

Why It's A New Life After Your Loved One Dies

By Lou LaGrand

When a loved one dies, initially it is very difficult to accept the loss and start the next chapter of life. Yet, the experience of millions of mourners tells us that is exactly what they had to do: Realize their old life is part of their personal history, and life without the deceased loved one will be very different.

The concept of a new life for many mourners is repulsive because they think it heralds forgetting the loved one. Nothing could be further from the truth. Others think a new life means starting over. Again, not true. In essence, starting your new life specifically means coping with massive change. No one can resist change; it is the one relentless eternal force.

As many therapists say, "What you resist persists." That is, if you resist the changes demanded by loss--the pain and anxiety will haunt you continuously as you attempt to live in the past. Here are four reasons why it's a new life after your loved one has died. And, to accept it as a new life and to be open to learning, will help you immensely in adjusting to your great loss.

1. Remember, a major loss means that part of you has died--that part that interacted with the person who died. You no longer have that interaction, that part of your nurturing community. When you realize this, it can be very scary. You will have to find ways to integrate the time you used to spend with the beloved into a new setting, a new life.

2. Nearly all major losses involve the development of new routines. It is natural to embrace the comfortable, predictable ways they we easily grow used to rather than face the unknown. However, one of the tasks of grieving is to adapt to the absence of the deceased. In so doing, we most often have to assume some of the responsibilities the loved one had.

A few examples: it may mean learning to fix things around the house, shop for one person, get used to an empty chair (or put it in another part of the house), or eat alone at a new time.

3. Next, you may have to change your role, seek a career, or become an advocate for a specific cause. You may have to be both a parent and a full time employee. Or, you may have to work part time in order to continue with a hobby or membership in a club, or to stay in the apartment or home you are living in.

In any event, it will mean meeting new people and doing new things in order to maintain your standard of living. How will you spend your time? In volunteering? Going to school? Teaching? Supporting others? A host of other activities?

4. All of the above means you will be establishing a new identity. You are no longer the same person you were before your loss. Part of restructuring your identity depends on how dependent you were on the deceased. Sometimes it takes great courage to create a new identity.

How do we get a new identity? It is a long term project that often means giving up old roles and taking on new ones, evaluating who you are (your identity beliefs) and who you want to become. It is structured on skills, relationships, new expectations and hopes, and the new behaviors necessitated by your loss. We also define ourselves by who we hang out with and who we shun.

Your new way of looking at the world, developing goals and purposes, accepting the enormous change, and telling yourself you are good, capable, loveable, and can love--will all be woven into your new identity.

So what can you do with the wisdom of the ages? The first step is to realize that your beliefs affect everything you do. Yes, everything. What you believe about death, an afterlife, your loved one, and your ability to deal with his/her loss drives your grief work. Then decide where you want to go in your new life. Do you want to always be loss oriented or restoration oriented?

Believe the inescapable--that loss changes us. There is little choice here.

Choose to believe it's a new life. You will always love the deceased. Talk to and keep him/her alive in your heart, family celebrations, anniversaries, and memorials. But start your new life, continue to grow and love. Trust grief and let it take its course, and reinvest your emotional energy into your new life.

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