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# Along The Way

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## Finding **Hope** in Grief

By John Kennedy Saynor

Does it seem odd for someone to talk about finding hope in grief? That's because one doesn't often read about rediscovering hope in the midst of grief. However, it has been one of the foundation stones of my work with bereaved people during the many years that I have been doing this work. In this article, I would like to address two aspects of hope and grief. First, I want to think about what hinders people from finding hope in grief. Then I would like to talk about how it is possible to find hope in the midst of our grief.

There are many things that hinder us from finding hope, especially in the early days after the death of a loved one. Here are some of them:

### **An inability to grasp what "hope" means.**

Perhaps it is because it is difficult to define hope. Or maybe it is because, in everyday conversation, we use terms like "positive attitude" or "wish" or "look forward to" instead of talking about being hopeful. The American journalist and author, Norman Cousins, wrote, "The capacity for hope is the most significant fact of life. It provides human beings with a sense of destination and the energy to get started." Perhaps this quote may help us to focus on how hope relates to the grief process.

### **The initial impact of grief dictates against our being hopeful.**

In the first place, the shock of grief literally affects the ability to think clearly. The future as you knew it has been lost. Notice I didn't say your future has been lost. It is the one you thought you had. There is still a future, but it will take time for you to see into that future.

### **Most bereaved people experience a period of disorientation.**

It is a time when you are unable to focus and to make clear decisions. It is a time of confusion and, often, of being unable to see outside your own situation. It is difficult to be hopeful in these circumstances.

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A journal helps you to keep track of the changes that are taking place in your life. Make notes of the things you would like to do and check up on how many of them you are doing or making serious plans to do.

### **Grief often robs you of your motivation or drive.**

This is a normal phase of grief and, with time, it will pass. However, it is difficult to find hope when you lack either the energy for, or the vision of what life could become.

### **Many bereaved people experience a loss of self-confidence.**

People who are normally self-motivated and confident will find themselves saying things like, “I don’t think I can do this!” or “How will I get through this?” Again, it is difficult to assume your normally “positive” or “hopeful” approach to life when you don’t think you can make it.

### **The ability to be hopeful is often hindered by the loss of identity of the closest survivor or survivors.**

When a person becomes spouse-less, child-less or parent-less, there is often a loss of identity. “I don’t know who I am now,” is something I often hear. This is probably one of the most difficult aspects of the grief process and, like everything else, it takes time to adjust. Eventually, one regains an understanding of who the new person is and with that comes a rebirth of hope.

### **Hope is often diminished following a series of crises in life.**

It is common for a person to experience a succession of deaths, illnesses, financial crises or other losses. That person may come to the end of their rope. They may give up on hoping things will ever get better – that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

One of the greatest assaults on hope is the loss of faith in a God or in the basic goodness of life. I think it is safe to say most people place their hope in either God or an outlook

on life that makes sense and helps them get through the difficult times. When that faith is lost, hope is also lost and the person is adrift in a sea of uncertainty and despair.

You may be able to identify with some of the above reasons why people are unable to be hopeful. But there will also be other reasons in your life causing you to have lost hope. Identifying them will help you to understand what is standing in the way of finding hope again. Then, in time, you will with some effort rediscover hope in your life.

## **So, then how do we regain our hope?**

### **Be patient.**

These are the most difficult words for a bereaved person to hear. Most of us want this period of grieving to be over in a hurry. However, there is no shortcut. It takes time for you to process what this loss means to you. Even as you are doing that, your hope will return.

### **Look for any sign of a return to life.**

You may be surprised the day you laugh out loud for the first time. There will eventually be days when you experience genuine joy or pleasure. This may happen when visiting friends, seeing the face of a young child or enjoying a walk with your dog. The day will come when you will begin to dream again. Your new future will emerge out of the fog of your grief. You will hear yourself say, “Someday I would like to do this.”

### **Don’t resist any signs that life may be returning for you.**

I believe human beings are essentially survivors and it is that instinct that has kept you going. Although there may have been days you wished you could have joined your loved one, you wouldn’t have done anything to make it happen. As



sure as the sun comes up each morning, and spring returns after winter, so life returns after a period of grief. As William Cowper, the English poet, once wrote, "The darkest day, if you live to tomorrow, will have passed away." When you feel life returning, don't feel guilty about moving on.

### **Find someone who is objective with whom you can speak openly.**

It is quite natural for a person who is grieving to begin to think about what life might look like a few weeks or months after the death of a loved one. You will find it helpful to share your thoughts and dreams with someone who isn't involved personally with your grief. The right person will encourage and support you in your journey. You need to find someone who will not hold you back.

### **Keep a journal for these days.**

You may find it useful to document your journey. A journal helps you to keep track of the changes that are taking place in your life. Make notes of the things you would like to do and check up on how many of them you are doing or making serious plans to do. When you look back on it months from now, you will smile as you realize how much you have changed.

### **Participate in a bereavement support group.**

You will find a great deal of support and encouragement meeting with people in the same situation as you. There is often a level of openness you may not find among your family or friends.

### **Recognize your successes.**

Often newly bereaved people are required to learn new things. A man may have to learn to cook or a woman may have to learn how to do the finances. Of course, the

opposite is often true as well! When you have done something for the first time that you have never done before, give yourself a pat on the back and congratulate yourself.

### **Dwell on the positive.**

I often ask people to make a list of all that they have remaining in their life in spite of the tremendous loss they have experienced. Sometimes they are surprised by this simple, but effective exercise. This list becomes their gratitude list. Make one of your own and put it on the door to your refrigerator. You will see it every day and begin to add to it on a regular basis. Soon you will realize how good life still is. You will be happy you persevered. You will understand what Norman Cousins meant when he said, "The capacity for hope is the most significant fact of life. It provides human beings with a sense of destination and the energy to get started."

### **Be a source of hope for others.**

There is nothing that helps like helping others. As soon as you feel you have some energy and some hope to give, give it to those who need it. Reach out to others who may have nobody who cares. Your caring will go a long way towards regaining your self-confidence and your identity. Don't be afraid to offer a hand and it will be received.

Finally, although you would rather not have gone through this experience, I'm sure you will admit that you are learning or have learned a great deal. Death is one of life's great teachers. The lessons you have learned will stand you in good stead for things you will be called on to deal with in the future. Know that you are a better and stronger person. Take these lessons and use them as you rebuild your life.

Harrison Ford, the American actor, once said, "We all have changes in our life that are, more or less, a second chance." This is your second chance!



# Understanding Your Loss

By John Kennedy Saynor

For years I have been involved in trying to comfort people when someone has died. I have found my work to be rewarding and fulfilling, so I am still surprised when people say to me, "How do you do this work? It must be so depressing!" Well it is sad, but not depressing.

What makes it rewarding is watching people rebuild their lives after the upheaval they experience when a loved one dies. For those who will accept the challenge, it is the beginning of a new adventure that often leads them down roads they never dreamed they would travel. They have learned how to embrace their grief.

Most people don't think of grief as a friend or something you would want to embrace. However, those who move into their grief and embrace it – instead of resisting it – stand a better chance of a full recovery.

Can grief be a friend? If someone comes into your life and takes you on a journey of self-discovery, growth and positive change, would you consider him or her a friend? I think you would. Then maybe it is possible to see grief as a friend.

What does it mean to embrace your grief?

Understand the depth of your loss. Sit down and take an inventory of what you have lost. When a spouse dies, you may have lost your best friend, your lifestyle and your financial security. If the relationship was an unhappy one, you may have lost the opportunity to make things right, the chance to regain the respect you think is coming to you, or your hopes and dreams. If you can grasp what you have lost, you begin to understand how this death is affecting every aspect of your life.

Move into your pain. For example, loneliness is a part of the pain that newly bereaved people feel most acutely. It helps to embrace

your loneliness ... to let it teach you and guide you to the reality and truth of your loss – and your life.

Slowly begin to adjust to life without your loved one. In the weeks and months following your loved one's death, you will want to stay where you are, living with your memories and wishing deeply you could go back in time. However, one day you will begin to feel a change – a rebirth. You will begin to feel like being more sociable. You may want to begin to do some volunteer work. You may want to redecorate your home. Don't resist this movement. It is part of the transition. Don't be afraid of losing the memory of the one who has died.

Begin to gradually explore your new life. This is a process that involves leaving the old life and moving on to another. It is slow and sometimes painful, and involves looking deep within to try to understand how this death is affecting you. It means looking back at what your life once was. It also includes examining the values that have guided your life this far and reassessing them. Doing this is a great catalyst for change!

Ask yourself what you gained from your relationship with the person who has died? What is left in your life that will help you move on?

While the notion of embracing your grief may be new to you, I believe it is worth considering. Many become locked in their grief because they fail to accept it as an important part of what life has for them. To embrace your grief means paying attention to it, listening to your pain and learning from the experience. Slowly but surely you will begin to live again and life will regain the joy you once knew and still long for.

John Kennedy Saynor is the founder of GENESIS Bereavement Resources. He may be reached through his website: [www.genesis-resources.com](http://www.genesis-resources.com).

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