COPING WITH GRIEF AND DEATH

By Margaret DeLong, PsyD

The passing of a life partner can be the most traumatic and emotionally painful experience of your life. The intensity of grief can be overwhelming at times, and even make you feel like you are losing your mind. The following descriptions are made to hopefully normalize your experiences and help you feel less alone in your grief. In addition, some suggestions are made to help you alleviate some of that pain, to turn a painful experience into a healing experience, and to make the experience meaningful.

• I don’t know how I’m ever going to get through this awful gut-wrenching pain. Grief is awful. Period. There is simply no way getting around it. In order to heal, you need to allow yourself to be fully present with your emotions and sensations. This is really scary, as grieving the loss of a life partner is gut-wrenching pain. Even though grief feels terrible and overwhelming, it is a normal reaction to death, and a healthy part of the healing process. Allow the tears to flow when you feel like crying. It is important not to try to shut off your emotions, as you simply cannot heal what you do not address. If you are finding that allowing yourself to experience the intensity of your emotions interferes with your ability to carry out responsibilities (work, parenting, etc), then it may be helpful to set aside a time later in the day when you can be free to do so.

• Everything I see, smell, and hear reminds me of my loved one. Do not be surprised if sounds, sights, and scents instantly remind you of your loved one. It is natural during grief to be reminded of your loved one both unexpectedly, and seemingly everywhere. This can be in the form of hearing your loved one’s voice, or smelling your loved one’s scent. Allow yourself to take it all in and be fully present in those moments. It may be helpful to keep in mind that the pain will be there, and to simply allow yourself the time and space to experience it.

• I cannot take the intensity of this grief. I need an outlet! You may find that your emotions are so intense that they need an outlet. Everyone experiences grief differently, and some find an increased need to express feelings. You can do so in a variety of ways. This can be done by journaling your thoughts and feelings about your loved one, and recalling special memories. Reaching out to a trusted friend and connecting on an emotional level may also be very helpful. Talking to another person who is also grieving
can help in sharing in the experience and help you to feel less alone. Seek professional help from a mental health professional. This can be a valuable opportunity to process your thoughts and feelings in an emotionally safe environment. You may also consider joining a bereavement group to share in your grief experience with others who are similarly grieving. One such group is GriefShare (www.griefshare.org).

- **I thought I was doing so well in healing. Why do I feel worse today?** Keep in mind that it is natural to experience an increase in grief and emotional pain on anniversaries, birthdays, at special events, and during the holidays. You may have been feeling better and making progress in your grief path, only to experience a heightened sense of loss during these times. Do not let this alarm you and make you feel that you are regressing, that something is “wrong” with you, or that you are not grieving “properly.” This is a natural reaction and part of the grief process. You can address this by anticipating the increase, and making a proactive plan. For example, if the anniversary of the death of your loved one is approaching, you can make a plan to spend some time that day with a trusted friend whose presence provides you with comfort.

- **I have no interest in anything or taking care of myself.** You may find that you are so overwhelmed with your grief that you forget to take care of yourself. It is so important to intentionally take time out to nourish your soul. You (or a concerned friend) may have to force yourself to do so! Do whatever brings you a sense of peace and you found in the past to enhance your mental health. This could be taking time out to exercise, enjoy a craft, read, or meditate. Grieving can feel so overwhelming that you cannot muster the energy to do what nourishes your soul when you need it the most.

- **I am terrified of losing my memories and connection with my loved one.** A common experience is being fearful of losing your emotional connection with your loved one. You have lost the physical connection, and it natural to feel that the emotional connection will also be lost. You can address this by actively taking on a favorite characteristic or action of your loved one. Did your loved one tell jokes or stories during gatherings? Cook or bake? Lead a prayer or recite a poem? Paint? You may find comfort in carrying on a favorite aspect or activity of your loved one, and this can help you feel a sense of connection in the years to come. Also, as memories fade over time, you may wish to keep a journal and jot down special memories as they come to mind. Preserving the memories with your written word can provide you with a sense of comfort that you will not forget the memories, and also provide an emotional connection with your loved one when you are writing and remembering.

- **Where have all my friends gone?** Although this may be a time when you expect others to support and comfort you, you may find yourself in a position of needing to forgive others for not being there for you. An example may be to forgive the friend you see at a gathering who has not called since your loved one’s death. Death brings up our strongest vulnerabilities and fears, and not everyone will be capable of dealing with your loss and their own feelings about it. Forgive, try not to take it personally, and spend time with someone who does provide comfort.

- **I had a brief moment of relief today, and I actually experienced joy.** But, now I feel guilty about that! Allow yourself to experience joy. Remembering your loved one does not mean sacrificing joy when it comes naturally. Allow yourself to laugh. It is not a betrayal to your loved one to experience happiness and joy.
• Why doesn’t anyone mention my loved one’s name? Sometimes people need to be told that it is okay to mention your loved one’s name, or that you especially want them to mention your loved one’s name. Do not be afraid to let others know what you specifically want and need. People mean well, but sometimes need to be told how to respond to you and the loss. Out of fear of saying the “wrong” thing, people sometimes say nothing of your loss, and this can be painful. Let others know and give “permission” if you would like your loved one to be freely mentioned and remembered.

• My loved one always took on this role during gatherings with family and friends. How in the world am I going to get through this special event? Plan ahead and consider how you would like to handle your loved one’s role. The role may be shared among family and friends, assigned to a different person, or modified in some meaningful way. You may also consider making new rituals. The purpose is to create the opportunity for meaningful remembering of the loved one, and to express and experience thoughts and feelings. The new ritual can also be an action, such as planting a tree, or a ceremony, or both. This can be done privately or with family and friends. You may want to create a symbolic remembrance of your loved one. This can be your loved one’s favorite holiday decoration placed in a special location, a new holiday decoration to represent your loved one, an object that belonged to your loved one, favorite music playing, or a burning candle. Consider whether there will be an empty chair. If your family ritual or gathering involved your loved one being seated at a particular chair around the table, you may wish to discuss with the others who will be present what to do with the empty chair. Seeing the empty chair can be a painful physical reminder of your loved one’s absence, and preparing for this can make the experience less painful. Anticipate your limits and do not be afraid to let others know what they are. This may mean telling a host/hostess that you are not making your usual dish or dessert this year. This could also mean informing the host/hostess that you may need to make an early exit, that this exit could be sudden, and that it may need to be done without making your usual round of good-byes.

• What is death anyway? Where did my loved one GO?? The death of a loved one can cause you to have questions about what happens after death and the meaning of life, even if you thought your beliefs and views were solid. Some people have found comfort reading books about “life after death.” Here are a few: Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife by Eben Alexander, Embraced by the Light by Betty Eadie, Your Life and Love Beyond Death by David Hyatt, Parting Visions by Melvin Morse, Saved by the Light by Dannion Brinkley, Closer to the Light by Melvin Morse, and Hello from Heaven by Bill and Judy Guggenheim.

• I need some reading resources. I need to read something that helps me understand what I am going through. An excellent book about common experiences with grief is How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies by Therese Rando, PhD. Another book that provides explanations of common experiences during the grief process is A Time To Grieve: Meditations for Healing After the Death of a Loved One by Carol Staudacher.
• I cannot believe how my brain is playing tricks on me. For a split second, I thought my loved one was alive. This is a cruel, yet common, experience in grief. We are so used to having our loved one around, that certain times of day or habits may be cruel reminders of the loss. For example, you may have talked to your loved one during your lunch hour. Do not be surprised if you go to pick up the phone to call your loved one. Or you may out of habit go to pick up your loved one’s laundry off of the floor. Or you may dream about your loved one so vividly that when you awaken it feels real, only to re-live the grief that your loved one is gone. These are common experiences, and expecting them from time to time may make dealing with them just a little less difficult and painful. When they do happen, allow yourself the time and space to process that unexpected surge in emotion.

• I am afraid that if I allow myself to heal, I am losing a connection with my loved one. Your loved one would not want you to be stuck in grief. You can remain emotionally connected to your loved one in ways that do not involve the pain of grief. Focus on all of the positive aspects of your loved one and the positive experiences and memories that you shared. This is your emotional connection with your loved one, and as you heal, you can remain connected on whatever emotional level is good and healthy for you.

Remember that your experiences, emotions, and reactions are flowing and changing, just as life is flowing and changing. What might feel right to do this year may be different next year. You can make a mental note of what felt good and what did not feel good based on your individual needs, and this is likely to change year to year. Also keep in mind that it is impossible to do all of these suggestions. Pick and choose what resonates with you, as the grieving process is intensely personal. The pain you experience is in proportion to the love between you and your loved one. The difference is that the pain will diminish over time, yet the love will forever endure.

Margaret ("Peggy") DeLong, PsyD, a licensed psychologist since 2002, has a private practice in the Liberty Corner section of Bernards Township. She provides evaluation and psychotherapy with clients and their families, preschool age through adult. She specializes in grief and loss, trauma, parenting issues, relationship difficulties, and issues related to child protection. In addition, she provides consultation with other health care professionals and preschool staff and parents. She also provides forensic services and has provided consultation regarding child protection matters and expert witness testimony in Passaic, Hunterdon, Warren, Somerset, Middlesex, Essex, and Hudson counties. In her free time, Dr. DeLong enjoys writing, telemark and downhill skiing, hiking, and mountain biking with her family in the Poconos and Vermont.