

# BLESSED SACRAMENT CATHOLIC CHURCH

## Grief Support Ministry Newsletter 1

To the families and friends of deceased Blessed Sacrament parishioners, Fr Marek, Deacon Nick, Deacon Bill and the Bereavement and Grief Support volunteers extend our heartfelt sympathy to you and your family on the loss of your loved one.

**May Our Lady of Sorrows Comfort and Heal You.**  
**Blessed Sacrament Grief Support Team Volunteers**

### **EMOTIONS YOU MAY FEEL IN THE FIRST WEEKS**

*A wide variety of emotions are normal in these early days and weeks*

- Depression and sadness.
- Anger and guilt or at least some manifestations of these emotions.
- Old issues, feelings and unresolved conflicts from the past.
- Low mood and disorganized thoughts.
- Fear, some anger or depression symptoms such as irritability, frustration, annoyance and intolerance, even at those trying to help.
- Lowered self-esteem and a lack of self-concern.
- Identity confusion due to sudden loss, especially with long-time partners.
- Grief bursts: acute upsurges of grief that appear suddenly with no warning.
- Sudden emotional surges that can be overwhelming and unsettling, but are usually temporary.

### **FIRST THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT GRIEF**

**Grief is a journey** that takes time and is full of ups and downs. It is an experience that is unique to each person as no two people experience grief in the same way. If you feel like crying, then cry. It is a healthy and acceptable way to express grief and release tension whether you are a man, woman or child. To bottle up your emotions may seem the right thing to do, especially for many men, but it may be harmful in the long run.

**Friends and relatives may want to help** you in some way, but may not know how to do it, or what to say or do. Help them be supportive to you by being as open and honest about your needs or feelings as you can. Talk about your loved one so they know it is appropriate for them to do so too.

**Physical reactions to the death of a loved one are common.** You may not feel like eating, or may overeat, You may have difficulty with sleeplessness or wanting to sleep all the time. You may have chest pain, headaches or loss of energy. Each of us may respond in a different way.

**Try to maintain a balanced diet and some daily exercise.** Going for walks around the block in the early morning can be energizing for the day or in the early evening can be a calming end of the day and encourage peaceful sleep.

**Avoid the use of drugs or alcohol** as many substances can be harmful or addictive if relied on too frequently and they prevent one from working through the pain of a loss, which we know is real to the individual experiencing it.

**Take time** to decide what to do with your loved one's belongings and don't allow someone to make

those decisions for you. This does not have to be done immediately and you can do it a little bit at a time as you feel able. If you can, put off major decisions for at least a year.

**Guilt, real or imagined, is a normal part of grief.** It is expressed in such thoughts as 'if only I would have' or 'I should have'. To resolve feelings of guilt, it is important to express them and forgive ourselves for things we feel guilty about. Unresolved guilt makes one feel miserable and can delay the grieving process. *(See article on handling guilt and grief after loss.)*

**It is normal to feel angry** about your loss or to seek someone to blame. You may find yourself easily angry or resentful. Share your feelings with someone you trust in an acceptable manner.

**If you have grieving children in your home, don't forget them.** Share your feelings and tears with them and encourage them to do the same as this will allow them to feel included and part of the grieving process.

**You can never be your 'old self' again for you are not the same person you were before your loss.** But you can find new meaning in life and move ahead. Be aware that clouds do clear, perhaps not as quickly as you would like, but they do eventually and you will find new meaning and purpose in life.

**Try not to be afraid.** Many people fear 'letting go' of emotions and crying will mean that they will be unable to stop or gain control again. In reality, this does not happen. People cry as much as they need to and tears are healing! Unexpressed grief can impact your physical and emotional health.

## OVERCOMING FIRSTS

When your loved one dies, every day is a challenge. As time progresses, special days can be an even bigger challenge, especially as they come in the first year. You may question how you can survive each 'first' – the first anniversary, the first birthday, the first holidays without a loved one present.

The anticipation of these days may be worse than the day itself. The year of overcoming firsts may be a time of many emotions as you navigate your grief journey. You may experience intense feelings of grief unexpectedly and often.

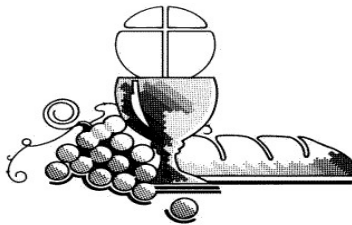
As you enter the year of firsts, please know:

- Each first is a new experience. Each event or party will not be the same without your loved one. You may feel out of sorts experiencing them for the first time and it may be difficult to celebrate. It is perfectly normal. Be kind to yourself.
- Each first can contribute to your grief reaction. It may seem that things are feeling normal and suddenly something small can trigger a tearful response. Plan for the waves of grief and be patient with yourself as you wander forward in this uncharted territory.
- Each first is an opportunity to honor your loved one. Many people who are grieving face the task of trying to develop new traditions. Look for ways to honor the past and incorporate new traditions into the future.
- Each first is an opportunity to honor yourself. While this doesn't happen overnight, everyone

must find a way to redefine their day-to-day routine and reconstruct meaning in what we do, how and why we do it. We need to accept who we are and who we are becoming in the context of life after loss. Learning this may be one of the most difficult adjustments a person may ever have to make.

It is difficult, but allow yourself to feel the pain of your grief as it approaches. Explore options of new routines and traditions. Life can, and does, go on. It may never be the same and it may not look like the plan you had intended. But getting through each 'first' helps us to build for our tomorrows.

“Grief is not a disorder, a disease or a sign of weakness.  
It is an emotional, physical, and spiritual necessity.”  
(Earl A. Grollman)



*Many thanks to the Bereavement staff of St Francis Hospice/Reflections Lifestage Care for sharing their grief support thoughts and information with us and for allowing us to offer it as part of Grief Support ministry.*

# Addendum to Grief Support Newsletter 1

## Guilt and Grieving

Guilt isn't a new part of grieving. It is a common emotion to experience after loss, particularly among caregivers. Although occasionally there is something worthy of feeling guilty about, often this isn't the case. Guilt frequently results from distorted thinking—that is, being much too hard on ourselves. Caregivers and survivors often expect way too much of themselves and beat themselves up when they don't fulfill those expectations. It's important to notice this kind of thinking when it occurs, because it can stand in the way of healthy grieving.

Here are three common ways we can be way too hard on ourselves after a loss, along with some tips about how to be kinder to ourselves.

### #1. "I didn't say or do enough."

People frequently regret having left something unsaid or undone in their relationship with their lost loved ones. They may feel they should have expressed more appreciation for the loved one, should have said "I love you" more often, or should have taken them to a favorite spot one last time. Particularly in the midst of their grief, people feel they should have been there for their loved one's death, or there to support them, even though that may actually have been impossible.

This kind of self-critical thinking is sometimes called the "tyranny of the shoulds." People often concentrate on what they didn't do—what they feel they *should* have done—but forget about all they actually did! There may have been many ways that their relationship with their loved one was strong.

I remember the daughter of an elderly man who passed away from lung cancer. She flew across the country four times to be with him, leaving her own work and family behind. When she wasn't there, she called often to check in with him and her mother. When she heard of a sudden decline in his health, she flew to his bedside only to find that she had missed the moment of his death.

She tortured herself for weeks, accusing herself of being a bad daughter because she "should" have been there. Seeing how hard on herself she was being, her mother finally clasped her hand and said, "Your father didn't care if you were there or not when he died. He knew you loved him; you showed him that over and over again." Just as her mother reminded her, it's important for all of us not to lose sight of what we actually have been able to do for our loved ones.

### #2. "I made the wrong decision."

Some caregivers or survivors blame themselves for having made a "wrong decision" in their loved ones' medical care. I remember one man whose 85-year-old grandmother had always said she wanted to be at home when she passed away. As she grew weaker, he even moved into her home to care for her, so her wish could be fulfilled. But, when she fell and fractured her hip, he followed the doctor's recommendation to bring her to the hospital by ambulance. The trip to the hospital was traumatic for her, and she cried out in pain and confusion. Unfortunately, just hours after entering the hospital, she passed away. He felt horribly guilty. "I should have kept her home," he said. "It's all my fault she died the way she did."

This is a difficult story. In retrospect, perhaps it would have been better for his grandmother to remain at home. With time, however, he came to realize that *he made the best decision he could with the information he had at the time*. He didn't know she was going to die when she did. All he knew was that his grandmother was in pain and the doctor recommended bringing her to the hospital. It wasn't his fault. His grandmother was very ill.

Similarly, when we feel we've made a wrong choice, it's important to ask whether we made the best decision we could given what we knew *at the time*. No one is to blame for not seeing the future.

### #3. "I'm a terrible person."

Bereaved individuals often are left with lingering feelings of mild regret or guilt. These feelings are generally manageable and rarely cause long-term difficulties. Feelings of self-hatred are potentially more problematic. When someone believes their loved one's death is all their fault, they may begin to feel worthless and awful about themselves. Normal guilt comes from wishing we had *done something differently*. But normal guilt can turn into self-hate when we believe *we are someone terrible*.

Just like regret and guilt, self-hatred often results from being way too hard on ourselves. Unfortunately, it is sometimes difficult for people who feel this way to see this clearly. Consequently, when our feelings extend beyond guilt to a sense of self-hatred, it's often important to speak with someone about it. Whether it's a counselor, a member of the clergy, or a friend, other people frequently have a clearer perspective on our situation than we do. They can help us realize when we're being too hard on ourselves.

Everyone grieves in a different way so it is hard to predict how the passing of loved ones will change the way people grieve in the long term. For now, however, if you're grieving, it's important to be kind to yourself. We're at a time in history when many people are cut off from the social rituals and in-person support they normally could access. In these unusual times, even the wisest among us often don't know what the right courses of action are. If you're experiencing guilt as part of your grief process, it can be important to remind yourself that nobody is perfect, even under ideal circumstances, let alone in the far-from-perfect and socially distanced world we live in.

## 7 Ways to Cope With Survivor's Guilt

Here are seven strategies for coping with guilt after loss:

Give yourself permission to grieve and experience whatever feelings you are having. Acknowledging these feelings is the first step toward healing.

Practice self-forgiveness. Don't put time limits on your feelings of loss and grief. It takes time to process these painful emotions.

Remind yourself that it's normal to have these feelings. Don't berate yourself for being human.

Try to remember that remaining behind can be a gift from your loved one. Allow yourself to feel thankful for that gift even though it may sit on a shelf until you are ready to unwrap it.

When ready, try to be of service to someone or something by engaging in a purposeful action.

Consider how the people you love feel about your situation; remind yourself of who cares for you and wants to help you now and over time.

Reach out to family and friends whom you trust and with whom you can comfortably share your feelings. As the saying goes, "*A problem shared is a problem halved.*"