

The first year of bereavement brings raw pain, disbelief, the agony of reality, and many other deep emotions – emotions many of us have never experienced, or at least not to the same depth.

The time period after the first year is usually not quite as pain-filled as all the firsts were. Although we may be a little better, often we are not nearly as healed as we would like. It helps to understand this next period and to learn some skills for coping. It is most helpful if we lower our expectations of ourselves, work on our grief, and hold on to hope.

Remember, grief is different for everyone. It is like fingerprints or snowflakes; no two are alike. Everyone grieves differently, so don't compare yourself to others or place yourself on a timetable. Some of the following suggestions/observations may help you:

After the first year...

- Beware of becoming critical of yourself, either consciously or unconsciously, because of unrealistic expectations.
- A different level of reality may hit us. We usually no longer deny the death, but now face the reality and its long-term implications.
- If the death was unexpected, some say that the second year is even more difficult.
- It may be the time to struggle with new life patterns. We may have handled grief by overactivity (becoming a workaholic, etc.). If our previous style of grieving has not been helpful, we must be willing to try new approaches: become more active in a support group; find telephone friends; read about grief; develop coping skills; become determined not to become stuck in our grief; do our grief work; hold on to hope.
- It is vital to find a friend to talk with. This is the one significant factor that prevents people from sliding into deep depression. You can find help in a support group.
- We should carefully consider the phases of grief. One or more phases may be giving us trouble, such as anger or guilt. If so, recognize the phase and work on it. Don't push it down or ignore it.
- Other events in your life may also be adding to your grief (such as trouble with a spouse, children, work, other family members or friends). Realize this happens to many grieving people and it does complicate your grief.
- You may or may not cry as often, as you did at first, but when you do, realize it is therapeutic. Don't fight the tears. As the author Jean G. Jones says in "Time Out for Grief," "Cry when you have to – laugh when you can."
- Physical symptoms may become more acute (stomach disorders, headaches, sleeplessness). Get a checkup.
- Insufficient sleep plagues many bereaved. It may be helpful to give up all caffeine and alcohol. Physical exercise helps you to relax and makes you sleepy.

After the first year...

- Check frequently that you have balance in your life – work, recreation (including exercise, hobbies, reading), adequate rest, and prayer.
- Don't be alarmed if depression reenters your life or appears for the first time. Depression is normal and its recurrence is also normal.
- Our grief may seem "out of control." We may feel as if we are "going crazy." This is common to bereaved people. It is important to realize grief work takes time. Much more time than we think it should. Be patient with yourself.
- Be aware of a lowered self-esteem. We might think to ourselves, "I don't like the person I've become." Often it is our unrealistic expectations of ourselves to be handling our grief better – no doubt we are doing better than we give ourselves credit for.
- We often hear "Time will heal." Yes, time does soften the hurt a bit, but mainly it is what we do with time; read, talk, struggle with the phases, get help when we become stuck in a phase, be gentle with ourselves, lower our expectations, build a pleasant time with family and friends, pray to our loved one.
- It helps to consider that our loved ones are happy – free of pain and hassles – that we will be together again. Also, if you died, would you want your loved ones to mourn deeply the rest of their lives? You would want them to enjoy life as much as possible. They want this for you.
- PRIDE may be one of your greatest stumbling blocks. You may think that you should be doing much better – you may not want to acknowledge that you need help.
- Vibes from friends may openly or subconsciously be, "Shape up – you must be over it now. Get on with living," etc. You not only experienced the death of a loved one, but you feel abandoned by friends and even family. Find others to talk with who understand. These friends may come from those who attend the support group meetings.
- Loneliness may seem to engulf us as we look ahead to life without our loved one. Find new friends, worthwhile work (support groups always need help with phoning, mailings, research, etc.). Connect with friends from the past. Pleasant memories can help too.
- If you feel guilty, it must be acknowledged – not suppressed. Really look at the "if onlys." Hopefully YOU and only YOU will be able to say to yourself, "I did the best that I could at the time, so did my loved one."
- WHY? If the "why" is bothering you, ask it again and again until you can come to terms with it. You may never know why. It may remain a mystery that you choose to let go of. When you can, concentrate on your choice to get better.
- Realize that anger may be at ourselves, God, the person who died or those in helping professions who did not seem to understand or help, etc. Acknowledging our anger is the first step in releasing its power over us.
- Don't expect too much of your family. They too, have their hands full of grief.
- Consider even though you are struggling with grief that you would rather have had the time with your loved one than not to have had them in your life at all.

After the first year...

- Set realistic goals for the future – realistic is the key word. Pinpoint your most acute concerns. Think of all possible solutions. Choose one solution at a time and implement it.
- So many of us have been brought up to be independent, saying something like, "I'm going to handle this grief myself." We find it difficult to ask for help. Yet we need help. Asking for help from caring people can make a big difference in your working through your grief. Force yourself to reach out for help.
- Often, when we slide back into the pits, we panic. We hate the feeling. Irrationally we feel that we will remain there. It is important to realize we have been in the pits before, and will be again, but we will get better.
- Be a fighter against giving up and becoming stuck in grief, as 15% do. A determination to work through grief may be one of the common denominators of those who recover. It is up to you.

From "Hope for the Bereaved: Understanding, Coping, and Growing through Grief," by Therese S. Schoeneck.

Time heals, many people say.
It may.
It may help to dull your pain
But the medicine of time,
taken by itself,
is not sure.
Time is neutral.
What helps is what you do with time.
—Earl A. Grollman