

Five Ways Toward Accepting the Death of a Loved One

By Lou LaGrand

The major task of mourning the death of a loved one is acceptance. That is, accepting the reality that the loved one is no longer with you and accepting the multiplicity of changes that are taking place in your life due to the loss. Resisting inevitable change only leads to more pain.

There are two levels of acceptance. The first, intellectual acceptance is easy to come by. We can acknowledge the death of a loved one. However, emotional acceptance is a different story; it takes a much longer time because it involves the process of withdrawing our emotional investment in the physical presence of the loved one.

Here are five ways you can assure yourself that your grief work will not be prolonged and you can eventually accept the death of your loved one on an emotional level. Much of this is internal work and will call on you to strengthen your inner life.

1. Embrace the fact that life will be different; it is a new life. This means realizing you have to give up some of the old routines involving your beloved. Giving up the old for the new is a major challenge. The inability to commit to this fact of life is what often brings on much depression and you use up precious energy in resisting. Decide as soon as possible that you will accept changes imposed by loss and start doing things that will accommodate change.
2. Realize your social circle and/or support network may be drastically altered. If you are widowed, there are some situations involving couples that you will not be invited to. This is often very difficult to deal with. There are also some people, even good friends, who are fearful of death and will tend to steer clear of conversations about your loved one. You will sense their uneasiness. Simply spend more time with those who meet your needs. And, you may have to search for new friends.
3. Work on reducing the amount of time you give to negative thoughts. Negative thinking involves thoughts about your supposed inability to cope with all your new responsibilities, roles, and challenges. Negative thoughts will never create the courage needed to deal with change. They are the number one force in prolonging grief.
4. Look for support from knowledgeable sources. Seeking knowledge and support from credible resources is very wise. Most mourners grieve deep within based on many myths that were accepted as truths early in life. Look for information in four areas: emotional, (how to manage emotions) spiritual (how best to utilize your faith traditions), physical (how to use exercise to reduce tension and anxiety), and mental (how to use your mind to calm yourself and change focus). All of these will assist in reducing the pain of loss.

Ask yourself in which area you are most lacking and go for it. Read. Ask others who have had similar loss experiences, people who conduct grief support groups, in hospices, churches, or hospitals, or if need be, a professional grief counselor. Every mourner's information needs will differ.

5. All mourners need a companion, an ally, someone who will walk with you through the painful journey. Search for one or more who always lets you be in charge of your grieving, offers choices, and does not tell you what you should be feeling or doing. Bounce your ideas and emotions off this person. Ask for their opinion on specific issues and then decide what you will do based on your analysis of all of the advice you have received.

Acceptance of your great loss is your number one goal. Keep it in the forefront of your thinking as you confront each day. However, don't allow that focus to obscure the various points of healing you experience along the way. You will feel better, and then have a few reversals. As you keep working, the reversals will not hang around as long as they used to. You will think of your loved one with hope and comfort. You will know that you are moving forward as you accommodate loss and change, love in separation as well as in the now, and reinvest in life. Those are the operational definitions of acceptance.