

Grief MATTERS

MARCH/APRIL 2024

On The Journey

Living with grief takes hard work and courage. Being intentional about doing what is best for ourselves is very important.

This issue of *Grief Matters* includes the following perspectives on grief: dealing with feelings of guilt and regret, the importance of staying connected to family, friends and support systems. The importance of paying attention to our emotional, spiritual and physical health as we travel this journey of grief.

Rev. Kuo Abbey

CHAPLAIN, GRIEF COUNSELOR

Grief, Guilt & Regret

“If only I had told her ‘thank you’ more often. I didn’t realize how much work she did to keep everything together.”

“If only I had listened to my instincts, I would have taken him to a specialist earlier. Maybe he would still be alive today.”

“If only...”

Author Louise Hay says, “We do the best we can with our understanding at the time and when we know better, we do better.” We all know about hindsight.

If your thoughts run like this, you may be experiencing guilt and regret. These feelings can plague us after a significant loss; we feel overwhelmed under their impact, convinced of our responsibility and failure to do what we “should have or could have done.” And now it’s too late. We can’t go back and change anything.

It is part of our humanity to look at what we did or did not do after someone dies. We search for explanations. Something we cannot fathom has happened! It is normal to experience feelings of grief, guilt and regret. None of us can live close to a person without doing or saying something we may regret,

Continued...

Grief Matters is published bi-monthly.

Grief Services Online

For information on upcoming grief support meetings and events, visit us online at: hospiceoflansing.org or ioniaareahospice.org.

Mailing List

Please call (517) 882-4500 or e-mail kabbey@hospiceoflansing.org if you wish to be removed from this mailing list.

To view Grief Matters online please visit hospiceoflansing.org or ioniaareahospice.org. Click on “Grief Support” at the top left of the page. Scroll down and you will find the links to the most recent issues.

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The World According to Mr. Rogers

2003, p. 186

One of the mysteries is that as unlike as we are, one human being from another, we also share much in common. Our lives begin the same way, by birth.... As we grow, we laugh and cry at many of the same things, and fear many of the same things. At the end, we all leave the same way-by death. Yet no two threads-no two lives-in that vast tapestry of existence have ever been, or ever will be, the same.

while continuing to love them deeply. Part of the problem is that after someone we love dies, our rational mind is not “front and center.” Explanations feel unwelcome. Our hearts are doing the talking; loud, clear and often.

That does not mean there aren't ways to deal with guilt and regret! Think about what specifically is troubling you. It may be helpful to discuss your feelings with a trusted friend, someone who won't dismiss your thoughts and feelings of guilt or judge you for them.

Don't feel embarrassed about talking about guilt or regret. These feelings may be part of the search for why our loved one died. Could we have made a difference? We want them back so badly we may have forgotten we are not in control of matters of life and death.

Some things just don't have a good answer, but that does not mean we have to accept the blame we put on ourselves. Try to look at your thoughts with an open mind. Maybe then you will start to see that your guilt and regret may not be logical and then you can begin to be kind to yourself and let it go.

If part of your guilt is legitimate, know that healthy guilt allows us to learn from our mistakes and then move on. We don't have to stay mired in it, even if we can't undo it.

If you feel like it would be helpful to ask forgiveness from your loved one, some people like the empty chair dialogue where you imagine your loved one is sitting there and you use a one-way conversation to express your regret and/or guilt and ask them for forgiveness. Consider how you would forgive them under the same circumstances. Writing about it can also be useful, as a letter to them or a

journal entry to yourself. Spiritual and religious beliefs can provide a path for self-awareness, understanding, and self-forgiveness. Self-compassion is another avenue for forgiveness. These four steps may be helpful as we struggle for understanding and self-compassion. First, acknowledging how much of a hard time you are having with your guilt/regret issues. Put these in the “I” form, for example; “I am really suffering with this.” Second, know that many people feel this way.

For example; “I am not alone in thinking this way at this time.” Third, ask for what you want. “Help me to be kind to myself and accept that if I had known what was going

to happen, I would have done it differently.” Fourth, honor how worthy you are. “I am worthy of peace and calmness inside.” When using self-compassion, think what you might say to a friend and then apply it to yourself. (Repeat and modify as often as needed.)

Finally, know that many bereaved people in the beginning feel these same things, but feelings of guilt and regret do lessen in time with effort to deal with them. This “grief work” leads to the salve of forgiveness. Everyone deserves forgiveness, especially for ourselves!

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The Effects of Grieving

Everyone processes grief differently; but one thing to keep in mind is that grief is multi-dimensional. In its emotional dimension, we experience loss and our heart “aches”. In its cognitive dimension, we experience forgetfulness and lack of concentration, as well as reliving our memories (both good and bad). In its spiritual dimension, we may question the meaning and purpose of life. In its physical dimension, we may experience muscle aches, tightness in the throat, heaviness in the chest, headaches, stomach problems, and exhaustion.

These are just a few of the symptoms one might experience when mourning the loss of a loved one. These symptoms may linger in the background, nagging at us, but the truth is our bodies are coping with the effects of grief just as much as our hearts and minds. Everything we experience is in some way “remembered” by our bodies. So not only are you adjusting to the emotional, the cognitive and spiritual effects of grief, your body is adjusting as well to the loss. This takes a lot of energy and you may become worn down. It becomes very important to take care of yourself, to eat right, to get adequate rest and to exercise.

Relaxation is important also. Reading a good book, sitting in meditation and/or prayer, listening to music, gardening or doing whatever brings joy can help physically as well as emotionally and spiritually. Grieving is a journey. Recognizing your symptoms and taking care of yourself is essential. Seek medical care if you, or your friends and family, notice that your symptoms have worsened. Grief is a journey with many twists and turns. It may be a difficult journey, but one that we must allow ourselves to travel.

The Importance of Staying Connected

The loss of a loved one can make the world seem an unfamiliar place. You may feel isolated, and what seemed like the simplest tasks before the death of your loved one may now seem daunting.

Your emotions may be so strong and intense that you struggle with ways to share your emotions and experiences with those close to you. It is easy to feel misunderstood by those around you because of the complexity of the emotions you are feeling. Many people find comfort in meditation, journaling, praying, and resting quietly in solitude. While this time alone to grieve is important, it is also important to lean on the people who care about you.

Frequently, friends and family want to help but don't know how, which is why you most often hear the phrase “if there is anything you need, just let me know.” Your loved ones may not be sure what you need, and may feel inadequate in the task of supporting you in your grief. Tell

mind coming over to spend some time with you. The best way to deal with grief is to “do the work”, and feel all the painful emotions of your loss. Express to your closest loved ones that their presence and understanding while you work through this difficult time is the best assistance they can offer you. Some of us may find it difficult to ask for help, as many of us pride ourselves on being strong and self-sufficient, but when you are grieving it is important to surround yourself with a community of supportive people.

Another strategy for staying connected is to join a support group. Grief can feel very lonely, even when you have loved ones in the area to support you. Sharing your story with others who have

Your loved ones may not be sure what you need, and may feel inadequate in the task of supporting you in your grief. Tell them what they best can do to help you, even if it seems like something simple.

them what they best can do to help you, even if it seems like something simple. If you know one of them is running to the store and you need some milk, ask! If you are having a day when you are feeling lower than usual, call your friend with the best listening ear and ask if they would like to get some lunch or would

suffered similar losses can help. Even though each loss is unique, they may also be experiencing the same mix of emotions that comes along with grieving. To find a bereavement support group in your area, contact local hospices, funeral homes, and counseling centers. It is important to remember that utilizing a support group or counseling

service does not mean that you are doing a “bad” job of grieving. Rather, it means that you recognize that you may require more, and perhaps a different type of support at this particular time in your journey. Just as every loss is unique so too is each individual's way of grieving.

Be mindful of your emotions, and the differences between grieving and when you may need to seek additional help. Remember, grieving is normal and is not limited by time. You may still have sad days six months or even several years after the loss of your loved one. However, if you experience any of the following symptoms, it is time to seek additional help from your physician or a counselor:

- Thoughts of ending your own life/ feeling like life isn't worth living
- Blaming yourself for the loss or for failing to prevent it
- Your sadness and depressed mood impair your ability to function in your job, social life or other important areas for weeks at a time

As always, please take advantage of Hospice of Lansing, Ionia Area Hospice, and Stoneleigh Residence bereavement support. Call us when you need help or a listening ear. We are available to help support you and your family. Bereavement support is offered free of charge to all in the community.

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