
Losing a Loved One

Catholic Grief Support

The Grieving Process



God can see into your broken heart, my friend.

He hears the groaning from the depths of your grief.

He can understand what you are experiencing and thinking and feeling.

He knows what you want to say or need to say, but find it impossible to say.

He accepts that helpless feeling as your prayer.

-DR. OSWALD HOFFMANN

I can't imagine all the thoughts and feelings you are having right now, but I can tell you a bit about the experience of grieving. Grieving is, first of all, a process. It takes time; it cannot be rushed. Each of us handles loss in our own way, and there is no right or wrong way to grieve. While each experience of mourning is unique, there are, nevertheless, some similarities in the process. One of those similarities is that there seem to be certain phases that we all go through as we grieve.

Right now you may be feeling numb, confused, and disorganized. You may feel that things are not real, that this is a dream, or that your loved one will return. These experiences characterize the first stage of grief. This part of grieving doesn't usually last very long, but it helps you get through what you have to get through.

The second phase is where you end up doing most of your work. Work? Yes, mourning is work; you may not be doing any heavy labor, but grieving requires a lot of mental labor and readjustment. The trauma of a major loss can also be thought of as a kind of wound. If you use these two analogies, you can see that you'll probably need extra sleep (even afternoon naps), good nutrition (to help you heal), and exercise (even a short walk around the block or moving your hands and legs). Your emotions may run the gamut from deep sadness, to anger, to irritability, to anxiousness, to depression. (You should not assume that what you are experiencing at this point is clinical depression- feeling bad is simply one of the aspects of grieving.) You may feel that you are losing control or going crazy. Don't worry. There is no one way to mourn, and these are all normal reactions to grieving.

“Recovery from grief is not a station you arrive at, but a manner of traveling.”

-DR. IVAN G. MATTERN

Another aspect of this stage of grief is the experience of “secondary losses.” You will find yourself mourning not only your primary loss, but all the other little losses connected to it. When one woman's only son was murdered, for example, she not only mourned her son but the fact that there would be no one to look after her in her old age. These losses are painful, but they are also a part of the process of mourning.

Sometimes people have experiences of seeing or feeling the person who died. These experiences remind us of our belief that there is life after death and that both the living and the dead are part of the “communion of saints” in which all believers share.

The final phase of mourning is called the “re-establishment phase.” This describes the point in your mourning where you feel you are ready to reenter the world. If you have lost a spouse, you may feel like dating again. Or you may find that you are motivated to do volunteer work for a worthwhile cause. Your energy won't be so tied up with your emotions, and you'll be ready to give to others. It may help you to know that this phase will come and you will feel better eventually. Remember, everyone is different and everyone goes through the process of mourning in various degrees and lengths of time. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Allow yourself the same grace and love our Lord Jesus gives to you.

Physical Symptoms of Grieving

Grieving is work. The exhaustion from grieving is similar to a heavy physical workout. These “symptoms” of grieving are sometimes mistakenly diagnosed as strictly physical problems.

COMMON COMPLAINTS ARE AS FOLLOWS:

- chest pains or heart problems
- dizziness
- dry mouth
- empty feeling in the stomach
- fatigue
- feeling of “something stuck in the throat”
- headache
- inability to sleep
- loss of sexual desire or having an overly active sexual desire
- loss of weight
- nausea and vomiting
- oversensitivity to noise
- pain
- purposeless activity
- shortness of breath
- trembling
- uncontrollable sighing and sobbing
- weakness in the muscles
- various gastrointestinal symptoms: constipation, diarrhea

(This information taken from books and research by Lieberman and Jacobs, Worden, Olders, and Rando.)

Any of these symptoms can be a normal part of the grieving process, but if they persist or become very uncomfortable, please make an appointment with your physician and tell her/him that you have experienced a recent major loss. If you are on medication from your physician, do your best to continue to take it without fail.

Avoid over-the-counter sleeping medications, if possible. They may only further interfere with your sleep and your overall recovery.

Relaxation techniques are very useful tools in coping with these physical symptoms of grief. Ask your health professional or local librarian about relaxation tapes to try, as well as a list of books and other materials that can help with relaxation.

Ways of self-calming and relaxing

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| Touch | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Soaking in a warm bath• Getting a massage• Stretching• Playing with an animal |
| Taste | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sipping warm herbal tea• Eating healthy food• Eating a comforting meal |
| Smell | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shopping for flowers• Deeply breathing in fresh air• Lighting a scented candle |
| Sight | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reading a good book• Watching the clouds• Watching a funny TV show |
| Sound | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Listening to relaxing music• Singing to yourself• Playing a musical instrument |
| Prayer | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Praying the Rosary• Meditating on a Bible verse• Sitting in adoration and allowing Jesus to comfort and calm you. |

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

-MATTHEW 11:28

Enough Faith?

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, Christ may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

EPHESIANS 3:16-17

“We are accustomed to thinking that if we just had enough faith, we would not have any doubts. Some soldiers are accustomed to thinking that if they just had enough bravery, they would not have any fears in battle. Some grieving people are accustomed to thinking that if they just had enough faith, they would not feel any sorrow. All of these ‘accustomed’ ways of thinking are unhelpful. In contrast, faith as courage suggests that faith is trusting God in spite of one’s doubts, that bravery is action in spite of one’s fears, and that faith is hope in a new tomorrow in spite of one’s present sorrow. Sometimes faith is the courage to trust in spite of feeling to the contrary.”

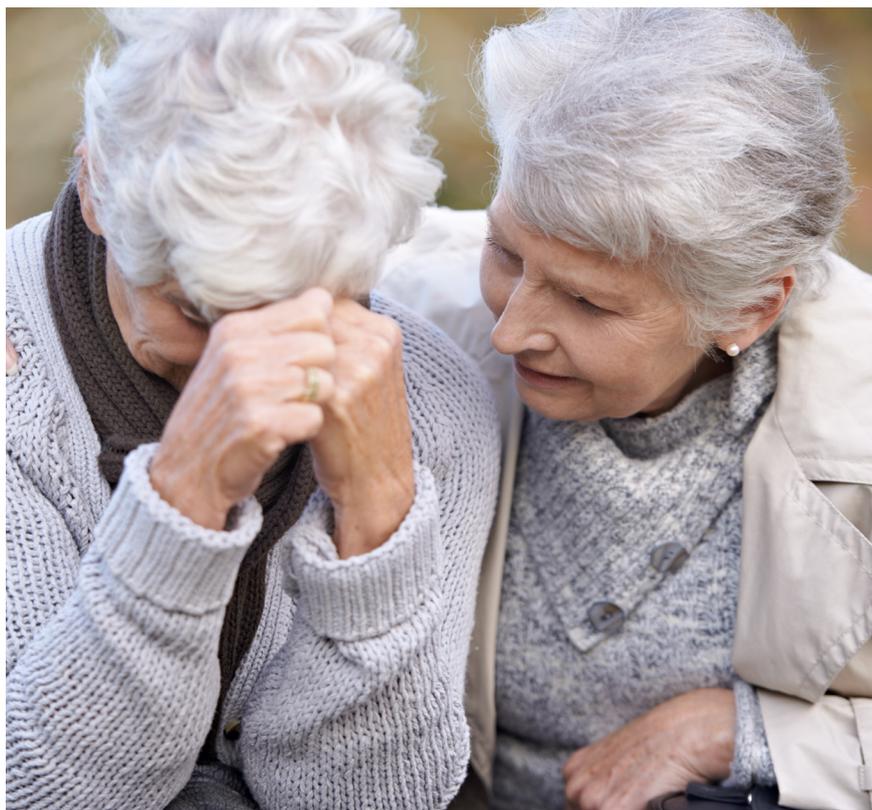
(TAKEN FROM GRIEF AND GROWTH: PASTORAL RESOURCES FOR EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH, BY R. S. SULLENDE, PAULIST PRESS, 1985.)

After a major loss, it is not uncommon to question our faith. We may ask why this has occurred, we may feel angry at God, or we may feel nothing at all toward God. Such feelings are normal. True faith, as R. S. Sullender reminds us, is not a matter of feeling, but the courage to go on believing and hoping.

Our thoughts and prayers are with you.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. . . . a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance. . . .

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-8



Working With Your Grief

Your life has been changed forever. This is a reality that takes time to absorb fully. Those who are grieving often feel emotional and social isolation, anger, and loss of vigor for life. Try not to be too hard on yourself.

***How long must I bear
pain in my soul, and
have sorrow in my
heart all the day?***

PSALM 13:2



One exercise you can do to connect with some of the life, energy, and the resources of the relationship that you had with your loved one is to close your eyes and, instead of seeing the person who died as small and distant, see the person as life-size. Instead of seeing (her/him) far away, see (her/him) close beside you. Instead of seeing (her/him) being still, see (her/him) moving.

You cannot replace the person you loved, but you can preserve the benefits and the qualities of the relationship. Maybe there was warmth, intimacy, and deep friendship. Maybe there was intelligence, humor, and liveliness. Maybe you appreciate yourself more because of your relationship. Whatever it is, take those qualities and values that were present in your relationship in the past and imagine what form those values and qualities might take in your future, as they continue to live in you.

You may want to try writing a letter to the person who died answering the following questions:

- What qualities do I miss most about you?
- What will I miss about our relationship?
- What do I wish I hadn't said?
- What do I wish I would have said?
- What do I wish I would not have done?
- What do I wish I would have done?
- What is the hardest thing I have to deal with?
- What is one special memory I have of you?
- What are some ways you will continue to live on in me?

We pray these suggestions will be helpful for you and allow you to feel the love of the person who died.

Returning to “Normal”

In grief there is often a sense or feeling of waiting for things to return to “normal”. However, we know in our mind that things will never return to normal, and our life has been irrevocably changed by the death of our loved one. There will be no return to “normal” as it was before the death, however, we may find a “new normal”.

Normal will be different for you than for your friends because of what you have experienced. Death has a way of changing people, often making them stronger and wiser. Your sense of “normal” will change as you pass through the grieving experience, and it will be different from month to month.

Although your thoughts may be different from some of your friends, they may be normal for someone who is grieving. You may find yourself angrier or more irritable. You may worry more about money than others do. You may find you cry more easily or feel like being alone more often.

These emotions can catch you off-guard. You may be out shopping, catch a glimpse of someone who looks like your loved one, and feel like running away. Or you may hear a certain song that brings back strong memories for you. Returning to church may bring back many memories, including memories of the funeral.

***Behold, God is my salvation,
I will trust, and will not be
afraid; for the Lord God is my
strength and my song, and he
has become my salvation.***

-ISAIAH 12:2

***Likewise the Spirit helps us in our
weakness; for we do not know how to
pray as we ought, but that very Spirit
intercedes with sighs too deep for words.
And God, who searches the heart, knows
what is the mind of the Spirit . . .***

-ROMANS 8:26-27

Anything can be a trigger and set you off crying, feeling confused, or feeling like you need to run. Know that this is a common part of grief. Take a couple deep breaths, cry if you need to, step out for a moment or two, or do whatever you need to do to center yourself. These feelings are real, and it is important to acknowledge that they are there.

Sometimes people don't know what to say to you, so they avoid you. Sometimes friends or family members will say things to you that hurt you. Of course, in most cases, they don't mean any harm; they simply don't know the right thing to say. As you deal with these painful experiences, you will become stronger, and each step of the pain will lead you through grieving and back to life.

Our Hope

I Know There's Life After Death, Right?

You may have always believed that there was life after death, but now you're not sure. Or maybe you believed that there was life after death, and this particular death made you feel all the more sure of it.

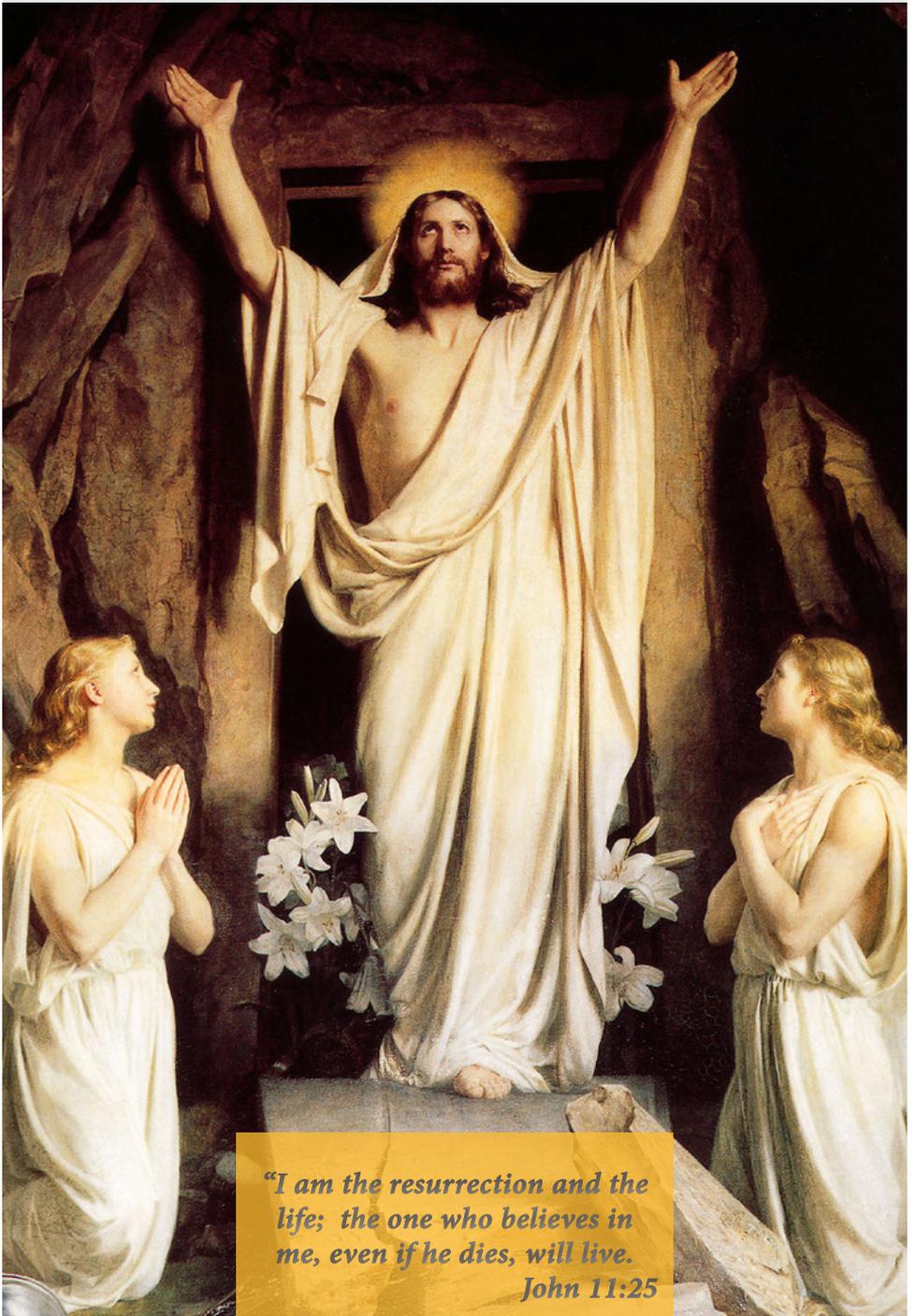
Our faith has a lot to say about death, in the teaching of the prophets, in the Apostles' Creed, and in the reality of Jesus' own death and resurrection. Now, even scientists are conducting research with people who claim that they have died and come back to life. Some people have claimed that in near-death experiences, they have left their body and found themselves hovering over their "dead" body. Their experiences vary, but many describe an overwhelming sense of love and reassurance.

If you should feel the presence of the person who died, or experience them in your dreams, know that you are not going crazy. Such experiences remind us of our belief that there is life after death, and that both the living and the dead share in the "communion of saints" of which all believers are a part. Accept these experiences as a source of comfort. If, on the other hand, you have dreams that replay themselves over and over or have nightmares, talk with someone who can help you work through your dreams so you can move forward into a restful night's sleep.

Praying for the person who has died can allow you to continue to express your love for her or him, while at the same time beginning to let (her/him) go.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died so that you may not grieve as others who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.

-1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-14



"I am the resurrection and the life; the one who believes in me, even if he dies, will live.

John 11:25

PRAYER FOR THE FAITHFUL DEPARTED

Eternal rest grant unto them,

O Lord.

And let the perpetual light

shine upon them.

And may the souls of all the

faithful departed,

through the mercy of God,

rest in peace.

Amen.



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