

Understand and Move Toward the Seven Goals of Mourning

By Lou LaGrand

Can you minimize unnecessary suffering when mourning the death of a loved one? Is grief always totally disabling? What choices are there to manage the intensity and sadness? These questions go to the heart of the issue of understanding the grief process at a time when we are disorganized and in need of support.

What occurs in the lives of most mourners--and it may be happening to you-- is that they often are not aware of their choices, and where they should be putting their effort to ease their pain. Specifically, the search is for direction in how and what to do to face the loss, move through it, and begin a life without the loved one.

Here are seven major goals to work toward in coping with your great loss that will help you adapt to a new world.

1. Accept the reality of what has occurred. The single most important goal of grieving is to accept the death of the loved one. Intellectually this is relatively easy to do. One can say yes to the fact that death occurred. In terms of the deep emotional connection to the loved one, however, acceptance is commonly much more difficult, and denial often prevails. Continually facing the pain of reality and expressing it day by day gradually leads to true acceptance.
2. Normalize the emotional pain of separation. The thought of separation can bring the deepest pain ever experienced. Despair, depression, anger, feelings of emptiness, confusion, helplessness, and loss of control are common. They spawn thoughts of no future, much loneliness, and being unloved. Emotions by themselves are neither good or bad; it's what we do with them that counts. They are managed by talking them out with trusted friends and continually telling yourself that these are expected human responses.
3. Confront the physical pain of separation. Many individuals do not realize that grief has a heavy physical component until it's too late. They become ill, experience nausea, lose weight, and can't eat or sleep. When you grieve, every cell in your body grieves. Negative thoughts and the stress they add eventually compromise the immune system. Your physical feeling and condition will further impact your emotional state. Taking daily breaks to rest and take some nourishment is essential to prevent illness.
4. Discover and mourn your secondary losses. Grief often seems to intensify at various times after you feel you are doing well. Usually this can be attributed to not recognizing and grieving secondary losses which accompany all major losses. Has the death of your loved one shattered your dreams and expectations, caused you to relocate, change your job, or reduced your social circle? These and many other secondary losses, which may come months or years later, must be mourned and some of them can be more demanding than the death itself.

5. Begin to reinvest in life and establish new routines. Grief commonly involves the need to take your emotional energy and invest it in new projects, purposes, and rewarding pursuits. This is a slow process which also dictates that old routines have to be abandoned and new ones adopted. It in no way means you are forgetting the beloved; it implies that your loss means new roles, responsibilities, and assuming tasks formerly assigned to your loved one. The hours you used to spend with him or her will now change depending on the path you take.

6. Accept and release sad reminders. We are wired to recall memories of all kinds, some of which can be extremely useful (loving memories) and others which need to be gently released. Again, it is normal to be reminded of your loved one any time you are doing something that you used to do together. It can be painful and sad, in which case you accept the reminder and not dwell on it. The key is to switch your attention away from it and tell yourself it is normal to have these memories. Gradually, they lessen in impact.

7. Establish a new relationship with the deceased and risk again. Few mourners are encouraged by friends and relatives to establish a new relationship with the deceased. So it is often done in a less than open way. Death does not end a relationship; it changes it. You can learn to love in separation, which means it is healthy to talk to your deceased loved one, if you wish. Establishing a new relationship will free you to risk again, face the unknown, and continue to engage the new world in which you live.

Part of loving in separation involves cherishing memories, speaking openly about the deceased, remembering him or her at celebrations, and living the lessons taught. Thomas Moore in *Dark Nights of the Soul* put it this way, "Maybe if we honored the dead more, we would know better what it means to have reverence for life..."

As you grieve your loved one, evaluate how you are progressing with meeting the goals of mourning. Every major loss carries hidden gifts because it is a natural part of life. Look carefully for and focus on them. And if you think you are stuck in your grief, seek out a best friend and discuss your fears. Persist. Never permit death to have the last word. You will come through your grief with new awareness and uncover a new outlook on life.