

Ten Keys to Improving Your Relationships as Mourning Begins to Ebb

By Lou LaGrand

The importance of interpersonal relationships in the process of reinvesting in life after the death of a loved one must never be underestimated. The quality of your friendships and communication with others has a major impact on anxiety levels, your ability to continue processing sad feelings--and most important--establishing your new personal identity.

Personal identity changes after the death of a loved one because you will have to take up some of the tasks your loved one was responsible for. But more important than that, you no longer will have that nurturing interaction. This will change you, and you will need to find ways to invest your emotional energy in projects and in helping others.

All of this demands good social skills when interacting with others. As often happens, our relationships with others before the death of a loved one are often reduced due to the time spent with the beloved.

Here are ten things you can do to strengthen your ability to interact with others and reap the benefits of strong interpersonal relationships.

1. Just as in meeting any important goal in your life, start by making the improvement of your relationships a major priority item for your task list. The research is clear: good relationships will keep you healthy; you will live longer and eventually put joy back into your journey. The more you deepen the connections in your life, the more you will reduce the obstacles and pitfalls of adjusting to your great loss. But you must have the intent to grow.
2. Form the habit of calling friends by name. Dale Carnegie often said that a person's name is the sweetest sound in the human language. If necessary, when you meet a new acquaintance, write his or her name down. It is especially important when greeting a person to use their name. "Hi Linda" is so much more meaningful than just "Hi."
3. Remember to write thank you notes and send birthday cards. Or make a telephone call to give congratulations. This type of contact nurtures relationships and lets the person know you care and are thinking about him or her.
4. Make it a habit to smile when meeting others even when you pass by or don't have an opportunity to stop and talk. This can be especially important if you are having a bad day and feeling a bit down. Try cracking a big smile right now as you read this, and feel the effect it has on your body.

5. Make every effort to join a group or two where you will find people with similar interests. Several friends, not one or two, is an appropriate goal. You can never have too many. Like choosing a doctor, if one group does not fill your bill, try another.

6. Plan your week so that you have specific times when you get together with your friends. You have to nurture relationships through consistent contact. Telephone or email regularly. Play cards, walk together in the evening, go out to eat, meet at a health club, or go to the mall together. You must spend time and make it a must to interact with your friends.

7. Be alert to compliment the people you meet when you see or hear something that deserves to be recognized. It may be an article of clothing or a piece of jewelry they are wearing, a caring gesture, or a loving decision that was made.

8. Here's a tough one for many. Put into play what I have come to call the Big Three: hug, wave, and smile. Every day make it a habit to employ the Big Three a minimum of three times. If you are passing someone you know at a distance, the wave and big smile is appropriate. If you are greeting your friend, hug (and of course, use the name).

9. Work to become a master at delivering the four A's which everyone wants and needs: Attention, Acceptance, Appreciation and Affection. Now there are hundreds, if not thousands, of ways to deliver those four basic human needs. I want them as much as you do.

Your homework is to think of the many ways you can develop specific behaviors to meet these needs in the people who come into and out of your life. Your friendship list will grow in direct proportion to your willingness (remember I did not say ability but I am emphasizing it's your choice) to meet these needs. It will guarantee that you beat loneliness.

10. Last but not least, cut your friends some slack. There are few, if any, perfect friendships. People are not always loyal and true. Nor do they always step in at the right time to help out. There are occasional disappointments. Don't focus on flaws and failings. Accept human frailty, air it out, and let it go.

A nurturing community is there for all of us regardless of where we live or if we have moved and are starting over. It simply takes determination and a little courage to find it. There are many giving, loving people out there that you would want as friends. Persist in the search and they will be found. So make up your mind that you will become an expert on the 4A's and believe that you have the power to build a life of solid connections.