Everyone has his or her own individual path through grief, but there are certain landmarks along the way that may help you recognize that you are healing.

You will know you are improving…

As you find the courage to face the facts and your true feelings.

As you find patience and give yourself time to accept the shock and to feel your feelings so that you begin to sense that you will gradually be free, not of sorrow, but of suppressed emotions.

As your head clears enough to sift good advice from bad and you recognize that you can make decisions based on your own needs instead of what friends and relatives believe you should do.

As you realize that you can change what needs to be changed.

As you find the self-discipline to work your way out of shock and suffering and you recognize that you can rejoin the human race with dignity and a sense of your own worth.

As you regain your sense of humor and find yourself laughing.

As you find the fortitude to begin to rejoin the human race with dignity and a sense of your own worth.

As you feel ready to take one step at a time toward your future, even though it is unknown.

Exercise: Ideas for Measuring Progress

It may help to deliberately notice your feelings and behaviors that show how far you’ve come. Take a few moments, either in writing or in your mind, to consider these landmarks.

It took courage for me to…

I had the patience to…

I made my own decisions about…
• I’ve discovered these capabilities that I never knew I had...
• Since this experience of loss, I have become...
• I have regained control of my life in these areas...
• I feel hopeful about...
• I am making future plans to...
• I was able to laugh when...
• A memory of my loved one that gives me pleasure is...
• I will always love him/her, but I can release and say goodbye to my loved one by...
• I have made progress in...

The Lighter Side of Bereavement

While you grieve, it is very important that you give yourself time and space to express your grief as well as opportunities for respite from the intensity of your feelings. Striking a balance is not easy; it often involves a trial and error process to find the right activities for yourself at the right time.

How can you find respite from grief without avoiding or discounting your pain? Experience with the bereaved and research shows that laughter is good medicine. Some of you may be startled by the suggestion that humor and grief can co-exist but consider what George Bernard Shaw said: “Life does not cease to be funny when people die any more than it ceases to be serious when people laugh.”

Humor and laughter do not force you to avoid your feelings, they simply give you an opportunity to focus on another part of the picture for a while. Instead of fun, laughter and levity into your daily routines lends perspective and can give you some much-needed relief at this time.

Furthermore, laughter and tears have more in common than you may think. Both crying and laughing release tension stored in the body. When you cry, you release toxins from your body. When you laugh, endorphins, the body’s natural painkillers, are released, fostering euphoric feelings and a sense of well-being. One of the wisest pieces of advice regarding coping with grief came from a bereaved mother, “Cry when you have to, laugh when you can.” In other words, it is essential to give yourself permission to both laugh and cry to heal completely.

Prescription for grief: One good belly laugh per day. Repeat as needed for relief of pain. If you are like many grieving people and feel like a “pain magnet,” you may need to be deliberate in your attempts to integrate humor into your daily routines. It helps to balance your most difficult times with opportunities to tickle your funny bone. Consider integrating one or more of the following suggestions into your daily routine.

1. Visit the comedy section of your local video store. Watch amusing movies or TV shows.
2. Read something funny, especially before bed. Try something by Robert Fulghum or children’s books like Dr. Seuss’ “Oh The Places You Will Go” or Judith Viorst’s “Alexander and the No Good, Horrible, Very Bad Day.”
3. Get out of the house and have some fun. Consider going to a comedy at your local movie theater. Allow yourself to see the humorous side of life all around you. It’s there – in your children and grandchildren, your pets and your neighbors – you’ll see it if you look.
4. Spend time with funny people. Laughter is contagious.

Warriors

In her book, “Widow,” Lynn Caine talks about the scars you earn from your grief. She calls your scars “battle stripes”. The scars are part of you and your struggle for development. They are proof of the fact that you are a human being.

Most decorated soldiers would readily trade their battle ribbons for an end to war. Still they can be satisfied that they did, what they had to do, that they made the most of the experience, that they learned from it, and that they came back alive.

As a human being, you are significantly impacted and shaped by the pain in your life. Your scars are your “battle ribbons” and they represent where you’ve been, they are part of your personal histories and present strengths. Why should you discount them?

Communicating with Your Kids

Communicating With Your Kids

Once, you may not know what or how to explain a loved one’s death to your child. Since children ask the same questions again and again, you may feel confused and wonder if you’re saying the right things. You may be tempted to “protect” your children and only tell them the “easy” things about the death. You may also be so filled with your own strong feelings that you tend to cut talking to your children – even though they need to talk to you. But how you communicate with your children affects how they handle their grief over time.

The following are tips for communicating to your children about death and your ongoing grief:

• Tell children about a death immediately with honesty and respect. Explain death in terms that children can understand (i.e., use correct terms such as “die”, “died” and “dead”). Words and expressions such as “passed away”, “rested”, and “went to sleep” may only confuse them.

• Express your own feelings openly. When children see you angry, crying, upset, and sad, they know it’s okay for them to have the same feelings. Seeing you express yourself shows them how to express their own strong feelings.

• Understand that children will express their feelings differently than adults, in their own way and in their own time. They may “act out” what has happened in their play. This is not disrespectful; it is a way for them to make sense of what has happened.

• Continue to talk about the person who died. Children need reassurance that the person will remain in their memories and in their hearts.

• Be patient with children and get feedback to know that you have understood each other.

• Be sure to validate your child’s expressions of feelings. Let them know that you accept what they are saying without judging or minimizing. Rather than saying, “You shouldn’t feel that way”, or “it’s not that bad”, you might say, “You’re right, it is hard, painful, or frustrating” or “I can see that your stomach is hurting”. Help your child elaborate from general thoughts to specific ones. For example, help them move from “I’m scared” to “I’m scared of being alone in the dark.”

• Avoid trying to read your child’s mind. Ask for confirmation about your guess. For example, you might say “You look pretty angry. Is that what you’re feeling right now?”

• Don’t be afraid to speak openly to others about the death while your child overhears. This gives children information, which they may not have thought to ask and permission to talk about it to others.

Some Suggestions to Children When Dealing With Anger

• Tell your parents how you plan to express your anger so that they understand what you are doing. They may be able to help you get old phone books, which you can tear up.

• It is important to clean up any messes you make.

• It is a good idea to have a cooling off time to calm down.

• It is rare that anything gets fixed when we are very angry. Problems between people are easier to solve when we allow a cooling-off period and get in touch with the feelings underneath the anger such as: hurt, shame, anxiety, and frustration.