



Ask an Expert

Question

Over the past 11 months I thought I had been handling my father's death pretty well. We were close, but moments of tears and heartache seemed fewer. Now, I am almost worse than ever. Why do I feel so bad as the first anniversary of my father's death approaches?

Answer

Emotions don't run in a straight line; nor are they always able to be controlled. There's a rhythm to bereavement, but not a timetable. How long it takes to accommodate and adjust to major loss is measured over many months, and in reality extends for years.

In our impatient culture, many of us expect, and are expected, to stop mourning in a short time, and absolutely by the time a full year has passed. That expectation is ridiculous, even cruel. Grief does not disappear forever as you turn the calendar for the twelfth time. Sadness over the loss of a loved one is never eliminated by time. Time heals through a diminishing of the intensity of feelings. No end point of forgetting ever comes.

...continued on p. 2

Anniversary blues: Normal and difficult

by Kenneth J. Doka, PhD, MDiv

"My husband died just over a year ago," a widow said when we met in my office. "Everyone reminds me it has been a year. I seemed to be doing so well for a while. Now I'm depressed again." She is not alone in her reaction.

For many people, the anniversary of the death is a down time. We remember each date vividly. "This is the day he went to the hospital." "Today she slipped into a coma." "The funeral was a year ago."

A year takes on a magical quality. We believe that if we survive the first year everything will be much better. Then the year goes by and we don't feel all that different. We become depressed and dispirited and when we do, it's important to realize that "anniversary reactions" are normal.

Most people take longer than a year to work through grief. The issue after the first year is not if we're feeling better, but if we're feeling better more of the time. There will be ups and downs, but perhaps the down periods will be less intense and frequent. Recognize that the anniversary of the death is a difficult time. Often when we accept that fact, we do not feel as bad about feeling down.

Following are some tips that may be helpful

as you deal with the anniversary of your loved one's death:

Do what helps you. Take off from work to relax, or if it makes you feel better, keep busy and involved. A mass, unveiling, memorial service, dedication of flowers, a visit to the cemetery, or a notice in the paper may give focus to your feelings and provide a sense of comfort. A quiet dinner with family and friends may also help.

Decide who you wish to be with—if anyone. Not only do we need to decide what to do, we may need to decide whom we would like to be with for what events. It is acceptable, maybe even necessary, that we spend some time alone. Some time, though,

...continued on p. 4



IN THIS ISSUE:

Loss transforms us 2

June 3

"What we have once enjoyed deeply we can never lose. All that we love deeply becomes a part of us."

— Helen Keller

Loss transforms us

by Judy Tatelbaum, LCSW

In the midst of grief our feelings often consume us. We are unaware of anything beyond our shock, sorrow, anger, loneliness, regret, and longing. We feel the impact of our loss every day. We may feel like we are simply surviving by a great force of effort. And that is the most we can do.

To heal from grief, we must face our loss and all the feelings that come with it. This process may take weeks or months. We may want to avoid or deny our feelings, but it is in acknowledging and allowing the truth of our experience that we heal.

It is the tragedies, ordeals, and trials of life that truly transform us. In the midst of pain, few recognize that there could be anything good coming of this difficult time. The good is subtle and not necessarily noticeable right away. Long after an ordeal we can get an overview of what we have been through, and see how we have been changed or even transformed.

I give my grief clients an exercise to do once they have fully expressed their grief: In a quiet moment, take time to ask yourself how you are different than before your loss occurred. How have you grown? Following are examples of some of the qualities we may develop after facing life's darkest moments.



Self love: After facing tough circumstances, we may make more effort to love and support ourselves, like taking more quiet time, or paying more attention to our feelings and reactions.

Self protection: We may become wiser in our selection of friends or set better limits with people than we did before. We often develop a new sense of evaluating people as to who is a good listener, who is not, who is apt to be too much of a “fixer” or helper, and who is insensitive or unable to face intense emotions.

Gratitude: Experiencing a death wakes us up to the fact that our lives are time-limited. We may suddenly be grateful for who we are and what we have when we remember the ones who are no longer with us.

Compassion: When we are in pain, we look inward and often feel very alone. Afterward, we see the pain in the world around us and we feel for others who also suffer.

Our worldview and perhaps our wish to help others can expand because of the losses we have faced.

Courage: Often we only see courage in others. When we realize that we have in fact faced something difficult head-on, we see our own courage. After living through the deaths of my parents, I noticed I didn't use the words

...continued on p. 3

Ask an expert ...continued from page 1

No point exists at which you can say, “I have totally integrated and accepted my loss.”

And what of the anniversaries of those losses? Following the cultural expectation that we should “be over” our grieving sets us up to be blindsided with the unexpected tears and sadness you describe. Anniversaries can come with devastating impact precisely because most people do not expect such impact.

When a loved one dies, our minds record the many external signals that mark that time of year: the season, holidays, the outside temperature, and even different smells in the air. Any one of these remembered signals, certainly in combination with others, is sufficient to stimulate memory of your loss, accompanied by a flood of

emotions.

Thus, anniversary reactions are really unplanned, though predictable, trips in the personal time machine of your mind's memories. They happen to all of us. They are deniable, but unavoidable. Ride with them as you would ride a particularly heavy wave in the surf. They will last varying amounts of time, from hours to several weeks. Then, like the wave, they recede, leaving you perhaps a bit tired, perhaps shaken from the experience, but quite able to go on. In going on you celebrate your own gift of life and through it pay tribute to the realities of the relationship you had with your father.

■ **Dr. Stephen P. Hersh**, is a psychiatrist who has specialized in dealing with the chronically and terminally ill and their families.

Loss transforms us ...continued from page 2

“I can’t” anymore.

Resilience: In coping with grief, we experience many complex and conflicting emotions. After we that we have survived another day, we may recognize that we were more resilient than we ever dreamed we could be.

Patience: We live in a society that expects instant results. Grief isn’t like that. Moving through our grief feelings and living with the loss of a loved one takes time.

Acceptance: Initially, we may feel like we can’t or won’t accept that our loved one has died. We may rail against

God or the doctors or life itself because we cannot bear our pain. Eventually, we discover that the unbearable is manageable. We begin to heal and to accept our loss. Accepting our loss transforms our whole experience of grief and life.

■ **Judy Tatelbaum, MSW, is a psychotherapist, public speaker, and author.**

June

by Natalie Taylor

Four months before the birth of her son, Kai, Natalie’s husband died suddenly. She describes her feelings as a widow one year after her loss.

I got a letter from Dr. Harnish, the minister who officiated Josh’s funeral. It was short. I opened it and read the first few lines: “First anniversary—Josh’s death.” It said that the next year may not be easier, but if I’ve made it through one year, I can certainly make it through the next. I just sat there and cried with the letter in my hand. I know this day is coming soon, and for some reason it hurts just waiting for it.

Every day I think about what I was doing last year at this time. What were we doing in June of last year? June 8? June 9? And we had no idea those were his last days.

June 15 is Father’s Day. I make the executive decision to have Kai baptized on Father’s Day. My family rallies. Dr. Harnish also rises to the occasion. We have a beautiful, quiet little ceremony. Later that evening my mom comes over so I can go for a jog and enjoy the summer air. I turn down my street and see a rainbow streaking across the sky.

I go through pictures of Josh. Part of me wants tomorrow to be here and gone. Part of me wants time to stand still. I go through all of the stuff from Josh’s funeral. I look at the program. I reread all of the cards people sent me. I’ve kept all of them in a box near my bed. I find my speech from

Josh’s funeral. I haven’t looked at this since the day I read it last year. I don’t know why but this feels like an appropriate time to read it again.

I don’t know who or what occupied my body in the days following his death. One time someone told me that the only time you have all of your friends and family in the same place to celebrate someone is at his wedding and his funeral. I am relieved that I was able to properly commemorate my husband, but it still perplexes me to no end that his wedding and funeral were 18 months and one day apart.

June 17. I spend the day at my parent’s house. We sit outside on our old red bench, pushing Kai on the swing that hangs from the linden tree in my parents’ front yard. We don’t talk about Josh. We just sit and push the swing. It is the only thing we know how to do today.

Kai is the beam of light. He is the only thing worth smiling about today. I don’t think he will ever know how he has saved all of us.

■ *Reprinted from the book Signs of Life by Natalie Taylor. Copyright © 2011 by Natalie Taylor. Published by Broadway, a division of Random House, Inc.*

Anniversary blues ...continued from page 1

should be spent with others as well. Be respectful of others' needs as they, too, approach the anniversary.

Be patient. Don't expect too much from yourself. Remember over time, each anniversary will become less difficult. This does not mean that we will never experience pain in the future. Holidays, anniversaries, including future anniversaries of the death, and even happy events such as weddings or births, may renew a sense of loss.

Things never go back to the way they were. A loss inevitably changes our life. In time we may grow to appreciate some of the

ways in which we have changed. And we will be able to think of the person who died without the great pain we experience even after a year. The great ups and downs of the roller coaster of grief will flatten. There may be some small bumps, but the intensity of the experience will be less. When the work of grief seems so hard and slow, we need to recall that promise.

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