

The Forgotten Factor in Coping with the Death of Your Loved One

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No one is immune from the sad experience of grieving the death of a loved one. Yet, until death comes into our lives and a significant person is no longer with us, our culture teaches us to deny death and minimize the impact it has on the quality of life. Then if we are lucky, we get a crash course in mourning from a counselor, clergy person, or social worker.

No matter what we learn at that time, we have long been saddled with the burdens of half-truths and false beliefs perpetuated by well-meaning adults. Those assumptions and beliefs make it difficult to reach the ultimate goal of all grieving: accepting the reality of the loss. Acceptance means saying an intellectual, but more importantly, an emotional "yes" to this major change in our lives.

Acceptance only comes through the concerted efforts of the person who is mourning. Contrary to an old piece of misinformation, time does not heal all wounds, unless the mourner does his/her grief work. Or, as a mother once said to me after the death of her 17 year old son in a car accident, "Time doesn't help unless you work between the minutes."

The key understanding is that you must take daily action toward acceptance and reinvesting in life. All of this is easy to say but difficult to do. So what form should the action take? Here are five beginnings.

1. Talk to yourself every day and night that you will get through this dark soul-searching experience. What you say to yourself not only affects every cell in your body for good or for bad, but it will heavily affect the much needed action that only you can initiate.
2. Although essential, positive self-talk alone is not a panacea. You must start engineering small successes in order to realize you can adapt to this major life-change. This is the key factor. Make a plan to get you through this particular day (even the next hour) or one that you believe will be difficult for you. Maybe working part-time would be a success for you or getting through your tax return by yourself for the first time. Find something and go for it as it will strengthen your inner life.
3. Recognize how far you have come. When you review your day, give yourself credit for where you are in your journey. If it has only been a month or several months, note that you are still going and will continue to persist. Every day tell yourself you will keep at it and know that things will change for the better. Your consistent action to adapt will make the difference. Celebrate your progress with a friend you trust and who knows your pain.
4. Examine why you are where you are in your grief work. What skills have you used? Or what hidden talent have you uncovered that you didn't realize you had? Something has gotten you this far. Your ability to organize? Your commitment? A belief? Your faith? Knowing you are not alone or how to relate to caregivers? Keep using whatever it is and working on developing it even more. In short, recognize and use your strengths.
5. Start and end each day with gratitude memories. This will be especially useful when you feel that downward spiral and anxiety over your loss starts to creep in. Review your day for the good things that happened-an old friend called, you found the key you misplaced, got a raise in pay, your computer is working well, etc.-and fully immerse yourself in the good feelings. This is sound mental health in the making. Also, review your life with the deceased, and pick out some gratitude memories. Focus on all you received and again immerse yourself in the feeling of being loved by him/her and a Higher Power.

In the final analysis, your action resulting in small successes, will be the determining factor in eliminating unnecessary suffering from your time of mourning. In the process of adapting, get rid of the notion that you can't have some moments of joy and inner peace. We all need them to balance the sadness and negative thoughts that constantly seep into our thinking. It's okay to smile, feel good, or have a laugh without feeling guilty-that's part of the action you can take and another small success. It will recharge you as you return to continue adapting to your great loss.