

Facing the Unknown After the Death of a Loved One

By Lou LaGrand

Has fear of the unknown frozen you so that you are hesitant to make much needed decisions? Or, has thinking about the future and how you are going to manage without your loved one brought great anxiety? Fear of the unknown is among the most common, and most difficult, grief-related issues to deal with.

Why is this so? Simply because uncertainty is an integral part of life that is ignored by most until it forces us to confront it. Then we have to take a stand when we are in an anxiety-filled frame of mind. The choice becomes: either learn to live one day at a time (perhaps one minute at a time) or allow the unknown to fill us with crippling fear and freeze us. So what can we do to deal with fear of the future, the unknown?

1. Realize that taking risks is still a productive method of dealing with the unknown. Risk taking is at the very core of growth and advancement. It involves new learning, sacrificing, and being open to the belief that failure is part of the learning curve; it gives us new information to carry on. Be willing to come out of your shell and start again and again, even though you are hurting.

2. Recognize that millions before you, and I include myself, have learned to live with uncertainty. Psychotherapist Pauline Boss in *Ambiguous Loss* says, "Although our longing for certainty is normal, it is also natural never to find it." The key word is natural and that you can live with uncertainty, so unpleasant though it is.

To live with it means that we need to keep experimenting to find ways to recognize that uncertainty is okay to have. At the same time, we make and execute plans to manage it (as mentioned above new learning is the key). Then, when one approach doesn't work, try another.

3. Focus your attention more on the present and less on the future. This takes concerted effort to be sure. But it can be done, and is a crucial strategy. Focus on and take care of immediate needs. And, when you feel the downward spiral of thinking the worst about what lies ahead--shift your attention back to something wholesome in the present.

Become an expert at refocusing and adopt it as a lifelong skill. Trust those you are close to. It's okay to lean on them and share your fear and ask for advice. Take it, if it fits for you. Let it go for later consideration, if it doesn't.

The key understanding is to take action after assessing the dynamics of the situation and consulting with those who have input that could be useful to your plan. The latter can help immensely in allaying fears, so seek out the wise and experienced, even if you have to pay an expert for advice.

The most consistent suggestion coming from counselors of every stripe is: face your uncertainty based fears. Don't allow them to immobilize you. Remember, there are always going to be times of not knowing--it is inescapable. However, the upside is that the history of facing the unknown tells us that you will prevail.