

## THE CENTRE FOR LIVING WITH DYING

### TOOLS FOR COPING

- \* Be gentle with your own feeling process. Avoid self judgement. Do not put "I should have" on yourself.
- \* Find a supportive person or persons you can trust to share your honest feelings.
- \* Give yourself time for healing. The timing of grief cannot be rushed. Plan your time so that you have specific time to focus on your loss, and special time to escape from the pain of the reality of what you are facing.
- \* When we experience fear, anger, helplessness, sorrow, pain, emptiness, isolation, depression, relief - it can be very confusing. Questions to ask yourself to focus are:

- \* How do I feel right now? (check body sensations, as well as thoughts and emotions)
- \* What do I need right now? (focus on immediate, attainable needs)
- \* How can I meet (or get a supportive friend to help me meet) these needs right now?

- \* Try to maintain as "regular" a schedule as possible. Avoid unrealistic expectations/goals of yourself.
- \* Maintain an awareness of your body's need for nutrition and rest. If symptoms arise that are new or unusual, see a physician.
- \* Listening to your body is critical during this period. And listening is different than "doing something for" your body. Listening means to honor the message our body is giving us, and our bodies never lie. Examples of how our bodies speak to us:

- \* Words or tears that are unexpressed can cause a lump in our throats.
- \* Anger that is held inside can give us an upset stomach, headache or tight neck and shoulders.
- \* Fear can be expressed by wringing hands, shakiness or queasy stomach.
- \* Guilt or resentment can feel like physical burdens we are carrying (I feel I weigh a ton).
- \* Sorrow or depression can feel like pressure or "breaking" in our heart or chest area. Breathing may be labored. We may heave great sighs.

Often we feel a combination of these feelings, like ocean waves waging over us, or bricks falling down upon us. It is important to ask the part of the body that is feeling:

- \* If you could talk, what would you say?
- \* What would you need?
- \* What picture or symbol best expresses you right now?
- \* What do you look like?
- \* Who is in you/with you?
- \* What is happening with you right now?

\* Writing a letter or drawing a picture about our illness, loss or grief are healing ways to get our feelings from the inside to the outside. Writing to others whom we feel incomplete with, or to our bodies, or to institutions, the universe, God or anybody, enables us to process what our body longs to say. It also enables us to release anger, frustration and isolation and move to a forgiving, life-affirming love for ourself and those who have touched our life.

\* Creating a "ritual" that expresses our feelings and situation is another active way to heal the pain of our grief, where we can create what is meaningful for us, and also include others in our life journey's milestone.

\* Record a life evaluation: Who and what has been important in my life? Have I done what I wanted in my life? What needs to be done for me to be fulfilled? What activities would give me the most satisfaction right now? Is there anything or anyone I feel incomplete or unfinished with at this time? Is there anything I need to do about that for me?

\* Realize the world around you and your daily activities will be filled with "landmines" - moments of painful realizations of your loss and resentment at a world that marches on, apparently without noticing or caring. Verbalize these feelings. They are normal.

\* As a person facing grief or illness, you will be stigmatized. People will not know how to handle you or make you better. They may even be afraid of you, because you represent fear and pain that could come into their lives. Allow yourself to be gently honest about your needs. Focus on taking care of yourself and surrounding yourself with caring people who will accept your process. You do not have to make it better for the world. This is a time to care for you as you would the most tender, vulnerable child who is hurting.

#### FOR YOU....

(When you are left with an empty or breaking heart)

Realize and recognize the loss, take time for nature's slow, sure stuttering process of healing.

Give yourself massive doses of restful relaxation and routine busy-ness.

Know that powerful, overwhelming feelings will lessen with time.

Be vulnerable, share your pain and be humble enough to accept support.

Surround yourself with life, plants, animals and friends.

Use mementos to help your mourning, not to live in the past.

Avoid rebound relationships, big decisions and anything addictive.

Keep a diary and record successes, memories and struggles.

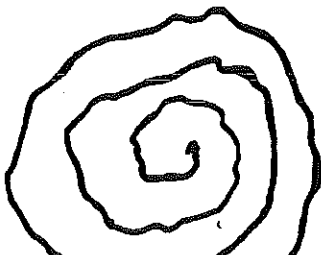
Prepare for change, new interests, new friends, solitude, creativity, growth.

Recognize that forgiveness (of ourselves and others) is a vital part of the healing process.

Know that holidays and anniversaries can bring us the painful feelings you thought you had successfully worked through.

Realize that any new death related crisis will bring up feelings about past losses.

Grief is a spiral of feelings, seasons and experiences. It is not a straight line with a beginning and ending. The process of grief is healing the pain of loss and keeping the treasured memories and love within your heart.



## **Facilitating Grief: Some Ideas to Help People Move Through Grief**

- Doing a “pie chart’ with the person regarding their feelings;
- Keeping a daily log recording feelings, hardest experiences, way time was spent;
- Journaling and then share the feelings and experiences that were recorded;
- Writing a letter that will remain unsent. Put in it all the things you want this person to know;
- Writing a biography of the person including such things as their favorite foods, expressions, hobbies, music etc. (Don’t worry about spelling or punctuation—just write)
- Have the mourner fill out an ‘inventory of grief reactions’;
- Suggest the possibility of using certain prompts to write (i.e. “Grief came knocking at my door one day”/ “I am hoping that one of these days...”
- Doing an acrostic using every letter of the alphabet to say “two words” (one positive /one negative) about the person or loss;
- Making a ‘memory book”, creating a website, a blog etc.;
- Making a ‘gratitude list’ for the person’s life and contributions and/ or a list for things one is still grateful for;
- Framing /re-frame old photos; Making a slide show; Telling others why these photos are important;
- Memorializing the person in some social activity or make donation to their favorite cause; (i.e. The neighborhood memorial dinner or the friends annual soccer game or trip)
- Memorializing the person symbolically (plant a tree/ name an award/ build an alter/ name a star or flower in their honor)

#### Resource 4 Letter to a Loved One

"I have learned from the bereaved and from my own experience that the letter is therapeutic in that it gives voice to the pain both in the writing and in the reading of it out loud."

- 1 Begin with how you have been doing since the death.
- 2 Write about what you miss most
- 3 Write about any regrets
- 4 Write anything you wish you had said prior to the death.
- 5 Describe how you are coping, what makes you laugh and cry now.
- 6 Close with any personal message you would like to include.

Mucha, Constance M. (2006). *Gently grieving*. New York: Paulist Press, 23.