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A Compassionate and Spiritual
Guide to Coping with Loss

grieving mindfully



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emotional, and spiritual acknowledgement that loss has happened. It allows you to acknowledge the immense task ahead of you, even if you were not present for the final moments of your loved one's presence.

There are many ways to carry out a symbolic farewell after sudden loss. The father of one of my patients had a sudden heart attack while she was out at a movie, and he had died by the time she rushed home from the theater. In order to say good-bye to him, she wrote him a letter, which she carried to his favorite beach and cast into the ocean. This simple ritual allowed her to feel connected to her father one last time, just long enough to acknowledge his death. Many of my patients have lit candles and incense at a specially designated time or place to facilitate a sense of "good-bye." Someone I know even went on a pilgrimage to her husband's ancestral home in Ireland after he was killed in car accident. She wore his wedding ring as a pendant in order to bring him with her for this final trip home.

Use your creativity and your intimate knowledge of what was special to your loved one to say good-bye in a symbolic way. This may mean writing a letter or taking a trip, as in the above examples, or something else. It may mean going to a special place, or doing a ritual at home. What is important is that the action allows your feelings to be expressed.

The Five Things

Dr. Ira Byock, a pioneer in the American hospice movement, has talked extensively about "the five things" (1997)—the topics that typically need to be covered in order to facilitate closure. I encourage people to articulate these five things to their dying loved ones, and also for their loved ones to articulate them. These five things cover all of the emotional territory of any relationship and may be discussed over days and months during its natural course. When you are mindful of the finitude of your days together, you may see what a luxury it is to be able to consciously have this type of conversation.

As you read over these five things, try to recall instances when you were able to talk to your loved one about these themes, even when there was no intention of the communication being final.

Recalling yourself saying any of these five things can help you to feel that the relationship was able to achieve a natural closure on some level. If you weren't able to actually address these topics, because of the circumstances of the relationship or the type of loss, you can have this conversation symbolically, such as in the form of a letter, visualization, or artwork.

The five things may be hard to say if you are idealizing your relationship. In many ways, saying the five things makes the loved one you've lost human again, instead of a focus of reverence or hatred. If any of these five things is difficult to express, it may indicate that issues related to that particular theme are standing in the way of your ability to find closure.

The five things are:

1. *I'm sorry.* Everyone in a close relationship has some regrets. None of us is perfect, especially the way we treat each other. Apologies are often spoken long before remorse is felt; out of a sense of duty, we may say "I'm sorry" long before we feel it. All apologies, whether big or small, hasty or well planned, pave the way for forgiveness. If you were not able to apologize for something you regret, you may find some comfort in symbolically and intentionally asking for forgiveness now.

2. *I forgive you.* This can be forgiveness about anything and everything. Forgiveness can be thought of as radical acceptance toward someone else. Forgiveness is not to be confused with forgetting. However, when you forgive, through the power of compassion, you release the hold that this issue has had on your life. Rather than feeling unresolved outrage or a sense of justice unserved, you take upon yourself the responsibility for living life on your terms.

3. *I love you.* Love is why you are grieving. Love transcends all sorrow, but sorrow can be fueled by love. Asking forgiveness and forgiving wrongs opens your heart to the full power of love. Acknowledging this love is...

affirmation of the relationship, your grief, and your capacity to share yourself with another human being.

4. *Thank you.* What did you learn from this relationship? What was special about your time together? How did your life change as a result of your loved one's presence, or even loss? Perhaps you learned to love deeper than you had thought possible, or perhaps you learned how to change the oil in your car. This is what you can thank your loved one for.

5. *Good-bye.* There is hardly ever a right time to say good-bye. If you have already lost your loved one, saying good-bye after their loss is a recognition of his or her absence, your grief, and your having cherished his or her presence. Saying good-bye to someone who is already gone does not dismiss that person from your life, or mean that your grief is over. Remember, grief does not end, even though it may stop hurting. Grief only changes.

Taking time to say the five things, out loud, in your mind, or on paper, allows you to develop a sense of closure in your shared relationship—a closure that comes from expressing your feelings, both good and bad, toward your loved one. Even if you feel that your loved one cannot hear you, it is important to be able to articulate and express for *yourself* these five things. Ideally, the five things can be brought into your current relationships as well.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

As painful as grief can be, each round of triggers offers an opportunity to reexamine yourself, your relationships, and your world. With each turn of the spiral staircase you encounter potent reminders of life without your loved one. Experiencing these reminders mindfully allows you to move toward closure and acceptance of how your world has changed.

Every journey up the spiral staircase of grief is unique. We may not know how long this spiral journey will take. Approaching grief as a life-changing event can help you shift your outlook from one wanting to rush through it to one of accepting each day for what it is emotionally, mentally, and spiritually unpredictable. This is a crucial part of radical acceptance.

Acceptance of loss is a gradual and constructive process that begins with closure. It happens whenever you allow yourself to experience all of the twists and turns of the spiral staircase. Remember acceptance is a path, not a goal. With each turn of the spiral staircase, you find a new aspect of your relationship to the world, and a new standing in it without your loved one. Acceptance facilitates the reconstruction of meaning. When you seek meaning for or an understanding of what you are experiencing, you actively reconstruct your world to accommodate the changes you have experienced and continue to go through. The empowerment that comes from realizing just how active a role you play in the construction of your world is the vehicle for harnessing the transformative power of grief.

The renowned grief psychologist Robert Nemeyer (1997) describes this potential for reconstruction as an indicator of how grief is indeed an active process in which we play an important role. Even though we may feel as if grief is something that has been forced upon us, or to which we are being subjected, it is actually something in which we actively participate. Our whole world changes when we grieve. Undergoing this process mindfully allows us to engage in the transformation consciously.

Becoming mindful of this transformative capacity of grief is one of the most meaningful and powerful ways to understand your loss. Because you may never know precisely why, when, or how a particular loss took place, using your loss as a life-affirming and transformative event can help you to shift your focus from “why me?” and “what if?” to the here and now.

Guidelines for the Transformation of Grief

In order to guide the process of transformation, you need to know exactly what you understand about your loss, and what drives