult experience also includes a change in identity. They are not the same persons they used to be and identity change is a major part of the adjustment process.

Identity is "who I think I am." Depending on your perceptions (the personal meaning you give to experience) and your belief system, much of which is formed early in life, you may see yourself in a variety of ways. You may think of yourself as a good worker, important to the welfare of others, a mother or father, skillful in a variety of ways, a somebody, or a nobody, to name a few.

After the death of a loved one, a mourner usually must deal with a number of changes. The part of the self that interacted with the loved one also dies and the mourner is no longer able to interact with the physical presence of the deceased. Many mourners refuse to acknowledge that death imposes identity change and resist the transition. However, it is inevitable that the survivor has to integrate the old and the new worlds.

Here's what you need to know to ease the transition into a new life and accept the changes in identity that death imposes.

1. Understand how we get a new identity. It is structured on skills, relationships, roles--and on all the new behaviors necessitated by one's loss. Relationships are of special importance because of the meaning they carry in terms of attention, appreciation, love, and acceptance. Love and service are powerful identity formers.
2. Your perception of your inner self is important to recognize and strengthen. "I am good, I am capable, I am loveable, I choose to be loving," are all crucial parts of identity. And, you can change behavior to strengthen these or other perceptions of the self. The sooner you can make the needed changes--by making them into your normal routines--all the better for you.
3. Determine what you need to add to your life now that your loved one is no longer physically present. What will you have to learn? What new role(s) will you have to assume? What relationships will you have to replace? What modifications in old behavior will you make as you add to your daily task list? If you were too dependent on the person who died, it will be especially important to have a friend or counselor assist you in this ongoing transition.
4. Examine your perception of social isolation. Has your loss caused you to feel isolated? Have some of your friends distanced themselves from you? This may be obvious if you are now a widow and some of your friends are married. What will you do to increase your circle of friends? Your community of friends, especially new friends, will be a part of your new identity and particularly useful in adjusting to loss. So too, will be the new relationship you establish with the deceased loved one through memory and loving in separation.
5. Examine the way you will be of service to your community. The way you use your time in service to others or in fulfilling a purpose or commitment to a cause will shape the way you feel about yourself, and how you adapt to the changed conditions of life. Think of whom you would like to help or what service you could provide and make plans to incorporate those activities into your lifestyle.
6. All that you now have to do, that was not part of your usual home routines when your loved one was alive, will also be part of your new identity. It could range from having to pump your own gas or do a plumbing repair

to doing the taxes or cooking for one. Will you think of these new duties as challenges or will you view them as demeaning chores? The attitude toward your transition is critical to success.

7. Many mourners also experience a values and/or belief shift. They are motivated to pick up on a project started by the deceased or they assume a particular value that was a major part of the deceased's life. New beliefs may replace the old.

Many factors go into the development of new identity beliefs after the death of a loved one. The work is demanding and can be very scary as you attempt to assume certain responsibilities for the first time. It is okay to feel inadequate, even overwhelmed, and to ask help from others in facing the unfamiliar.

Turn to your spiritual beliefs and the people who have suffered through similar losses. Work on one change at a time. Keep a diary to record your victories and struggles. Know that you are important, possess the willpower to make this transition, and will outlast the distress associated with your great loss.