

Grief's Journey



We at HopeWest hold you in our thoughts and hearts as you approach the first anniversary of the death of your loved one.

Enduring the first year of loss is, in itself, an accomplishment and we congratulate you for making it through the inevitably painful first year. We hope that your journey through grief has taken you beyond mere survival to a place of new hope and loving involvement in life. We hope that amid the pain and turmoil of this journey you have also found growth, meaning and inner wisdom.

As you near the anniversary of your loved one's death, we want to remind you that each individual heals at his or her own pace; there is no timetable. Recognize that anniversary reactions are typical. Don't panic if you encounter a resurgence or intensification of pain at this time. This is not regression, but simply another phase in the unfolding healing process of grief.

We encourage you to be gentle with yourself. This may mean resisting the need to be "finished" with your grief at a particular point in time. Remember that healing does not mean the end of sorrow. More accurately, healing means being open to new possibilities for the future and finding a new enthusiasm for life without the person who has died.

Remember that joy and sorrow can co-exist. Those who remain open to dealing with their emotions live life more fully and experience joy more completely.

Typical Anniversary Reactions

Grieving people commonly report similar experiences as they approach and encounter the one year anniversary of their loved one's death. Like all other phases of grief, your reactions will be unique to you but it sometimes helps to know that you are not alone. Others have walked this difficult road and have survived. So will you.

Most people are genuinely surprised by the intensity of the feelings which typically begin to re-surface days or weeks prior to the actual anniversary date. The month before the anniversary is usually fraught with anxiety as we begin to dread the arrival of the actual day. Nightmares, insomnia and physical complaints are common, especially when we try to suppress the signs of acute grief (anger, despair, sadness, guilt, etc.) that tend to re-surge at this time. We often feel overwhelmed and confused by these anniversary reactions, questioning if we have made any progress in our grief work at all.

It is common to relive the days, weeks or months prior to the death of your loved one. You may recall the circumstances of the death, the funeral and your initial reactions in vivid detail. Some people even experience flashback type imagery.

*But if in your thoughts you must measure time into seasons,
let each season encircle all the other seasons,
and let today embrace the past with remembrance
and the future with longing. -- Gibran*

Although the various anniversary reactions are painful, they should not be taken as a sign of regression, but rather as an opportunity to release the residual pain of your grief. You may use this time to reflect on various aspects of the relationship you had, to assess which aspects of your grief have been resolved and which aspects require more attention, it is important, as always, to suspend judgment of your feelings and simply allow them to find expression. Give yourself permission to fully experience and express your feelings through tears, sharing, writing, art, music, dance, movement or exercise.

Suggestions for Handling the Anniversary

1. Anticipate and prepare for the anniversary. When it comes to handling significant days (holidays, birthdays, etc.) it is better to anticipate the difficulty and plan how you want to spend the day rather than trying to ignore it.
2. Accept the fact that the time before and immediately after the anniversary will be painful. The actual anniversary date is rarely as devastating as we actually anticipated, especially for those who have consciously planned for it. Rest assured that the intensification of your pain at anniversary times is temporary and you will regain your equilibrium. Anniversary reactions are not isolated to the first year. However in subsequent years, the intensity and duration generally decrease. Having made it through the first anniversary of the death, you will have developed inner resources and external coping strategies to use when facing the days ahead.
3. Find a way to acknowledge the significance of the day and to remember the person who has died. Some suggestions:
 - Have a religious service dedicated to the person who has died.
 - Have flowers significantly placed in memory of the person who has died.
 - Plan your own special anniversary ritual. You can do this alone or with family members and friends. For example, one bereaved father goes surfing on the anniversary of his son's death. He scatters flowers on the ocean as he paddles out on his board. This allows him to spend some quiet time alone in memory of his son while engaging in an activity which they both found enjoyable. Another widow planned a dinner party and cooked
4. Do something fun that you did or planned to do with your loved one. For example, one mom took her kids out of school on her husband's birthday and they did all the things that they enjoyed as a family: they got ice cream, they went bowling, they went to the movies and out to dinner.
5. Use your Journal – Write a letter to the person who has died. Tell him or her how you are doing on this day and where you are in your grief. You may also want to imagine his or her response to your letter and write it as if he were writing back to you.
6. Indulge and nurture yourself. In the days around the anniversary be gentle with yourself and do things that will bring you spiritual, physical and emotional nourishment.
7. Limit your expectations and responsibilities. Engage the coping strategies and nurturing activities which you have found valuable throughout your grief process.

some of her husband's favorite foods. She encouraged her guests to share their cherished memories of her husband.



Subsequent Temporary Upsurges of Grief

Therese Rando, Ph.D., psychotherapist and author, refers to the unanticipated waves of grief that come up sometimes as the most difficult and unexpected times as STUG reactions (or subsequent temporary upsurges of grief.) She states that these reactions, although often extremely painful and difficult, are not uncommon but actually expected to a certain degree. We know that the grief process is linked to external events and persons and can be stimulated by them. So our memories may be triggered by a specific song on the radio, or by attending a church service (which we used to do together) or by visiting a favorite restaurant or a family reunion, etc. At those times our grief will be resurrected as fresh memories and hopes that have not all been dealt with are encountered. Each may bring with it a realization, that could not have been understood before, of what was lost.

Some of us respond by welcoming the feelings because they signify that the deceased has not been forgotten, or that we are still moved by the loss. Others may fear that they are regressing or that they will have to undergo all their acute grief again. For each person, the meaning of the reaction will be individual and specific. Be aware that these reactions can actually help us to finish our unfinished business and move through issues where we feel stuck. However, they can also be a normal healthy response that is temporary and brief that can continue to happen even many years after the death.

*“Were it possible for us to see further
than our knowledge reaches,
perhaps we would endure our sadness
with greater confidence than our joys.
For they are moments when something
new has entered into us,
something unknown.”*

– Rainer Maria Rilke



Parent's Corner

Anniversaries and Memory Building

Children grieve periodically over the years. While the timing of their grief may sometimes seem mysterious, there are many times when their grief may intensify, such as holidays, school events or important family occasions. They will also miss their loved one at developmental milestones like birthdays, graduations, weddings and births. Anniversaries of the death continue to be a special time of grieving for children.

It is important to be aware of these times in your child's life so you may be able to help them, if they wish to do something to honor their grief and recognize the deceased. Often though, parents and children may find they disagree about what they want to do. As much as possible, parents should respect each one's wishes and allow differences in participation among the family.

School teachers should be alerted to significant times so they may be aware of situations when a child would be sensitive. An example may be a classroom activity where the students make Mother's Day or Father's Day cards.



There are many ways to mark the passing of a special day. This is a good time to either draw upon old family traditions or to begin new ones in the creation of your own family rituals. Rituals add a profound richness to our memories as well as meaning and value in our relationships with the living.

Many families visit the cemetery or the place where the ashes were scattered. Others visit places that were special to the person who died. These might include parks, restaurants, or vacation spots. Or, the child might enjoy doing a specific activity that he or she used to do with the person who died.

Some families' ceremonies or rituals include letters or poems they've written to the deceased. Other families may make a special meal, maybe the deceased's favorite foods. However, since the odor and taste of food may bring back memories in an acute fashion, it is important to be sensitive to the wishes of the participants. These are also good occasions to allow humor to aid in our healing process. Humor helps release tension and brings families closer together.

Going through scrapbooks and photo albums can be a good way for families to share stories, build memories and correct misinformation about what the deceased was like. It is important for your children to have a place to keep mementoes of their loved one such as pictures, special art objects or jewelry. In our support groups, children develop a memory book or box. They write down specific information about the person who died



(for example, date of death, how and where the death occurred, the person's favorite song, TV show, etc.). They may draw or write memories of special times with the person and feelings about their loss. They may include their own special photos of activities with their loved one. They may save treasured objects and mementoes belonging to the deceased which they value. These activities create the opportunity to keep their memory alive.

Structuring of Celebrations, Anniversaries and Holidays

Although painful reactions, whether thoughts or feelings, can be stirred up at anniversary times, or holidays or special events, these are normal and essential elements of our healing. Participation in ritual activities to commemorate these

occasions may provide a therapeutic and healing experience which will help us not only get through the day but will generate healing and soothing memories to carry with us.



The most healing ritual will be ones individually designed to target those aspects of our grieving which may be impediments to successful mourning. The purpose of a ritual is to give voice and expression to our feeling and thoughts. Often we haven't had funerals or memorial services and so haven't had the opportunity to publicly say goodbye.

We may want to develop a new leave-taking ritual (no matter how long it has been since the death) such as:

- Creating a symbolic leave-taking to help us make a new start in life.
- Expressing some of the statements and feelings that didn't have an opportunity to be said or may need to be re-said.
- Creating an opportunity for family members to rekindle pleasant memories through sharing and reminiscing.
- Memory-building rituals for children too young to remember who need to have a sense of who this person was and is to them.

It is important that each family member have a role and specific tasks as a way to achieve meaningful participation if they wish. Rituals can be brief and informal or may be for a specific time period at a special place and more formally structured. The most important ingredient may be one's desire to participate and having a specific goal in mind.

Rituals help us adjust to change, define relationships and provide security and protection. They may be termed "connection rites" (Rando) and can include such simple activities as mentioning

the deceased's name during grace, giving a toast in honor of the loved one, making a donation in honor of the individual, or lighting a candle in their memory. What is being acknowledged and continued is the expression of love for the relationship with the deceased. It is a healthy way to honor and to continue the relationship.

When to Go for Help

Anniversaries are a time to re-group, reassess and take stock of how we're doing. It may be that we feel we need help with the over and above reactions that may be occurring because of the anniversary, we have a sense that we may need professional assistance. How do we decide that? There are some general indicators that may help us.

They include:

- Your grief has been and continues to be absent.
- Your grief is overly prolonged (the acute grief symptoms persist without changing).
- In some ways, you continue to act as if your loved one were still alive.
- You feel "stuck," as if you are not moving through your grief or making progress.
- Others tell you that they think you could benefit from professional help.
- You have a history of mental illness or emotional disturbance.
- You have dangerous behaviors (driving fast or recklessly, not taking prescribed medications for on-going medical problems, spending money irresponsibly, entering bad relationships, dangerous use of alcohol or drugs).
- Inability to feel a return of joy in your life.
- Suicidal thoughts or feelings.
- Social isolation.

When you doubt your progress or just have a question, it is best to seek help. HopeWest bereavement counselors are available for consultation. Even if you should find out that everything is normal, it is far better to err on the side of seeking help. It is important to put this in the proper perspective. Often we struggle with seeking a counselor's advice. We may never have needed such help before and we're not about to now. However, if we broke a leg, we would see a doctor. Why not seek assistance from a grief counselor? The goal will be to foster and assist your natural healing and to receive education about normal grief. The counselor should be someone who has had appropriate professional training in grief.

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serious illness and grief – one family at a time.*