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Along The Way

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Preparing for Birthdays, Anniversaries and Special Holidays

By John Kennedy Saynor

“My daughter’s birthday is next week and I am dreading the day!” This is a comment I hear regularly from bereaved people who are facing, especially for the first time, a special day after the death of a loved one.

The first year of special days is especially difficult. You will face the first wedding anniversary, birthday and anniversary of the person’s death. You will also encounter the first of any number of special days – Christmas, Hanukkah, Easter, Thanksgiving and New Year’s.

Not only that, the changes of seasons will bring memories of the one who has died.

It may help you to know that a certain amount of anxiety before one of these special days is quite normal. You may experience strong feelings of sadness,

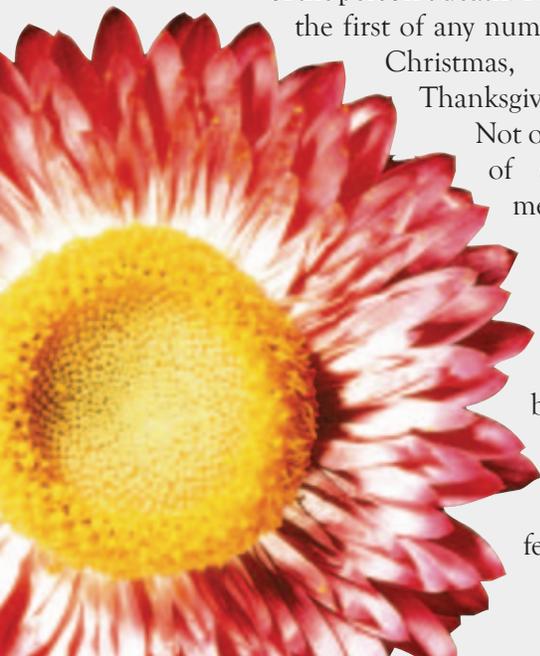
longing for the one who has died and perhaps even anger that he or she left you. These feelings will be reduced if you plan ahead for these special days.

There are a number of important principles that apply to these special days.

Anticipation of the day is usually worse than the day itself. I have had many people tell me that they worried about the upcoming day and when it arrived, it was much easier than they thought. That is usually the case!

Make plans for the day. Don’t let the day control you. Planning is central to making sure that the day isn’t as bad as you anticipate. If you don’t make plans you are likely to be anxious because of the unknown. If you plan, you know in advance what the day will look like.

Involve other family members or friends. Remember everyone in the family is wondering what is going to happen. If your family is one that has difficulty communicating, it will be worse for everyone. Ask people in advance what they would like to do. Children often come up with something quite creative that actually brings some life and enjoyment to the day.





Recently I sat with a group of people who shared their ideas with a woman who was about to observe her late son's birthday. Here are some of them.

One woman who recently observed her daughter's birthday told how she took flowers to her daughter's house. Her daughter loved flowers. It made more sense to her mother to take them to her daughter's home rather than to the cemetery where they may not be noticed by anyone. In her daughter's home, her daughter's husband and two children would appreciate them.

The journey through grief is not an easy one. Special days can bring the family together and help you to realize you are not alone.

Another woman told how she and her daughter spent the anniversary of her husband's death shopping! They had dinner together that night and, of course, talked about their husband and father.

On the other side of the circle a young woman whose husband had died suddenly told of how she threw a big party for her husband's birthday. She invited 70 people because this is exactly what her husband would have wanted.

Recently a couple shared with me what they did on their daughter's birthday. Their daughter had three children less than six years of age! On that day, they had a birthday party for the children's mother and after dinner went out into the garden where the children released helium-

filled balloons. In the balloons were notes and pictures the children had placed there for their mother. It was very therapeutic for both the grandparents and the children!

The journey through grief is not an easy one as you know. However, with some determination and creativity that involves other people, the journey can be made successfully. Special days can bring the family together and help you to realize you are not alone and that life does indeed go on.



You're a Man and You're Grieving

By John Kennedy Saynor

Over the years there has been considerable discussion about the differences between men and women when it comes to grieving. While there are many similarities, there are differences. It is these differences that, at times, make it challenging for a man to grieve in a healthy, productive way. The discussion, as you will see, isn't black and white and it is unwise to say things like, "Men don't do this," or "A man would never do that!" Of course you wouldn't say that about a woman would you?

Some men ask for help, some don't. When it comes to things of the heart, many men don't know what to ask for. People often ask, "Why aren't there more men in bereavement support groups?" I often hear a woman complain, "My husband won't talk to me about our daughter's death!"

If you are a man, you may resent these generalities. To say that all men don't express their feelings or talk about them is as inaccurate as it is to say that all women are comfortable expressing their feelings. There are, however, some ways in which men and women deal differently with loss. Why is that?

A lot has to do with how men are socialized or "brought up." As a man, you may remember your parents telling you to "stop crying, because big boys don't cry!" You may have painful memories of other children laughing at you and calling you "sissy" if you were crying. This socialization of boys leads to many expectations of them when they grow up.

Men are expected to be in control of situations and to show confidence while looking after others. Men are thought to be more concerned with thinking than with feeling. A man is expected to be the courageous one; the one who will figure out how to get through a difficult time and to lead others through it. Men are seen as the one who can bear the pain without giving in to it.

Both men and women are affected by our cultural avoidance of death and grief, but this avoidance has a different effect on the two sexes. A woman generally has an easier time in dealing with this prohibition in that she probably has a system of support in place in which intimacy is the key word. Think of it for a moment. At the time of a death, it is usually the women who plan what the person who has died will wear for burial, the women who order the flowers, the women who plan, prepare and carry out the reception afterwards. The men in the family often continue to work as long as possible before the funeral and miss out on much of the work that helps the women begin the grieving process.

How do some men respond to a death?

1. Remain silent. A man will often withdraw and not talk about how he is feeling.
2. Engage in solitary mourning or "secret" grief. He may not tell fellow employees or neighbours for fear of revealing his feelings and appearing vulnerable.

3. Take physical and legal action. Often a man will say after an accident, "I'm going to sue!" Others may become involved in organizations that will work towards eliminating the cause of their loved one's death. Frequently men hide their sorrow in anger.
4. Deal with their loss intellectually. A man will often spend a lot of time trying to understand how the death occurred and what impact it will have on him. He will translate raw emotion into a rational, but often detached, process of determining what, if any, changes he needs to make to his life.

Helpful hints for a man who is grieving

1. This may be one of the most painful times of your life. You may experience emotions you have never recognized before. These emotions may be more intense than you have ever known. Allow yourself the privilege of expressing your feelings. You don't have to be brave.
2. Participate in planning the funeral if it is a family member who has died. The choice of clothing for the deceased, ordering of flowers or memorials and planning the service are activities that will give you an opportunity to express your feelings about the one who has died.
3. Don't short cut the funeral itself. Attendance and participation in the funeral is an important step in beginning to deal with the reality of the loss.
4. Learn about grief. What will you experience? How long will it take to recover? How can you help yourself? How can others help you? The grieving process has the potential of being a time of personal growth and discovery.
5. Men tend to be task oriented. You and other men in the family could look after an appropriate memorial for the person who has died. This could be a donation to the university the person attended or any organization that was of special interest to the deceased. It may involve planting a tree to commemorate the life that was lived.
6. Explore the possibility of a support group. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness but of self-awareness. The number of men attending support groups is on the increase. Meeting with the group leader before the group begins will give you a good sense of what is expected of you and what you can expect.
7. Above all, look after yourself. Regular exercise, proper nutrition and sleep are important. This is a time for you to reflect on life, to re-evaluate and recreate your life. Take time. Don't be impatient with yourself or the process. It is a time to explore your spirituality. Listen to your heart. In time you will live and laugh again.

A Farewell for Bette

By John Kennedy Saynor

Bette was one of an ever-increasing number of people who had become disillusioned with organized religion. In fact, one day she said to me, "I can't believe that I spent so much of my life in that church!"

Having said that, she was a deeply spiritual person and wanted her funeral service to be an event that would honour her spiritual journey. She phoned me after being diagnosed with an inoperable cancer and asked me to visit her to talk about her funeral. Every detail of the service was planned by Bette and she wanted to make sure that I would follow her wishes.

She was a beautiful woman with a wide range of interests: art, tennis, golf, reading, bridge, travel and writing. Besides being involved with a number of agencies as a volunteer, she kept in touch with children and stepchildren from three marriages!

So, it was that on the day of her funeral, the chapel of the funeral home was packed with family and a wide variety of friends who gathered to pay tribute to her. Her casket was surrounded by flowers and some of her art. Pictures of her life and family were arranged among the flowers.

The service began with a moment of silent meditation followed by music from the Taizé Community in France. "Sing to God," a song of praise, was her choice to begin the service. Taizé is a community of Protestants and Catholics in the province of Burgundy in France. It is a place that welcomes believers and skeptics alike. It was a place where Bette would have felt completely at home.

Following "Sing to God," a prayer was offered.

*"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home."*

(From "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" by William Wordsworth)

Personal tributes are important at a time such as this and so it was decided that her son and daughter would offer their memories. These were the most moving moments of our time together. They were able to share wonderful stories of a warm and caring mother, who had always been there for them and supported them in whatever they did. She had been an example to them of one who wasn't stuck in the past and who was open to new ideas.

In my reflection, I commented on how a time such as this is important for family and friends to grieve together and to pay tribute to the one who has died. It is also an opportunity for those who are left to reflect on their own lives and what is important to them as they move on to the next chapter.

Following my reflection, those in attendance said British poet David Harkins' poem together.

You can shed tears that she is gone

Or you can smile because she has lived.

You can close your eyes and pray that she'll come back

Or you can open your eyes and see that she has left.

Your heart can be empty because you can't see her

Or can be full of the love that you shared.

You can turn your back on tomorrow and live yesterday

Or you can be happy for tomorrow because of yesterday.

You can remember her and only that she's gone

Or you can cherish her memory and let it live on.

You can cry and close your mind, be empty and turn your back

Or you can do what she'd want: smile, open your eyes, love and go on.

The last two lines of this poem expressed exactly what Bette wanted her family and friends to do.

The service concluded with a version of the Lord's Prayer from the New Zealand Prayer Book and another rousing song of praise from Taizé.

As the crowd left the chapel that day, there was a sense that this had truly been a celebration of Bette's life. There were tears and there was laughter. There were stories, music and moments of reflection. Bette would have been proud.

John Kennedy Saynor is the founder of GENESIS Bereavement Resources. He can be contacted through www.genesis-resources.com.

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