



Hospice Of Metropolitan Erie, Inc.

202 East 10th Street
Erie, PA 16503
814-456-6689



The Empty Chair / Be- reavement Newsletter

Hospice and the Funeral Director

By Nancy Dusckas

When I was asked to write an article for the newsletter I was not sure what avenue to follow. Do I do the traditional article that talks about our job and the value of pre-planning? Do I write an article about dealing with grief in general and offer ways to deal with your loss? Those articles have been written by me and others before. They are valuable articles and important information but in thinking this through I felt the desire to make it more personal.

Often people think that Funeral Directors are the professionals when it comes to understanding and handling grief well. We see it day in and day out and I do believe that we have an important role to play in the process. I believe that if we do not do our job well that we can interfere in the grief process. But what people may not ever think about is how well do Funeral Directors handle grief when it is their own? That is what I want to share with you today. That we walk the same painful steps to try to deal with the same adjustments of loss that you do. We can glean knowledge from others as we watch them handle their grief, just as people gain strength and knowledge as they work with the Funeral Director.

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My Families, My Patients, and My Life Lessons

By Wanda Filer, M.D.

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Newsletter

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Each day, in my role as a Family Physician, I care for patients struggling with grief and the profound sense of loss that accompanies it. The grandmother, whose 17 year old granddaughter was murdered almost 2 years ago, and still feeling the acute pain; the nurse who just lost her beloved father after a lifetime of mutual caring; or the frail elderly woman who has spent the last 5 years dedicated to caring for her terminally ill diabetic son. Each of these people have names and faces to me, as do their loved ones, who are often my patients. My professional role allows me to care for multiple generations in many families and to see the best and the worst traits of families. I have witnessed the casualty cruelty and unending love, the abandonment and the unwavering commitment, the good death and the missed opportunities, the beginning of life and the end.

As I reflect on these experiences, I realize, once again, how rich my own life and perspective has become, due to the honor and privilege to care for these families at the most difficult times in their lives. When my patients

confide their fears and anguish, I have an opportunity to try to ease the pain of their bodies and their spirits. Often I am amazed to see the strength of my most ill patients and watch them, as their chief concerns are for those who will be left behind. They worry about what will happen when they are gone and how loved ones will cope. I have been given a great gift, as a Family Physician, and I cherish the personal and professional relationships that I have enjoyed.

Many years ago, in my training, I was called to the bedside of a woman whose medical situation was rapidly deteriorating. She was alone in her room, in her life and in her death. She was afraid and fearful. She had no faith to call upon and no friends to ease her way. Due to other pressing patient duties, I left her bedside for a few hours and when I returned, she had passed away. I still remember my sense of guilt and shortcoming at not being able to make her last few hours a bit more tranquil. I made an internal promise to never allow that to happen to my patients again!

My friend and patient, Jessie, passed away at her home this past spring, at age 103! She had come to see me on her 100th birthday and told me that she had just decided to stop driving. Apparently my prescription, to strengthen her bones, did not do enough to allow her to see over the steering wheel—even when sitting on a phonebook and pillow! I went to Jessie's home on the night before her death, called in by her niece, but this woman was surely sent by God to be with Jessie, in her final hours. Jessie was able to open her eyes, give me her usual big smile and even squeeze my hand. My role in the house, that evening, was not as a physician who could give some pill to fix the situation, but as a physician who would practice the ART of medicine and let Jessie's niece know that she was not alone. We shared stories about our experiences with Jessie over the years, laughed, cried and hugged each other, addressed practical issues of getting work excuses and airline ticket exceptions, for her niece to stay longer to attend the funeral. When her niece had her own short term medical needs, they were addressed. A few weeks later, I received an e-mail from Jessie's 84 year old son, who lives in Europe, thanking me for years of caring for his mother and inviting me into his home at any time that I might be visiting his area! I think of Jessie very often and can smile, knowing that I had the chance to really know her and to do my best for her.

I have lost several patients over the years and I remember many moments that I was able to privately spend with them. Most of them were able to achieve significant peace at the end of their lives and I hope that I played a role in some of that achievement. I do not and cannot dwell on my own sense of loss with them, as it would impair my ability to work with the next patient and his or her family. This my sound callous to some, but it is the reality that I have learned over time. I have learned the difference between empathy and sympathy, and, for my own well being, learned the need for balance. Instead, I focus on my chance to have known and served these people, getting to know them and their willingness to entrust their most personal and painful issues to my care. It is an extraordinary honor and responsibility to have people share their innermost thoughts, often unknown to anyone else, and ask you for your opinion/ ideas/ advice/ supportive ear. I am lucky to have cared for many people in my life, in many ways, and to be given the gift to see the complexity and richness of humanity.

Wanda Filer, M.D.

*President of American Cancer Society of Pennsylvania
Immediate Past President of the PA Academy of Family Physicians
Founder of the Strategic Health Institute*



GRIEF—A Personal Response

When my mother made her transition I felt both sorrow and relief. Relief, for she had been getting so sick and disabled. I did not feel remorse because of feeling relief; relief can be a normal response as part of the grieving process.

I'm one of those people who have delayed feelings of loss so friends thought I had lost my mind when the day my mother passed one of them played the piano while I sang and sang and sang. The relief that I felt was knowing that now my mother was dancing on the winds of the universe.

As time passed, I began experiencing the physical loss. During a two year period, I lost four other family members and a number of friends. I felt overwhelmed. In order to deal with my feelings, I began to express them in writing. One of them was a poem entitled "Grief."

*I pass
and see you in a bough of pine.
I listen
and hear you in a phrase of song.
I touch
and feel you in the blowing wind.
I smell
and whiff you in a ocean swell.
I taste
and savor your salty tears.
I hurt
and feel your last pain.
I sleep
and harbor a dream of you.
I laugh
and remember joy of you.
I cry
and experience the loss of you.
I wait
knowing you will not return.*

The poem "Grief" was my physical response, at different times, to each of those experiences. Writing down feelings may help us cope with our emotions. It doesn't matter what we say or how we say it or if you tell yourself you can't write, it's a good form of relief.

After the physical release and though I still miss the physical presence, a strong feeling of the love we shared came through. My lesson was that though the body may disappear, love crosses the barrier between life and death. The feeling of love is never lost and death is not the end. It can be the beginning of understanding.

Regrets—Don't Let It Control You

Grief is a process of healing. It is difficult and heavy. Loose strings of regrets can diminish or block healing. Regrets may arise out of unfulfilled obligations; hurt you caused or that your loved one caused you; unfulfilled promises, unexpressed affection. These situations cause us pain.

Forgiveness makes regrets manageable and we can deal with them. Forgiveness does not change the past-that's over. It changes the present where regrets about the past live. You need to forgive the deceased and perhaps yourself. Forgiveness does not mean approval; it does not mean you abandon your principles. Forgiveness recognizes and accepts the hurt-and then moves on. If regret is a big part of grief, forgiveness is the only way through it. If there are situations in your life now that cause estrangement take steps to resolve them-NOW. Don't let regrets in your life trap you-resolve them NOW.

MISSION STATEMENT Hospice of Metropolitan Erie, Inc.

Hospice of Metropolitan Erie (HOME) is committed to providing care of the highest standard to enhance the quality of life of the terminally ill and their families, and the community.

Take Heart

I have days when it seems that such a big piece has been ripped from my life that only a gaping hole is left. Yet I also have days of celebrating new beginnings. My life and my roles are different now, and many of the changes I have experienced are positive ones. I am learning everyday how to be a "creative survivor." And I trust you will too.

Erin Diehl

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My first major journey dealing with a significant loss was when my mother died in 1978. Hospice was not prevalent in Erie at that time so we needed to do the extended care at the hospital. One of the first things I noticed was that even in the business of life, things stop and you find time to just be there. If you look at your daily schedule and try to figure out what you can cut out to have time for a sickness, you probably can't. But when the sickness strikes, you realize what is most important to you, and that time magically surfaces. I also noticed that the stages of grief are real. They may not all be identical for each person and the length and degree of dealing with the emotions is different with people, but there are definitely stages to go through. I have heard the grief first described as work, that you have to work through them. This is something I have always agreed with, though when you are going through them you may not describe them as such. You may call them "hitting walls", "waves of grief" or "trying to fill the gaps". However they are described, they are real, they are prevalent and they are painful, even for a Funeral Director.

But what I really want to share is that even in one's deepest grief and pain I truly believe that there is hope and peace as you work through your grief. I believe this because I saw it in my own family's journey as we dealt with my mother's death. When my mother died I saw my father struggle with what we call the "What If's". What if the doctor did miss some obvious signs, what if we had tried other treatment, what if we had gone to other treatment centers. The what if's were a major part of our lives for several years. Every time we started driving to the cemetery in Cambridge Springs, the what if's started. It was a

40 minute drive and it was the only topic for my dad during that drive. One day, several years after my mom's death, as we headed to the cemetery, out of the blue, the what if's started. But this time it was different. All of a sudden I realized that we were almost to Cambridge Springs, only 5 minutes from the cemetery, and only then did the what if's start. In my heart I gave a thankful prayer. I realized that my father was starting to heal.

I think of that trip often as I daily watch new families starting the painful journey of having to heal after the death of a loved one. It is not easy, there are many set backs, but it is a journey that I truly believe can bring healing along the way.

There were many things that have brought us to this point of healing and I believe that we used them all. We had our family, our faith, our friends and wonderful community programs like Hospice. This is a journey that we take individually, but we do not have to take it alone. I encourage you to give yourself time to heal and to be open to the many ways and people that are here to help you heal.

Nancy Dusckas

To be human is to suffer loss.

To love is to grieve.

To grieve is to heal.

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*Be grateful for grief.
It is an infallible sign that
we have loved someone deeply
enough to miss them.*

WHAT IS GRIEF?...

It's a natural and normal reaction to loss.

You need to go through grief to heal.

Grief can follow many kinds of loss.

The death of a loved one may cause the most intense grief, but grief can also follow other losses, such as:

- A miscarriage
- A divorce or separation
- Learning you have a disability or serious illness
- The death of a pet

These losses can bring reactions much like those that follow the death of a loved one.

Grief can bring a wide range of emotions.

These can range from deep sadness to anger. Some of these feelings may be new or frightening to you. Accepting that these are normal reactions is the first step on your road to healing.

You can find ways to deal with your pain.

There are many healthy ways to cope with grief. You can find ways that work for you. Know that there is plenty of help whenever you need it, too.

EVERYONE GRIEVES DIFFERENTLY

How you may grieve may depend on many factors. These include:

The circumstances of the loss

Every loss is hard. But grief may be especially intense, complex or lengthy if you lost someone very close to you, or if the cause of death is unknown or unusual. For example, grief may be especially hard when the loss is:

- The death of a child, parent, spouse or life partner
- A sudden or violent death
- A death due to suicide

Personal Factors

- Gender-males and females may have been taught different ways to handle stress and emotions. So they may acknowledge and express their grief in different ways.
- Age and life experiences-these can affect

your understanding of death and your sense of self when you experience a loss.

- Culture and faith-these may influence your beliefs about death and your responses, such as your choice of rituals for honoring someone who has died.
- Personality-different personality traits (such as being outgoing, shy, expressive or thoughtful) often lead to different ways of coping with loss.

BE ALERT FOR DEPRESSION

Deep sadness and feeling depressed for a while are normal after a loss. But lasting depression is a cause for concern.

Some warning signs, check any that you have had for 2 months or more-or that you are worried about:

- Feeling empty, hopeless, helpless or worthless
- Being preoccupied with feeling of guilt
- Loss of interest in pleasurable activities
- No interest in eating
- Trouble sleeping
- Trouble remembering, concentrating or making decisions
- Withdrawing from friends and family
- Hallucinations (other than thinking you hear the voice of your loved one or see his or her image briefly)

If you checked 1 or more items, get help from a health-care provider. Depression is a medical condition that needs treatment.

LET YOURSELF GRIEVE in a way that feels natural for you. It's OK to take longer or shorter time than others to work through your pain. And it is OK to grieve more or less intensely than others.

Allow any feelings and thoughts to come forth. There's no right or wrong way to feel or think about your loss. Don't be pressured by others' ideas of how you "should" or "have to" be.

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A Positive Attitude is good for your Health

Is this the time in your life for a period of reflection and change? This then is the time to focus on our attitude, examining it for signs of negativity & making a concerted effort to be more positive.

Even if you don't consider yourself a naysayer, make a point over the next few days to scrutinize what you think and say; it just might be eye-opening. For instance, how much of your self-talk and communication with others contains the words "can't," "don't," "shouldn't," "couldn't," and "never"? Do you frequently start sentences with "If only," "I can't believe" or "I hate it when," or make statements such as "It's impossible," "I have no choice," "That's terrible" or "Why me?"

Unfortunately, it's much easier to be critical — of ourselves, others and the world in general — and pessimistic about the future than to be enthusiastic and optimistic. It doesn't help that the mass media thrives on disaster, failure and discord, perpetuating and sometimes even creating it. And it really is true that misery loves company: when we complain aloud, other people usually join in, reinforcing our perception.

Often insidious, negative thinking takes many forms: doubt; worry; catastrophizing; focusing on our own or other people's shortcomings; seeking flaws in proposed plans; dwelling on what we perceive to be lacking in our lives; entitlement (perceiving we are owed certain things); denial; inflexibility; hopelessness; and regarding the world as an uncaring, perhaps even hostile place.

Results of such thinking include self-absorption; defensiveness; self-criticism; destructive criticism of others; sarcasm; distrust; blame; jealousy; bitterness; self-pity; avoidance; indecision; chronic complaining; low self-esteem; resistance to change; helplessness; and passivity.

Negativity is harmful not only to our physical and mental health—generating stress that can lead to illness—but also to our spiritual well-being.

Following are some ways to counteract negative tendencies:

- Limit your exposure to the news.
- Use positive self-talk—for example, "I can," "I will," "I choose."
- Be generous with praise and encouragement and cautious with criticism (and only give the constructive type).
- Cultivate a healthy sense of humor. Read the comics, watch a TV sitcom, rent funny movies. Don't take yourself or others too seriously.
- Accept realities you cannot change and focus instead on those you can influence.
- Trust that there's a valuable lesson in every type of adversity, and recognize that no matter what happens, you always have a choice about how you respond.
- Stay connected to people who care. Minimize contact with those who are negative or self-centered-narcissist.
- Find an outlet for expressing your thoughts and feelings, such as talking with a friend or keeping a journal.
- Pick your battles. Don't make a major issue out of every concern.
- Don't dwell on past mistakes, hurts or other unpleasant events.
- Look for the good in people and situations.
- Demonstrate empathy, give others the benefit of the doubt and practice forgiveness.
- Make healthy lifestyle choices, including eating nutritiously, getting sufficient sleep and staying as active as possible.
- Do something you enjoy each day, such as reading, listening to music or engaging in a hobby.
- Identify sources of stress in your life, eliminate as many as possible and learn to manage the rest. Practice relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, meditation or yoga.
- Seek help from your family doctor or a counselor if you continually feel sad, angry or overwhelmed.
- Let go of the need for perfection, and be

flexible about plans and expectations. Take things one day at a time.

- Be receptive to learning new ways of doing things, if necessary, as well as trying new activities.
- Do nice things for others.
- Set aside quiet time each day, to nurture your spirituality and help keep you grounded.
- Focus on the good things in your life—such as supportive relationships—and seek beauty and tranquility—for example, through appreciation of art or nature. Count your blessings every day. Learn to live in the moment and enjoy life's simple pleasures.

Lisa M. Petsche is a clinical social worker and freelance journalist specializing in health and seniors' issues. Reprinted with permission of the Tri-State Senior News.

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Try to express your feelings and thoughts.

For example, you can do this by talking, crying, writing or doing physical activity.

Reach out to people you trust. This is the time to lean on friends and other supportive people. Look for people who accept your feelings and thoughts, no matter what they are. Often, people want to help but don't know how. Try simply telling them what you need.

Acknowledging your reactions and giving them an outlet are important to your healing process.

JUST AS A REMINDER...

Our bereavement groups are held on the 2nd Tuesday of each month at 7pm and also on the 3rd Thursday of each month at 10am. They are held at 202 East 10th Street (the corner of 10th & Holland) and parking is available in the rear of the building.

From "The Five People You Meet In Heaven"

Mitch Albom

"There are no random acts. We are all connected. You can no more separate one life from another than you can separate a breeze from the wind."

"It is because the human spirit knows, deep down, that all lives intersect. That death doesn't just take someone, it misses someone else, and in the small distance between being taken and being missed, lives are changed. There is a balance to it all. One withers, another grows. Birth and death are part of a whole."

"Sometimes when you sacrifice something precious, you're not really losing it. You're just passing it on to someone else."

"Learn this...holding anger is a poison. It eats you from inside. We think that hating is a weapon that attacks the person who harmed us. But hatred is a curved blade. And the harm we do, we do to ourselves."

Lost love is still love.

Life has to end.

Love does not.

Memory becomes your partner.

You nurture it. You hold it. Love never ends.



I knew my life would never be the same again. But I didn't know that it could somehow, someday still be ok.

Mary Wiher



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 Erie, PA 16503
 (814) 456-6689

*The phoenix
 symbolizes the
 human spirit's
 ability to rise
 above life's most
 painful moments.*

You are invited to help Hospice in our work, ensuring the comfort and dignity of our community's members in the closing days of life.

Memorials _____ General Contributions _____
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ACKNOWLEDGMENT TO: _____

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YOUR DONATION IS TAX DEDUCTIBLE—THANK YOU.

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