

Healing Passage:
Charting paths for your
course through
grief

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This booklet is dedicated to all those who have experienced the death of a loved one.

The days, weeks, and months ahead may be filled with taking care of paperwork, phone calls notifying individuals and agencies about the death, and other innumerable details.

However, the seconds, minutes, and years woven within the strands of time will be filled with living each day without your loved one's presence. The journey through this time is called grief.

This journey is yours alone, and you will have to find your way through grief. However, you do not have to find it alone.

Our desire is to provide four "tools" to help guide you as you chart the paths for your healing passage: a lantern, sextant, compass, and telescope. Each will offer illumination and direction as you navigate the waters of grief. However, the brightest source of illumination is your true "North Star" - your memories and connection with your loved one.

And, your connection is the journey eternal.

Foreword

What is grief? What does grief mean to you? Why do you need to grieve? We hope that this booklet can help you find some of your answers to these questions, and more.

No one can know the unique way your loved one smiled at you, touched your face, or the special name he or she gave to you. So, your experience of grief can't be addressed perfectly in a book. But we can shed some light on the process of grieving a loss.

Sometimes, your loss can run so deep that you can only get through it by talking to a professional person, a doctor, clergy, or counselor. Please don't try to be *strong* and build a wall around your feelings, to get through grief. Of course, there are times when it feels like this is the only way to cope. But, in our experience of the grief process, this eventually only makes problems worse. Indeed, the problems often resurface later in a more painful way.

The analogy of using ancient navigational tools for guidance seems useful when thinking

about ways to help travel through the grieving process. Grief is like a wide ocean. It's easy to lose your bearings. So, we offer a "lantern" to shed light on the meaning of grief and some ways grief can affect you. We also offer a "sextant" and a "compass" to help guide you through the turbulent waters of complicated grief and some of the difficult reactions to grief. Lastly we offer a "telescope" to look towards the horizon for solid ground, as you continue charting your passage through healing in grief's journey. Because many people have questions about children's grief and how to help them in their healing, we have included children's grief in this section, also.

We hope you gain encouragement and support from this booklet. May you find our words nurturing, perhaps as a safe harbor or resting place, on your continuing journey through grief.

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A Lantern: Illumination on the grieving process.

Grief is a night task. It leaves the Griever feeling disoriented, as if under some sort of evil anesthesia, and never waking up; or waking up and stumbling around the room uncontrollably. Indeed, many describe it as a bad dream.

Normally, the Griever will need a lantern, some way to shed light on the surroundings. What's normal? Am I going crazy? I keep forgetting things: Is that part of it, too? In the following sections we offer illumination on the meaning of grief and how grief can affect you.

•**THE NATURE OF GRIEF.** In *A Grief Observed* (1963), a most eloquent tribute by C.S. Lewis following the death of his wife, Lewis writes, "For in grief nothing 'stays put.' One keeps on emerging from a phase, but it always recurs. Round and round." He continues by likening his grief process to being "on a spiral." And, if on a spiral, he asks if he is "going up or

down it?"

This is the nature of grief. Some of the theories about the way people grieve emphasize that grief occurs in stages. It seems, however, that even these "stage" theories end up more like a "spiral." So many grieving individuals have shared with us their concerns about "going crazy" because of this very reason! No sooner do they feel like they have finally worked through a certain place in their grief, when they hear a song reminding them of their loved one or walk past a favorite restaurant where they formerly dined, and those same painful grieving feelings seem to return with a vengeance. Other people have told us about "hearing" their loved one's voice or even "seeing" them at the mall. All these reactions can cause them to question their sanity. No, they are probably not going crazy. Still, it's hard to believe otherwise when you're experiencing some of the very deep feelings of grief.

If the lantern offers any enlightenment on the grieving person, it is this: Grief is unique, it is work, and it is a process!

•**GRIEF IS UNIQUE.** Although we may experience similar grief-related reactions in the weeks, months, and years following the death of a loved one, the *way* we feel our grief is our own. Therefore, don't let others tell you how you "should" or "should not" feel. Just as your relationship with your loved one was unlike any other relationship, so too, will your grief be unique.

Some people tell us they are relieved after their loved one dies: "She suffered for so long. I know it sounds terrible to say, but I am really glad that it's over for her. I *hated* to see her suffer." This is normal and understandable. On the other hand, so is the experience of pining after your loved one, especially when you have been together many, many years.

Some folks experience many of the grieving reactions we will describe, whereas others seem to experience only a few. For instance, some people work through different aspects of the grief process during the long illness before a loved one's death. Others grieve

primarily after the death.

Also, the length of time it takes to work through the grieving process varies according to the individual, the relationship with a loved one, and complicating factors relating to the death. If you are actively working through the process of grief, your grieving process will take as much time as you need!

•**GRIEF IS WORK.** Although ours is a society that often blocks, denies, or minimizes painful feelings, there is no effective way to get around true grieving feelings. Grief requires a willingness to allow yourself to feel your loss, so that you not only honor your loved one and that relationship, but can also begin your healing. Every aspect of your being can be affected by grief. Your physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional selves need to feel and mourn your loss. Acknowledging your feelings (sometimes even your *lack of feelings*), understanding what you are feeling, and expressing these emotions all demand energy, time, and process - in short, work!

• **GRIEF IS A PROCESS.** Although there are many theories about grief, several basic elements seem to be true for almost all people. One such element is that you cannot get through grief by any other means than by going *through* it! This means that, even if you try to deny or block your feelings, or even work yourself into exhaustion each day so that your body pain overrides your emotional pain, your grieving feelings will wait until you are ready to work through the core of your grief. Some people go for years before they realize that they still need to grieve a loved one's death. Unfortunately, there is no easy detour around this journey.

Another concept to remember is that grief is a process. Grief is a verb, not a noun. Grief is active, fluid, and involves your entire being. The basic nature of grief may look and feel like a spiral staircase. Some days you may move up a few stairs in your grief work and other days you may move down. If you keep trying to work with your feelings and grieving reactions you will generally move through the *landings* of the

staircase towards healing.

Studies by William J. Worden suggest that the grieving process travels through various stages, *landings*, which we occasionally revisit. Even with this stage theory, please understand that the stages of shock, disorganization, and reorganization may not be true for every person. Remember, grief is unique.

In the initial days and weeks, even months, after a loved one's death, when you are so busy with funeral arrangements, handling paperwork with various agencies, or writing thank you notes for expressions of sympathy from others, you may feel somewhat numb or simply "going through the motions." This is the stage Worden refers to as "shock." It is a natural, initial way of coping. During this period, people are often surprised at how well they are getting through each day. Some even think that they have finished grieving after a few months, because of this initial numbness. Others may be forgetful and disconnected from the world around them, as in a dream. If you are open to your feelings, that "numbness" eventually wears off and you

begin to experience some of the difficult and real feelings of grief. Sometimes the impact of the grief is delayed so long that you may not even correlate the *feelings* with the *grief process*.

During the time that follows shock, called “disorganization,” Worden believes that we may have physical, emotional, mental and spiritual reactions to our loss. If the relationship with your loved one was very close and strong, likewise, your feelings of grief may be very powerful. You may experience surges of grief that seem overwhelming at times. Later, we will discuss some of the ways grief can affect us during this period. It is important to understand, however, that your grief can fluctuate through these surges and ebbs of emotions, causing you to question your sanity or to prompt fears of losing control. Please know that this is all a normal, albeit difficult, part of grief.

It is significant during this time of remembering, to recall the full picture of your loved one. Sometimes our memories *color* the reality of a loved one’s place in life.

For instance, the adult child of an alcoholic father may choose to forget some of the painful memories related to the alcoholism. Try to remember the person as she or he was - fully human in all aspects. In this way, you are able to honor, grieve, and feel the loss of the real person in your life.

Expression of your feelings is very important. Journaling, talking with a trusted and empathic listener, joining a grief support group, and consulting a counselor or therapist can all help cope with those difficult emotions.

Only after you have traveled with your grief and worked through these many reactions, does the process of “reorganization” begin. At some point, you begin to feel less pain and start to feel more energy. You can face the day with more hope, sensing that you have formed a different relationship with your loved one and that this changed relationship, while still painful, can be a touchstone for the future.

You may still experience grieving periods, especially during the holidays or special marker dates that were significant to both you and your

loved one. But, even these feelings will seem different from your initial reactions of sorrow and pain. Your grief feels different because **you** are different. Working through the many reactions in your grieving process enables a changed relationship with your loved one, meaningful and soulfully significant for your present and future years. Again, this all takes as much time as it needs and your healing process will continue for as long as you remember your loved one.

A Sextant and A Compass: Guides for Finding Your Way.

Long years ago, sailors would generally set sail during the seasons of the year when there were fairly dependable prevailing winds. They would begin their voyage basically on faith alone, depending on these prevailing winds to take them to their destination. Since they were at sea, there were no maps. Instead, they had a few instruments that would help them on the journey. Some of them are relatively new. Others have been around for a very long time. Still, they were essential to understanding their location when they were out on the wide sea.

Two of those instruments, the compass and the sextant, were vital in gaining a sense of direction. For sailors, caught in the *doldrums*, a time when the prevailing winds stopped, it was easy to feel like they were going nowhere, or worse, going in circles. The compass, at least, would give them some idea of the direction in which they were pointed. The sextant, on the other hand, let the sailor know which latitude he

was in (how far north or south). Even if they weren't making any speed, at least they could have some idea that they were going in the *right direction*.

In this light, we offer tools to help guide you through the turbulent waters of difficult reactions to grief and some complicating factors affecting grief. Hopefully, through this guidance you will sense that you, too, are going in a direction that can further your passage in healing.

•*GRIEF CAN HAVE SIGNIFICANT PHYSICAL REACTIONS*. Grieving feelings can affect many aspects of your general health. Unusual sleeping patterns, eating irregularities, increased stress, activity changes, and painful feelings can all impact your immune system and your ability to cope with your day-to-day schedules. You may become very forgetful or lethargic. Physically, in addition to your heartache, you may experience headaches, stomachaches, backaches, dizziness, nausea, or even rashes. You may be unable to concentrate

or even read more than a paragraph at one sitting. Weariness with life, sighing, and crying are all common reactions.

Here are some things that may help (don't be hard on yourself by trying to do them *all*): Try to eat some healthier foods; Try to get some exercise; Go for your regular checkup with your doctor or schedule a visit if you have a question about your health; Be gentle with yourself; Let those who care about you, help you; Set limits for yourself and stick to them; and, Allow yourself to be nurtured. When you care for yourself in these ways, you are better able to deal with your grief.

Be attentive to your grieving process, not just the grief. It is normal to experience some, if not all the reactions described above. If, however, you find yourself unable to accomplish ordinary daily tasks of functioning, or overly withdrawing from others, you should consider consulting a professional who can help guide you in your process.

•*GRIEF CAN CREATE QUESTIONS IN*

OUR SPIRITUAL LIVES. When we hear that a person has died, our first impulse may be to rationalize it by asking about the cause of death and fitting the pieces of information into a perspective on our mortality. We may look at the death as a natural end of a very long life. Or, we may see this as a release from a prolonged, painful disease process. But, when we experience the death of someone close to us, especially when that death defies the boundaries of how or when death “should” occur, we may question the very foundation of our belief system.

Although this is a normal and understandable part of your grief, these questions about the meaning of life and death, or about God’s place in your universe, can be frightening and soulfully painful. Talk with a trusted friend or representative from your religious community who will sit with you in a nonjudgmental way and hear your questions. Although you may never receive answers to some of your questions, the significance lies in giving yourself permission to ask. It may even

deepen your spiritual experience.

And, this spiritual experience can be, if you desire, a significant part of your grief. Your soul’s participation in coping with your loss can help you to *feel* your way through your sorrows.

Our spiritual side may need to struggle with the “dark night,” to anguish through our loss, and to have its own experience of mourning. We need more than our mind’s power to navigate and direct our course through the rough waters of grief. If we allow our soul’s prodding and beckoning to help guide us, if we release our white-knuckled grip on the ship’s wheel of control, if we rely on our innermost instincts about the right course for us, we can literally become transformed through our journey.

COMPLICATING FACTORS

Grieving may be the most painful human emotion we feel. We experience it many times throughout life on various levels: a divorce; the loss of a job; an encounter with chronic or serious

illness; the destruction of a home by fire or flood. All these things and more, heighten our sensation of loss and haunt us when we face loss anew. When a loss occurs it can gain strength, like a tornado, from other prevailing winds. Many people say that they have had several hard times, all at once. Others are reminded of the pain experienced in a death years ago. Death often draws upon the deep well of painful life events. There are some circumstances where this is especially true - the complicating factors that may threaten our healing passage through grief.

•*FEELINGS OF GUILT.* At times, a caregiver may feel a sense of guilt, wishing she had done something differently in making choices for her loved one. She may wish that she had done more. For instance, she may wish that they had persuaded a loved one to have gone to the doctor sooner, chosen a different treatment, or perhaps tried to visit her loved one more. Likewise, another caregiver may have regrets over such choices as prolonging treatment when the illness was terminal. Similarly, we have

worked with families that had unintentionally contributed to the earlier death of a patient, though they meant well. For example, with stroke patients, a family member may attempt to feed the patient when there is little or no swallowing reflex left, causing the patient to aspirate or choke. Sometimes, families wish they had done less, let their loved one go sooner, or had not fought so hard and so long.

Guilt is an alarm that goes off in the recesses of our soul. It reminds us that something needs tending. All the afore-mentioned reasons for feeling guilt speak to our humanity and our human needs and desires. These reasons are many. We are busy. We don't want to take the time to go to the doctor for "that little pain." It's hard to be around someone who's terminally ill. We were confronted with many kinds of different treatments and it's hard sometimes to choose the right one, if there is one. We want our loved one to eat. In our society, if you don't eat, "you will die" or, "you won't get better." So, we try to feed our loved one because we don't want him or her to starve. You see, there are *reasons* for the

choices we made. Almost always, the reason was love. We do the best we can, given the information we have and the pressure of the circumstances.

Still, the guilt is real. There's no rule book in life that says exactly what choice to make each time. Much of life is learned *on the job*. Given this fact, it is easy to be a Monday morning quarterback. But when we think back and second-guess our actions, we should try to follow-up with two more steps: learning from the situation and blessing/ forgiving ourselves.

Our loved one would most likely not want us to "beat ourselves up" over the choices that we made. The biggest single concern of the hundreds of people we were with at the time of death, was the well-being of those they loved. In general, they would want us to learn from life and be wise. When we see that we can do things better, the best thing we can do is promise ourselves that we will try. The alarm is our awareness. We turn off the alarm by genuinely learning from our circumstances.

Finally, we can make the conscious choice

to let go of our guilt and to forgive ourselves. This is helped by remembering the circumstances more accurately, blessing ourselves for well-made choices, and forgiving ourselves for those we could have made better. Often, we are not able to remember the things we did right! We don't remember that we genuinely loved and tried to show that love.

If you are reading these pages, our clinical expertise would lead us to believe you cared for the person you lost. They would want the best for you, as you did for them!

•*UNRESOLVED RELATIONSHIP ISSUES.*
It is not unusual in the weeks and months after the death of a loved one, for an individual to regret things they said, "should" have said, or didn't say to their loved one before their death. "If only I had more time, I would have told my Dad how important he was in my life," remorseful one caregiver. Another person who had a strained relationship with his father said, "This man wreaked havoc in my personal life and I never forgave him. But in reality, I don't even think he knew how he affected my life. Now that

he's dead, I feel anger and then feel guilty for feeling angry!" One son had not spoken with his mother for the past 25 years and asked not to be contacted by his siblings, as his mother was dying.

Unfinished business relates to issues that were never really discussed or resolved while your loved one was still alive. People may spend years following another's death reviewing those past issues and generally "beating themselves up" over unresolved relationship concerns. This carryover load becomes our emotional baggage that makes coping and grieving more difficult.

- *SUDDEN LOSS*. The issues relating to grief after the sudden death of a loved one, merit more personal attention and support than any booklet can offer. An unanticipated death may be one of life's cruelest and harshest experiences. So many aspects of a survivor's world are changed forever - in an instant.

The grieving process, also, is so intensified because of the very nature of the loss. The survivor may have had little or no chance to

express final thoughts or to share a final embrace with their loved one. Each of these losses in sudden death becomes another painful crisis with which the survivor must cope. And, as the weeks and months go by, as the survivor begins to realize what the loved one's death really means, it can seem as if grief strikes painfully anew with each realization.

One person plays many roles in a lifetime. It takes time for a survivor to fully realize that, not only did her husband die, but so too, did her best friend, soulmate, father of their children, handyman, gardener, and trusted advisor. All of these factors not only complicate the grieving process but can threaten one's basic sense of security. A survivor's world may never feel safe again.

It is often very hard to shake thoughts of the trauma surrounding many sudden deaths. There are often repeated and overwhelming *what ifs* and painful visions that re-play through our mind. These remembrances can invade our sleep, create disturbing dreams or nightmares, and linger in our hearts and minds for a

prolonged time. Anxiety, anger, fear, doubt, and vulnerability are all common reactions to sudden loss. As we suggested, sudden death shakes the emotional structures we use to live with some sense of assurance and confidence.

All grief deserves and needs caring support. But those individuals who are grieving the sudden loss of a loved one need all the empathy, understanding, and nurturance that caring people can offer. A good social support system can help you cope with your grief. As we said at the outset, although you do have to travel through the journey of grief in your own way, you do not have to go alone.

A Telescope: An Eye Towards Healing and Helping Others Heal.

During a recent news interview with a bereaved mother, one year after the shooting death of her son, the reporter asked, "So, how do you think you will ever find closure with your son's death?" The mother's poignant response was simply, "There is no closure. There is only healing of a wound that never completely closes."

Our journey through grief is like that deep wound that scabs and, with healing and time, leaves a scar. The more heartfelt the bond with a loved one, the deeper the scar.

The final tool we offer for your passage is one that encourages hope and healing: the telescope. As navigators would search the horizon, seeking and hoping that their long journey would soon be over, so too, do you search for coping, healing, and hopes for a better day. Sailors also used a telescope to amplify their own limited powers of vision - to see what they could not with their own eyes. A Griever,

likewise, can find hope by viewing a situation through another's eye's or vision. We hope these perspectives about ways to work through grief will also help your healing. We will suggest specific ways of dealing with your grief and adjusting to your future life. We will close by offering thoughts about children's grief and ways to help them also seek and find healing.

•WAYS TO WORK TOWARDS HEALING.

Perhaps the single most effective means of working through your grief is to give expression to your feelings. Talking, praying, screaming (*within reason!*), painting, exercise, singing, and most especially, writing, can all help us to *get it out*. Journaling is an excellent tool for expressing your emotions, for saying those things that you either wanted to say before another's death or would like to say now as you look at your relationship in retrospect. Writing these feelings down not only helps you to express your innermost thoughts but it also helps free your mind and heart for other grieving issues. Also, writing helps clarify your thoughts and may help

put issues into better perspective.

Some people have even written a letter to their loved one, as if their loved one could read it. They share their pain, their questions, their regrets, and their remembrances of moments forever written in their hearts. Some have then taken these types of letters, tenderly wrapped and tied with a satin ribbon, and carefully tucked them at the gravesite's headstone.

Those with unresolved issues have also used the tool of the "empty chair" dialogue. In this situation, you carry on an imaginary conversation between yourself and the person or event of concern. Essentially, you address the chair as if the person was there, expressing all those things you would still like to say. This can be an emotionally powerful tool and it may be helpful to have someone there to talk with you, after your dialogue.

Look for individuals who are non-judgmental towards your grief experience. You need to express your emotions in a safe and caring atmosphere. And, it's important to express those feelings over and over again, until

you are able to better understand and resolve some of your more difficult emotions.

Our society basically allows a mourner an expected set period of time to grieve and then to get on with life. If you work full-time, you are fortunate if your employer gives you a week to grieve. You are even more fortunate if you can take frequent breaks during the day if you feel overwhelmed with grieving emotions. Try to let your employer know what you may need during the weeks or months after the death of a loved one. If it is impossible to receive any of the above assistance from your company, please set time aside for yourself later in the day. Some days you may need to journal, others you may need solitary time to think, and yet other days you might need “time out” from your grief and share time with others. The point is, you may have to tell friends or family or *yourself*, that you need time, space, and support for your grief.

Grief can significantly affect your health. Sleep irregularities, diet changes, and deeply painful emotions cause many to consider taking a prescribed medication to “get over” this time.

However, taking medication for grief should be seriously considered and weighed. Medication prescribed to avoid the difficult feelings of grief, or to simply numb the pain for a prolonged time, can interfere with experiencing the process of grief - thereby interfering with and slowing your healing. However, medication can be helpful under the right circumstances and under the proper supervision of your physician. Anti-depressants can be especially helpful for the elderly, when warranted. Talk with your doctor about how a prescribed medication might help your need.

There is a saying that, “Tears of laughter can be as healing as tears of grief.” Allow yourself to enjoy those *ebbs* in your grieving process when you feel energized and good about life. This is not a betrayal to the memory of your loved one, but rather a tribute to your desire to continue the grieving process. You need these times of calm waters to help your ability to navigate through the more choppy waters that may lie ahead.

•*GRIEF HAS ITS OWN SEASONS AND FINDS MEANING IN RITUAL.* Rituals are the means of outwardly expressing and honoring experiences and moments from our past. Rituals can help us cope with our grief as we inevitably recall those special days and moments shared with our loved one.

Although he or she may have died years ago and you feel that you are coping relatively well these days, when an anniversary of the death, the holidays, or any other *marker* date occurs, you may relive your feelings of loss. Even though these times may be difficult, this too, is a normal part of the grieving process as you remember those precious moments.

Planning a way to honor that date and the memory, can help you cope during this time. Some people find meaning in visiting the cemetery and placing flowers at the grave site. Others remember their loved one at a family meal where a candle is lit and memories are shared by friends and family. And, others may need to be away from the holiday routine or marker date by doing something different, by

taking a cruise, or traveling to a new destination. What's important during this time is to anticipate it, and make plans that will bring personal meaning to the date while allowing you to actively deal with your feelings.

You may consider creating your own ritual that can help clarify unfinished business. This ritual can be as simple or elaborate as you need. A "helium balloon release" can be a very simple, yet moving ritual for you and for your family. You write a message or thought on a small piece of paper, attach it to a ribbon on the balloon, and verbally share a thought about the deceased person before you release the balloon into the sky. As the balloon is carried past the horizon of your vision, you know that the balloon and message are a concrete reality somewhere, reflecting the ongoing love and connection with your loved one.

Funerals, memorial services, visits to the cemetery, or special dinners, all help you to outwardly express your innermost feelings. Although it seems that rituals may have lost their significance in today's society, they endure in

meaning as ways of coping with your grief, expressing your emotions, and cherishing the gifts of love.

WHEN CHILDREN GRIEVE

When a child deals with a death, he or she will do so in vastly different ways from an adult or even other children of various ages. The way Sarah, at age five, copes with her mother's death will be very different from the way Jeff copes, at age nine. Sarah will not be able to process her experience in the same way as her brother or father. Helping children navigate through their grief, requires a basic sense of how their journey is so much different from an adult's.

•*CHILDHOOD GRIEF: THE FACTS*. The next few pages will discuss the nature of childhood loss and grief. We will close with ideas that may help children process their grief experiences.

▫ Children do grieve.

- Children may express their grief differently than adults, but those feelings of loss are no less real and essential in healing. Not seeing a child grieving does not equal absence of grieving.
- Children need to know that it is okay to grieve and need to express it as only they can.
- Children understand the concept of death in relationship to their development. Very young children may believe that death is temporary while an eleven-year-old, although understanding the irreversibility of death, may fight accepting its finality.
- A normal aspect of children's development includes "magical" thinking. One way a child copes with death and loss is by thinking that if they really wish hard enough, they can make any wish or thought come true. Young children may think that if they behave perfectly, their loved one will "un-die." Or, like the cartoons, their loved one will reappear after the next commercial. It's important to be honest with children about the finality of physical death while allowing them to express these wishful fantasies.

- Following sudden and/or violent deaths, the child's world may become emotionally colored by vulnerability, uncertainty, and fear. They find themselves always "waiting for the other shoe to drop." They may become overly attentive to the evening news, things that feel unsafe, and changes in routine. These aspects of their understanding should be understood and reflected upon rather than *corrected*. Their experience has taught them to fear. It is up to adults to help them rebuild their trust and hope.
- Children will express their grief. Some of the ways they do this include acting out, behaving *too good* (because they are afraid that a loss is a result of their *bad* behavior), anger episodes, and decline in academic performance. If they do not find ways of expressing and exploring their grief in a safe and welcoming environment, they may act it out in less healthy ways. Other ways children express their grief, like adults, is through physical symptoms and illness. As the heart aches with loss and grief, so too, does the body. If these symptoms are a concern, check

with your child's doctor.

Although you may want to protect a child from grieving feelings - don't. They need to experience their own process of grief, as do adults. The following section offers some ways to help . . .

•*REGARDING FUNERALS OR MEMORIAL SERVICES*. Allow children, according to their age and comfort level, to participate in any funeral planning or memorial service. Perhaps a special drawing, photo, or meaningful object could be placed with the flowers at the service. Many families have found it helpful to allow the child to place some meaningful token or memento *in* the casket at the funeral. These kinds of interventions allow the child to hold on to the connection with their loved one in a more tangible way.

Explain beforehand what is involved with a funeral service, what the child may see and what meaning the service has for those in attendance. Offer these thoughts as honestly and simply as

possible, being appropriate to the child's age and development. Allow the child to ask any questions along the way. And, let the child know that it's okay to change his or her mind about attending a service. Never force a child to attend a funeral. Open, honest, and loving communication during this time is an invaluable gift for the child.

•*OTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR HELPING GRIEVING CHILDREN.* When talking with children, use the correct words: "Death" or "dead" rather than "gone" or "lost" or "asleep." Children understand words literally. So, if we say, "We lost Grandma," a child may think that Grandma can be found and brought back. Outings or bedtime can mistakenly take on a whole new, scary dimension: The child, too, may *get lost* or never awaken from their *sleep*.

One way to begin talking about death with younger children is by comparing nature with life, change, and death. Leo Buscaglia uses the change of seasons as a theme in describing aspects of living and dying in his book, The Fall

of Freddie the Leaf (1982).

In addition to open communication, children benefit from acceptance, a willingness to listen, continued support, affection, physical closeness, and a sense of security.

Allow the child to express grief in various ways. Tears, telling stories, creative drawing, modeling with clay, and playing games can all be expressions of grief. An activity that children, as well as adults, often find comforting is creating a special box or photo album filled with memories of their loved one. In addition to pictures, the child can add any precious item that physically connects them to the memory of the person who died, such as a pen, scarf, tickets to a baseball game, postcards or letters.

Offer insight into the many different, normal feelings related to grief. Let children know that *all* feelings are okay - even feelings of betrayal and anger. Feelings are reflections of where they are at - it's what those feelings are about, their source, and what they **do** with their feelings that are also significant.

By being open to their grief, you can be

alert to signs of guilt or other difficult emotions. A child who feels secure in talking about feelings may better express their fears or irrational thinking. Children's irrational or magical thinking may cause them to feel somehow responsible for the person's death. They may incorrectly connect events from the past with that death. For example, the last memory a child may have of grandpa, was of yelling at him to "shut up" or "get lost." Through their youth and innocence, a child could really believe that he or she "wished" grandpa's death. By talking about these fears, this gives you the chance to clarify the reality of the past and to relieve inappropriate fears.

Recognize that children, as do adults, need time away from grief. A child may need even greater lapses in "obvious" grieving as they develop from one stage of awareness to another.

Know that it is normal for a child to have difficulty with schoolwork. In part, this is due to the difficulty in concentration and the inability to stay focused on a task. Talk with the child's teacher/s and school counselor. Let them know

what your concerns are, while getting helpful information from them about children and grief.

If needed, seek out a children's grief support group in your community. A well-developed group, led by trained coordinators, could help a child work through grieving feelings along with other children of similar ages. A hospice organization in your area may be able to provide this type of information.

Because a loved one's death may vary in significance depending upon the relationship with the child, it may be helpful to seek professional help if you are concerned about how the child is coping on a daily basis. In addition, adults should be very attentive to a child who has had several consecutive or painful losses in a relatively short time. Losses that are violent should also trigger our attention. A counselor or therapist may recognize behavior indicative of inadequate coping and offer therapeutic interventions to help with specific problems the child may be experiencing.

There are many excellent books about children's grief and how adults can help them

with their grieving process. A personal favorite for helping younger children with grief is, Talking About Death: A dialogue between parent and child, by Earl A. Grollman. Another is, The Grieving Child: A parent's guide, by Helen Fitzgerald. However, the best way to find a book that fits your specific needs is to look over the "Grief" shelf at your bookstore or library. A list of books about talking with grieving children is in our "Bibliography" section.

Coping with your own grief while helping a grieving child can be extremely difficult. Accept the help of caring friends and relatives when you can, take time out for your own grief, and be gentle with yourself. You can't help others if you are drained of energy and emotions. "Being strong" for others means caring for yourself, too. Mignon McLaughlin said, "The only courage that matters is the kind that gets you from one minute to the next."

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES.

As you peer through your telescope, you will begin to notice the faintest outline of solid ground emerging at the horizon. As the future unfolds, as time and healing grow, the following may be a version of what you will see.

You have traveled along some treacherous and tumultuous waters and at times it may have felt as if the storm was about to capsize your ship. But, you held on and made your way through, the best way you could. There were days that seemed overcast and gray. Other days, you were actually able to give thanks for the warmth and nurturance of the sun. Perhaps there were times when you felt adrift in the open waters, solitary, lost and alone. These were the times that you checked your direction and searched for ways to just get through. And, although it may have seemed that this leg of the journey was never-ending, you found that navigating was becoming less difficult and you actually began to think that better days may lie ahead.

Does this mean that your journey is over? Does this mean that your grief is past you or that you'll forget your loved one? No, your journey may never be over but it will continue on different waters. No, you'll probably never forget. It's your memories that will help guide your passage on your continuing journey . . .

Working through the grieving process, time, the support of loved ones and the community, will all help with coping and healing. In time, your grief will feel different, you will feel more energy and better able to cope with your loss. Although you may still experience times of sorrow, you will remember your loved one without those stinging, painful, initial feelings of grief. You will no longer feel overwhelmed by your emotions. You will actually look forward to the day and feel ready to participate in relationships with other people. You can make plans for the future. You will feel more comfortable with your new way of thinking, feeling, and living.

This new way of thinking and feeling about your loved one will help you live your

coming years with a "knowing" that your passage in healing will be never ending. And, your memories, love, and connection with your loved one *are* the journey eternal.

Bibliography

The following titles are books which we have found helpful and informative about the grieving process. In addition, there are many other grief-related books available which may address your specific need or concern.

If you are in the early stages of grief, it may be difficult to read more than a paragraph at one sitting. You may find, however, that your ability to concentrate and your desire to read about grief may change from one day to the next.

It can be comforting to simply read about a grief-related experience that closely mirrors your own experience. It helps to be reminded that you are not alone in your grief - there are people and "tools" to help!

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There are also many good organizations and websites offering information and support about grief. Our website, www.elderhope.com has a list of some of these sites and agencies relating to grief and bereavement.

Note: These pages are for informational purposes only. If you are facing difficulty with bereavement, you should consult a physician, professional counselor, or trained clergy.

If you would like to contact us with a question or concern, please call us at (972) 768-8553 or e-mail us at www.elderhope.com