A Cold Winter’s Grief

The bereaved often find winter to be strangely satisfying. The cold, the dark, the lifeless of winter seem to fit. These signs of icy winter reflect the inner emotional reality. The bleakness echoes the deep darkness that often characterizes grief.

A grieving mother once told me she dreaded the return of spring. She did not want to grow again or warmth to return to the earth, especially not upon her daughter's grave. She would have been relieved if the snow and ice stayed indefinitely. Winter perfectly suited her inner sense of the darkness of earth and the despair of grief. Emily Dickinson captured this mood when she wrote:

There is a certain slant of light on winter afternoons
That oppresses, like the weight of cathedral tunes.
Heavenly hurt it gives us;
We can find no scar,
But eternal difference
Where the meanings are.

While each grief experience is unique, deep “winter-like” emotions are common, understandable and probably necessary for grief to be fully experienced and expressed.

In his book “Attachment and Loss”, John Bowlby noted that the sadness and depression that follows loss includes four phases:

1. Numbing
2. Yearning/searching for the lost figure
3. Disorganization and despair
4. Reorganization

Before reorganization can occur following a loss, it is typical for the griever to go through intense feelings of bleakness and despair. This includes experiencing the numbness which shock creates, the deep feelings of longing for the lost loved one and the difficulty of reordering a life that has been turned upside down by a death.

What can you do to help yourself when you are in deep grief? It is often a combination of times of solitude and times of communication that makes it possible to enter into and also pass through such “numbing” feelings.

You will need the private time of solitude to think your thoughts and feel your feelings. But you also need the time of talking to others to express your feelings and ideas. Grief is less likely to be resolved if the emotions are totally avoided or only partially experienced or expressed. You may find that the shared grief is grief relieved.

The “winter-like” emotions might stay beyond their season. Then it may be time to seek consultation with a grief counselor or other professional to help you toward healthful healing.

By: Reverend Paul A. Metzler, D.Min. Director, Community and Program Services At Visiting Nurse Service of New York, A Bereavement Newsletter for UNSNY Hospice Care January/February 2009

HOPE by Dr. Wendy Harpham
wendyharpham.com

Hope is an image of goals, Planted firmly in your mind.
When looking at life before you, Hope lines the paths you find.
Hope is a well of courage, Nestled deep within your heart.
When faltering in fear and doubt, Hope pushes you to start.
Hope is an urge to keep going, For limbs too tired and weak.
When apathy stills all desire, Hope sparks the fuel you seek.
Hope is a promise of patience, As you wait for distress to wane.
When all you can do is nothing, Hope pulls you through the pain.
Hope is a spirit that lifts you, Should heaviness pull at your soul.
When torn apart by losses, Hope mends to keep you whole.
10 Tips to Help Yourself in Times of Grief

Caring for Yourself While Grieving

Grief is a journey you must endure after the loss of a loved one. It’s easy to become overwhelmed as you work through the phases and tasks of grief, so it’s important to remember to care for yourself. Here are 10 tips, collected from people who have traveled this road before you, to help you along this journey.

• Seek and Accept Support. You cannot travel this path alone. You need the support and care of others. Call on a trusted family member or friend, church clergy or professional counselors. Call your local hospice agency or community grief center for advice to get you started.

• Accept Your Grief. Don’t try to run and hide from your grief. You need to experience the pain and sorrow to be able to move past it and on towards healing.

• Find Role Models. You are not the first to travel the road of grief. Discover how others have coped with loss before you. This will provide you with a model to base your own healing on and remind you that you are not alone. Read books on grief and meet others who have worked through grief at support groups.

• Learn About Grief. The more you know about grief and dispel the myths surrounding it, the more you will realize that your grief is normal. You may also discover warning signs that your grief may be complicated and that you need more help to cope. Either way, knowledge is power.

• Express Your Grief. Grief cannot stay hidden deep within you. The best way to work through grief is to let it out. Cry, scream and yell if you need to. Express your feelings through music, art, poetry or journaling. Whether you express your grief with a safe person you trust or let it out in complete privacy, expressing your feelings is the only true way to honor your grief and begin to work through it.

• Accept Your Feelings. Grief can surface many different feelings–some very intense. Acknowledge these feelings and accept them as part of the natural grieving process. Don’t hold in anger, sadness or longing. These are important feelings that, once expressed, help you heal.

• Pace Yourself. Grief can be exhausting. It takes a lot of energy to feel so intensely. Allow yourself plenty of time to do everyday activities and don’t over-schedule yourself. Rest when you need to and offer yourself some grace.

• Get Involved in Something. Getting involved in work or some other activity you enjoy can keep you focused and offer a welcome distraction from your grief. If that activity is especially meaningful or helpful to others, you might find it also raises your spirits.

• Have a Little Fun. Sometimes grieving people won’t allow themselves to have any fun, as if sharing a laugh with someone is somehow dishonoring the memory of their loved one. The truth is laughter is excellent medicine. A great way to have some genuine fun is to surround yourself with children or animals.

• Keep the Faith. Remember that intense grief doesn’t last forever. One of my favorite sayings goes “Faith is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to go on when fear is present.” Keep the faith that you will one day heal and be whole again.


Dear Poppy,

This is the first time that I’ve done this but I think this is the first year I’ve realized how much I wish you were there for me. Even though I barely got to spend time with you, I believe I have a lifetime full of memories of you that I am so thankful of. I really hope you are proud of me, I know you’re always watching. I know you would be so proud of Aunt Dana, and I also know you were there to help her win. Every year we decorate a tree in your memory and right under it is the story of us, I really do miss you, everyone does but we stay strong because we know you’re always watching over us. Sometimes, I look on the sunset and thank you because it’s so beautiful, just like your smile. I understood why you loved going to the track and all the races, it’s so much fun I wish you could be there standing next to us cheering Aunt Dana on, but you’re there in spirit. Sometimes my dad, mom, or GeeGee will say “just like your poppy” and at first I get sad but then I realized I’m blessed to have any trait of you. The sun just all the sudden came shining through my window, thank you poppy. I hope I’ve made you proud, I try really hard. Merry Christmas poppy I love you so much.

Love, Adison 2011

By Adison Eslinger who was 18 months old when her grandfather, Ken Gyory, passed away 15 years ago.
Seasons of Grief

By Sandy Goodman

It is winter today. There is no sun, not even a flash of light to focus on. The sir has become murky as if it has solidified, losing its clarity. Ice covers everything, smothering any life that might have been.

Staring out my window, I compare the bite of winter to my grief: the coldness, the shadows, and my reluctance to breathe in any more discomfort. Grief, like winter, appears uninvited and unwelcomed. We abhor the pain and wonder why we must endure the distress, while all along we feel the imminent arrival.

Winter compels the earth to rest. Everything stops struggling, stops performing, and sleeps. Abruptly, nature’s need to “do” is gone and “being” is all that is necessary. All that was living before appears lifeless. The leaves disappear from the trees, flowers no longer grace our gardens, and the grass is entombed by snow. But what is going on beneath that which we see? Are the flowers really gone, or are they only changing…becoming new, becoming different?

I ponder how much further I dare go with this. Can I contend that grief, like winter, is a gift? Can I talk about the metamorphosis of grief, and contemplate gratitude for its presence? I do not know, but that is where my thoughts are leading me.

Grief necessitates a sabbatical from living. We stop struggling, stop performing, and freeze. Our compulsion to “do” dissolves, and “being” is all that is possible. Our life as we knew it disappears, dreams are shattered, and our hearts are ripped from us in the blink of an eye. We are gone, lost in our grief. But what is transpiring in our heart? Is everything gone, or is it only changing…becoming new, becoming different?

Grief is harder than winter. The tasks of daily living are amplified, and what was once soft and blurred becomes sharp and ragged. While winter invariably ends and I remember that spring will arrive, grief makes no such promise. I must wait without assurance. There are moments when winter is beautiful: a blanket of fresh snow on Christmas morning or the surprise of a warm breeze in February. There are nights when winter is hard and ugly, when temperatures plummet and the howl of the wind threatens our sanity. Grief is the same. A special memory comes into my heart and grief becomes bittersweet…beautiful. Then, a letter addressed to my son arrives in the mail, and I am back to the harsh reality that he is gone.

Finally, I accepted what happened and expressed gratitude. When the lights went off and then on again for no apparent reason, I was quick to say “thank you.” If I was only thanking the power company, it didn’t matter. I invited experiences by talking to Jason and asking him to come to me in the mail, in lists, and joined chats where these topics were addressed. I began to support my new belief system with knowledge.

I invited experiences by talking to Jason and asking him to come to me in a dream or give me a sign of his presence. I meditated and made myself more aware of that which isn’t seen or touched. I opened up a doorway of possibility and welcomed all that came from love to enter.

And change is what I did. As winter alters the earth, my grief changed me.

Grief necessitates a sabbatical from living. We stop struggling, stop performing, and freeze. Our compulsion to “do” dissolves, and “being” is all that is possible. Our life as we knew it disappears, dreams are shattered, and our hearts are ripped from us in the blink of an eye. We are gone, lost in our grief. But what is transpiring in our heart? Is everything gone, or is it only changing…becoming new, becoming different?

Grief, like winter, freezes our world. Both appear painful, horrifying and devastating, but it is our preparation for, reaction to, and perception of that creates our discomfort. It is our need to label that which appraises discomfort as bad. If we deny that death is possible for those we love, we will be stunned and terrified by its occurrence. If we react to the first blizzard of winter with panic and fear, we will be too afraid to honor its power. If we perceive a fatal ice storm as an act of God, we will shake our fist at him and spend more time than we have asking why. And if we distinguish death as the end of a loved one’s existence, we will be eternally saddened by their absence. The path to spring, to the end of winter, requires only our patience and perseverance. The path to healing requires that and more: it requires that we learn to think differently.

We are a society that fears death. We consider it an end to life, love, and all that came before. Those who die either cease to be or they exist in a place that is unavailable to us. It is not surprising that fear is present. However, if we alter our beliefs, we can then change our preparation for, reaction to, and perception of death. If we come to know that earth is a change in form and not an end, we will not eliminate the winters of our grieving, but we will lessen our suffering.

My journey has been both desolate and inspiring. There have been moments when I thought the cold and darkness would never end, and moments when tears of joy washed away the pain and light permeated my being. I invite you to walk the path of grief a little differently: to nurture the gift of grief. It is there, buried beneath a frozen crust that protects and restores while the winter of our soul…ensues.

Sandy Goodman is the author of “Love Never Dies: A Mother’s Journey from Loss to Love” (Jodere Group, 2002), and the founder and chapter leader of the Wind River Chapter of The Compassionate Friends. She has presented at national conferences for The Compassionate Friends, Bereaved Parents of the USA and the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors.
**BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT GROUPS**

All programs are held at Carroll Hospice, 292 Stoner Avenue, unless otherwise noted. Bereavement Support Groups are open to anyone in the community regardless of where the death occurred. If the weather is inclement, please follow the Carroll County Public Schools policy. If schools are closed, our groups are cancelled.

To register for a program or for more information about bereavement services, please call 410-871-7231 or 410-871-7656.

**Pathways Support Group**
Open to anyone whose loved one has died. The group addresses the emotional issues surrounding the loss and offers coping strategies. **Third Wednesday of each month, 6:30 – 8 p.m.** No registration required.

**Bereavement Luncheons**
An opportunity to meet, have lunch and receive support from others in the community who are suffering from the death of someone close. **Last Tuesday of each month, Noon, Call for location and more information; no registration required.**

**Widows Support Group**
Open to women of all ages whose spouse has died. Attendees receive emotional support and discuss techniques to successfully cope with their grief in a friendly and nurturing environment. **First Tuesday of each month, 6:30 – 8 p.m.** No registration required.

**Camp T.R.**
A weekend grief camp for children (ages 7–15) whose loved one has died. Each participant is assigned a grief buddy. **Held first weekend in June** at Hashawha Environmental Center, 300 John Owings Road. Registration and completed application required.

**Healing Hearts Day Camp**
For children (ages 7–13) whose loved one has died. Children learn ways of coping with grief through a combination of activity and quiet sharing and support. **Call for dates, times and locations.** Registration and completed application required.

**FootPrints Support Group**
A five-week support group for parents who have lost a baby during pregnancy or shortly after birth. **Call for dates, times and locations.**

**Pet Loss Support Group**
This support group offers people of all ages whose pet has died the opportunity to share their feelings and receive emotional support from others facing a similar loss. **Quarterly on a Saturday, 10:30 – noon, Call for dates; registration required.**

**Glade Valley Grief Support Group**
Open to anyone whose loved one has died. The group addresses issues surrounding the loss and offers coping strategies. **Third Thursday of each month, 2:30 – 4 p.m., Glade Valley Center, Genesis Health Care, 56 W. Frederick Street, Walkersville, MD 21793.** Registration required.