

How Your Life Can Have Meaning after the Death of a Loved One

By Lou LaGrand

How can you find meaning in life now that your loved one has died? How can existence possibly have any purpose? It is common to feel that life has ended for you. When someone we love is no longer physically present, we are often haunted by despair, emptiness, and the lack of purpose.

Even though grief therapists know this is a common yet temporary experience, it is not common and temporary as far as you are concerned. It is too real and deeply painful to consider what the death of your loved one means.

1. The first step to take is at some point in your mourning is to decide that you will become restoration oriented. I cannot tell you when that will occur; only you can make the call. In short, you must form the intention of reinvesting in life despite all of the feelings inside that say, no way. You may not be able to do it today. Later, a little at a time, will do. However, it is clear that a loss orientation always leads to stagnation and increased unhappiness.

One of the secrets of human behavior is to discover that you can act your way into new beliefs and assumptions about life. Yes, act. You don't necessarily have to start with the positive mental attitude everyone talks about. This happens in someone's life every day. What they never thought could happen within, suddenly changes due to their persistent make believe behavior.

Act as you wish to be is an ages old recipe for adapting to change. Hard work? Yes. Yet it always works, if you do one thing: keep acting "as if." This means acting as if you are where you want to be.

2. Embrace that which is unfamiliar is the second step. It is the familiar and predictable which gives us a secure feeling. The loss of your loved one forces you to face a new world, a new life, devoid of the presence of the person who added so much meaning to existence. You will have to face the unfamiliar, learn new skills, and reach out--or live a much contracted existence. That is a given. But you can approach the task with special motivation to look for ways to reinvest your emotional energy.

Here is a taste of what others have done. Take short or long trips to places you have never been. They can be places near your home or out of the country. Start sampling foods from other cultures. Some you can purchase in your local super market. Others can be tried in restaurants. Try a sport or exercise you have never done before. It could be Yoga, Tai Chi, boating, breathing exercises, or golf as starters. Never stop learning. There are thousands of things we have never done.

3. In welcoming the unfamiliar, don't be over-controlling. Let whatever you discover in your attempts to embrace the unexplored to play out. Don't judge too soon whether it's good or not so good for you. See what it fully offers by giving it much time and space to play its role in your

daily life. Consider the satisfaction it brings and the interpersonal relationships it generates in your evaluation to make it a part of your new life or to abandon it. Let these events unfold to create a multiplicity of possibilities and wonder for your greater good. Study the possibilities carefully.

4. At root, you are searching for meaning in the death of your loved one and in a life without him/her. Realize how vastly important meaning is. It is the flywheel of life around which everything is organized; you are a universe of meanings and emotions. It builds and tears down, brings sorrow or joy, throws you into the past or causes you to become interconnected in a web of relationships. Changes in meaning can bring changes in your ability to cope; even your body will respond in healthier ways.

We act out and believe what is meaningful and makes sense. Meaning will change your life for good or for the worst--all on the way you choose to perceive an event. The miracle of it is that you can find new meaning for your life, let go of the old, and cooperate with the massive changes imposed by loss. For it is meaning that will keep you connected to your loved one, and learning to love in separation.

Don't forget, all of the above works if: you act as you wish to be, seek and accept the unfamiliar, and refuse to be controlling as you allow the new to play out. This will facilitate making a diligent search in your thought life for other meanings in the death of your loved one and in your life. What other meanings can you find?