

How Gratitude Will Reduce the Pain of Grief

By Lou LaGrand

"How can I be thankful for anything when I am mourning my deceased loved one? I can't begin to think about appreciation or being grateful." These comments are quite understandable early in the grief process. But later, holding on to these assertions will eliminate an important action that reduces the intensity of grief, and which others have found useful.

Gratitude is that quality or feeling of being thankful, which is life affirming and energy restoring. Affirming life and restoring energy are critical mental and physical factors when coping with the death of a loved one. Here are five ideas to think about in using gratitude as a new routine in your daily life and to help you cope with your loss.

1. Start the first thing in the morning using gratitude as a wake-up ritual. In response to a question I asked members of one of my grief support groups regarding how they have been able to cope with their losses up to this point, one woman shared the following. "When I get up each morning, I start the day reviewing all that I am grateful for. It gets me going in the right direction." What it does, of course, is positively balance much of the negativity that normally floods the mind at the beginning of the day when grieving. Try starting your day in this manner.
2. Make a list each evening of the things you are grateful for. After you finish your list, ask yourself if you have included little things to be grateful for or just the big things. What is big or little depends on how you perceive. Some of the little stuff for me are all of the things I take for granted like the clean air I breathe, the people who greet me by name, those that smile or shake my hand and cause me to feel as though I am accepted, my energy level (until it goes down), and a ton of other things. Plan on reading your gratitude list whenever you start feeling down.
3. When grieving, if anger hangs around too long in your thoughts, switch your attention to a person, place, or thing you are grateful for. Anger is an extremely physical and emotional drain. Although anger may be entirely justified, to allow it to become a long term part of your daily thought life will prolong your grief work. Use your self-talk to change the scene: "I have this anger and rightly so, but I am choosing to be thankful for all of the help I am receiving from my friends. I am truly grateful."
4. Show gratitude to and for yourself. Develop the attitude of gratitude to include yourself and all of the little victories you have had as you begin to accept your life without the physical presence of the deceased. You have made it through the funeral, the holiday, the trip to the lawyer's office, the condolences of friends and people you didn't know, and a host of other stressful events. Say to yourself, "I'm grateful for the courage I showed, and my persistence and stamina."
5. Use a symbol to remind you to express gratitude. Some people use the Gratitude Glass that can be purchased on the Internet or play music with a gratitude theme. Your symbol can be anything you feel is appropriate, from something your loved one owned to a trinket he/she bought for you, or an object that was a gift. Carry it in your pocket or purse; place it on the dashboard of your car, or in a special place in your home. When you see it, use it as a cue to check your attitude. Then immediately think of the special things you appreciate and are thankful for despite your pain. This act alone will focus you on a positive path.
6. Give thanks each day at a specific time to God or your Higher Power. Make this a part of your prayer life. You will reap the benefits; or, as Sarah Ban Breathnach in *Simple Abundance* puts it, "You simply will not be the same person two months from now after consciously giving thanks each day for the abundance that exists in your life. And you will have set in motion an ancient spiritual law: the more you have and are grateful for, the more will be given you." Thanksgiving will summon inner peace.

In summary, gratitude is an inspirational force that can add another significant factor in the development of a strong inner life. It causes us to draw our attention to the good, the beautiful, the whole and hearty; it will open up a host of possibilities, which is exactly what we need when in pain.

What most all of us forget is that--like kindness (the best way to stay healthy), love, and a good laugh--the act of being grateful floods our bodies with the feel-good hormones at a time when they are most needed. Live gratitude; it will guarantee you'll get through the many changes you face.