

What To Do When Someone Dies And There Was No Time For Goodbyes

February 27th, 2007 . by The Grief Blog

Not infrequently, death occurs and surviving family members and friends do not have the opportunity to say goodbye to the loved one who died. Fatal automobile accidents and heart attacks, hurricanes, murders, and many other unexpected events are the catalysts for much anxiety and deeply felt grief.

Many survivors are guilt ridden when in fact there is clearly no outward cause for such guilt. They did nothing wrong. Yet, unexpected death often wipes out our ability to see that we did not create the circumstances to cause the emotion being experienced.

Sometimes dying people choose to die when those close to them are not present in order to spare them additional pain. Also, it is not uncommon for a person to die in a hospital or hospice setting when a family member is rushing to get there. All of the pain of these events is maximized by the thought of not being with the person at the end.

So what can be done to reduce emotional pain and provide support in the face of deep sadness? Plenty. One or more of the following can prove helpful.

- Say goodbye in a private setting. I often tell those who are mourning the death of a loved one that there is nothing wrong with talking to the person who has died. It is a successful coping response used by millions of people and a meaningful way to say goodbye. Find a quiet room in your home, place a picture or other symbol of the loved one across from you, and say whatever you need to say. Explain why you were not there, why you are sorry, and that your love will always be with the person. If you believe in an afterlife, ask the person to send you a sign that they have heard you and are okay.
- Be sure to go to the funeral service and the viewing of the body. The funeral is traditionally the time and place where you get to say goodbye to the person who died (something all children should be told). It can especially be your informal opportunity to say your goodbyes. If you are unable to attend the scheduled service time or showing, then find someone to go with you at another time when you can view the deceased.

It is very important for you, especially on an unconscious level, to have seen the person who died.

- Write your goodbyes in your diary or a letter. Writing thoughts and descriptions of feelings can provide a profound emotional and physical release. Write as though you are speaking directly to your loved one and be specific. Put an I Love You in it, and that you will never forget the person. When you are burdened by your thoughts of not having said goodbye, reread what you have written. You may also want to add something else to your writing at this time.
- Write or paste messages to the loved one on a biodegradable helium-filled balloon for release. This can be a wonderful opportunity for a ritual of goodbye as you watch the balloon ascend into the sky. It will give you a planned occasion to think of your loved one if you are alone or discuss memories of the loved one if it is a group or family ritual.

Be sure you purchase a biodegradable balloon as others are very damaging to wildlife and the environment.

- Learn to refocus your attention and thoughts. When guilt and anxiety arise over the unintended event of not being able to say goodbye, an important survival skill involves immediately refocusing your attention. First, believe that the loved one understands your inability to say goodbye and would not hold a grudge. Then divert your awareness to a pleasant memory of the deceased or visualize her forgiving you. Change what is happening in the moment. This technique takes practice but it is a powerful coping response to develop and can be used for dealing with many other unwanted thoughts.

These approaches for dealing with not being able to say goodbye have a common goal: the acceptance of one of the sad events often associated with the death of a loved one. In the final analysis, each person has the ability to say a belated goodbye, let go of anxiety, recognize that separations without goodbye happen often, and start on the road of reinvesting in life.

"Pain Sorrow and suffering is but the kiss of Jesus. A sign that you have come so close to Him that he can kiss you. May God give you all the courage to accept your cross with resignation and love in union with the passion of Jesus."

Portion of text of a letter from
Mother Teresa to Gilbert Ortiz, Cheyenne, WY
Printed in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer
Page A3, Monday April 6, 1998

A million times we've missed you.
A million times we've cried.
If love could have saved you.
You never would have died.

Things we feel most deeply,
are the hardest things to say.
Our dearest one, we loved you
In a very special way

- Unknown

Seattle-King County Chapter TCF
Chapter News, August 1998

NO VACATION

There is no vacation from your absence.
Every morning I awake.

Every noon I feel the hole in my heart.
Every evening my arms are empty.
My life is busy now but not quite full.
My heart is mended but not quite healed.

For the rest of my life every moment will be lived without you.
There is no vacation from your absence.

Kathy Boyette, Gulf Coast Chapter, MS
reprinted in Seattle-King County Chapter
TCF Chapter News, August 1998