



What Hope Can There Be in the Face of Such Tragedy?

Jeremiah 29:11: *For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.*

Guest: Stephen M. King, CFSP
(Owner of the Mystic Funeral Home, Mystic, CT)

Here we are just a few days before Christmas 2012. This is a time when there is usually a magic in the air, an excitement for friends, family and good cheer. Usually, that is the case - but not this year. No, not this year. Something happened, and as a result the giddy joy is gone. We have suffered a great loss. A few short days ago, an unimaginable crime was committed and 27 people, 20 of them 6-and 7-year old children, had their lives taken from them, brutally and without mercy. Today we honor their memory and recognize the pain of their grief-stricken families and friends. Today we also search to find how the hope of the true meaning of Christmas can give us - all of us - strength to cope, strength to stand, and strength to begin to move forward.

Our First Theme: Sorrow

Sorrow and pain are a legacy that humankind has had to live with since man's first sin:

Matthew 2:18: (NASB) *A voice was heard in Ramah, Weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; And she refused to be comforted, Because they were no more.*



"Precious Child," (Verse 1) Karen Tayler

In my dreams you are alive and well,
precious child, precious child
In my mind I see you clear as a bell
precious child, precious child
In my soul there is a hole
that can never be filled
But in my heart there is hope
because you are with me still
In my heart you live on
always there, never gone
Precious child, you left too soon
and though it may be true that we're apart,
you will live forever in my heart

Psalms 130:1: *Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O LORD.*

Chase Kowalski, age 7
Josephine Gay, age 7
Ana Marquez-Greene, age 6
Dawn Hochsprung, age 47
Mary Sherlach, age 56
Benjamin Wheeler, age 6
Catherine Hubbard, age 6
Caroline Previdi, age 6
Noah Pozner, age 6
Charlotte Bacon, age 6
Dylan Hockley, age 6
James Mattioli, age 6
Grace McDonnell, age 7
Victoria Soto, age 27
Emilie Parker, age 6
Jessica Rekos, age 6
Olivia Engel, age 6
Allison Wyatt, age 6
Lauren Rousseau, age 30
Anne Marie Murphy, age 52
Avielle Richman, age 6
Jack Pinto, age 6
Daniel Barden, age 7
Rachel D'Avino, age 29
Madeleine Hsu, age 6
Nancy Lanza, age 52



MYSTIC FUNERAL HOME
Traditional Funeral, Memorial, Burial and Cremation

Question for Stephen: You were up in Newtown, CT, this past week. What did you do, what were your impressions and observations and how did it affect you? *Stephen participated in one of the funerals. It was very difficult for the funeral directors involved. Listen to his full answer by listening to the archived program.*

As we cry at the tragedy of our losses, God knows our pain, and God cries with us:

Jeremiah 9:17-18: (NASB) ¹⁷Thus says the LORD of hosts, Consider and call for the mourning women, that they may come;... ¹⁸Let them make haste and take up a wailing for us, that our eyes may shed tears and our eyelids flow with water.



"Where Are You, Christmas?" (Verse 1) Faith Hill

Where are you Christmas?
Why can't I find you?
Why have you gone away?
Where is the laughter
you used to bring me?
Why can't I hear music play?
My world is changing
I'm rearranging
Does that mean Christmas changes, too?

Because there is sorrow, the sorrow of sin, death and tragedy, finding hope is an urgent matter. We look for hope in Christmas' true meaning.

Our Second Theme: Uncertainty

Deep sorrow and loss inevitably bring uncertainty, for they shake the foundational relationships that our lives are built upon, and they pierce the armor of stability that we find protection behind. This, therefore, can be a fearful time as well, for now as uncertainty settles in, it changes the punctuation of our lives from periods and exclamations to just questions...lots and lots of questions.

Question for Stephen: What can you tell us about the timeline of grief? *There isn't a right or wrong way of coping with grief. Individuals deal with grief differently. In speaking with the families we deal with, the first six to 18 months are the most difficult. During this time period, loved ones are no longer reaching out to the hurting person, but it's a stage when the numbness disappears and reality sets in and they are back to their normal lives. It's not a time to produce, achieve or accomplish. When someone vanishes from our lives, we may discover the most routine task becomes extremely difficult.*

Grief doesn't follow a pattern; it is more like a roller coaster up and down.



Uncertainty was an overwhelming factor in the development of God's plan of hope for men. This song is about Mary on the road to Bethlehem. She is tired, frightened and looking for the Father's guidance.



"Breath of Heaven," (Verse 1) Amy Grant

I have traveled many moonless nights,
cold and weary with a babe inside
and I wonder what I've done,
Holy Father, You have come
and chosen me now to carry Your son

I am waiting in a silent prayer
I am frightened by the load I bear
In a world as cold as stone
Must I walk this path alone?
Be with me now, be with me now

Sometimes it is appropriate to talk to a professional about your grief. Some people need to talk about the loss over and over again and family may become worn out, so counseling may be helpful.

These questions would have been in Mary's mind from the beginning:

Luke 1:26-35: (NRSV) ²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

When we are dealing with sorrow, uncertainty follows. It seems there is nothing stable in our lives. It is then we want to look to the true hope for the human race, the true meaning of Christmas.



"Away in a Manger," Celtic Woman

Away in a manger no crib for his bed
The little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head
The stars in the bright sky look down where he lay
The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.

Going back to the original life changing announcement to Mary:

³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. ³⁴Mary said to the angel, How can this be, since I am a virgin? ³⁵The angel said to her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.

Ridicule and gossip would follow as this young woman carried this baby to term - all the while knowing it was the will of God - yet bearing the judgment of those around her. So, amidst the uncertainty of all these circumstances, Christ the Savior is born.



Our Third Theme: Humble Strength

Once faced with the uncertainty born out of deep sorrow and loss, we are still obliged to walk the path of our life. Strangely, what was once a paved road has now become mud-filled mire through which each step has now become a stress and a strain. Our hope lies in the taking of each step, for in so doing we almost imperceptibly begin to develop a humble strength.

Question for Stephen: What would you say are the most important ingredients for people to deal with loss?

1. *Be there.*
2. *Tolerate silences.*
3. *Listen and accept in a non-judgmental way.*
4. *Avoid the use of clichés. ("Think of all the good times!" "Give it time, it will get better!" "You're young, you will marry again!")*
5. *Encourage them to talk about their loved one.*
6. *Be practical in your offer of support.*



"Breath of Heaven," (Verse 3) Amy Grant

Do you wonder as you watch my face
if a wiser one should have had my place?
But I offer all I am,
for the mercy of your plan
Help me be strong
Help me be, help me

Luke 2:1-7: (KJV) ¹And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.... ³And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. ⁴And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem;... ⁵To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. ⁶And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. ⁷And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

7. *Mentioning your loved one's name.*
8. *Accepting that tears are normal and healthy.*
9. *Don't try to fill in conversations with a lot of outside news.*
10. *Remember that grief may take many years to work through.*
11. *Acknowledging birth days, death days and anniversaries.*
12. *Accepting that you cannot really make them feel better; they will have to work through the grief process themselves. It is painful. You may not be able to make it better, but you can be there with them while they feel bad.*



This begins with a recap of the journey to Bethlehem where they found no room...



"Do You Have Room," (Verse 1) Shawna Edwards

They journeyed far, a weary pair
they sought for shelter from the cold night air

Some place where she could lay her head
where she could give her babe a quiet bed.

Was there no room or corner there
in all the town someone could spare
was there no soul come to their aid
a stable there with them this day

Do you have room for the Savior
and do you seek him anew,
have you a place for the one who lived
and died for you

Are you as humble as a shepherd boy
or as wise as men foretold

Would you have come that night
Would you have sought the light?
Do you have room?

Luke 2:8-13: (KJV) ⁸And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. ¹⁰And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. ¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. ¹²And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ¹⁴Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.



"O Holy Night," (Verse 1) Josh Groban

O Holy Night
the stars are brightly shining
It is the night of our dear Savior's birth
Long lay the world
in sin and error pining
'til he appeared
and the soul felt its worth
The thrill of hope
the weary world rejoices
for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn
Fall on your knees
oh hear the angel voices
O night divine
O night when Christ was born
O night divine
O night, O night divine

The integrity of the promises of God - the best reason for hope:

Isaiah 9:6-7: (KJV) ⁶For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. ⁷Of the increase of his government and



peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.

Death, sorrow and grief happen in a world of sin. But there is an answer in the plan of God. There is a way for us to deal with our sorrow and difficulty, a way for us to get ahold of it, and achieve the humble strength in the experience.

Our Fourth Theme: Endurance

In the wake of tragic loss, endurance is rarely set upon as an objective to achieve. However, it does come to us, often as an unsought for and unexpected, yet welcome, ally and it quietly performs its vital and life altering work upon our lives.



"Precious Child," (Verse 2) Karen Taylor

In my plans I was the first to leave,
precious child, precious child
but in this world I was left here to grieve,
precious child, my precious child
In my soul there is a hole
that can never be filled
but in my heart there is hope
and you are with me still

In my heart you live on
always there, never gone
Precious child, you left too soon
though it may be true that we are apart
you will live forever in my heart.
God knows I want to hold you, see you, touch you
and maybe there's a heaven
and someday I will again
Please know you're not
forgotten until then

Question for Stephen: Based on your own experience, how should people explain the events in Newtown to their children? Avoid it? Use sweeping generalizations? Get specific? Stephen answers that it is important to answer them. Hear his full advice by listening to the archived program.



A caller suggests: God's own son, our Lord Jesus, experienced death. Through that death and resurrection, life is guaranteed to all. John 3:16
1 Corinthians 15:26: Death is man's greatest enemy. It will be destroyed, and there will be no more need for funeral homes!



This is the story of the long and difficult journey of the three wise men who came from the east in search of the King.



"Adore Him," (Verse 1) Kari Jobe

Countless days on a journey that led so far
Endless nights they traveled to follow the star
They did not find a palace, just a humble village home
and searching for a king
but finding a child, no crown, no throne.
Still they bowed down
Come let us adore him
Oh come let us adore him
Oh come let us adore him

Matthew 2:1-12: (NRSV) ¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage. ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.

So, their objective was clear - travel as far as necessary to find a child. Once found, pay him homage for he would be the hope of the world. Dedication truly develops endurance. We need to withstand the forces of evil.

Our Fifth Theme: New Reality

It is often through the unperceived development of endurance that we find ourselves one day prepared for the new reality that inevitably takes hold of our lives. While this new reality is of necessity somewhat of our own design, it is not of our preference. Yet, it must stay.



"Precious Child," (Verse 3) Karen Taylor

In my heart you live on
Always there, never gone
Precious child, you left too soon,
Though it may be true that we're apart
You will live forever... in my heart

Question for Stephen: We often talk about closure with tragic events. In your work, do you see closure happen or begin to happen and how important do you think it is? He does not necessarily see closure during the days of the funeral. It starts to begin after the daily routine starts. Closure is on the timeline of grief, sometime in the future. It allows us to accept our new reality.

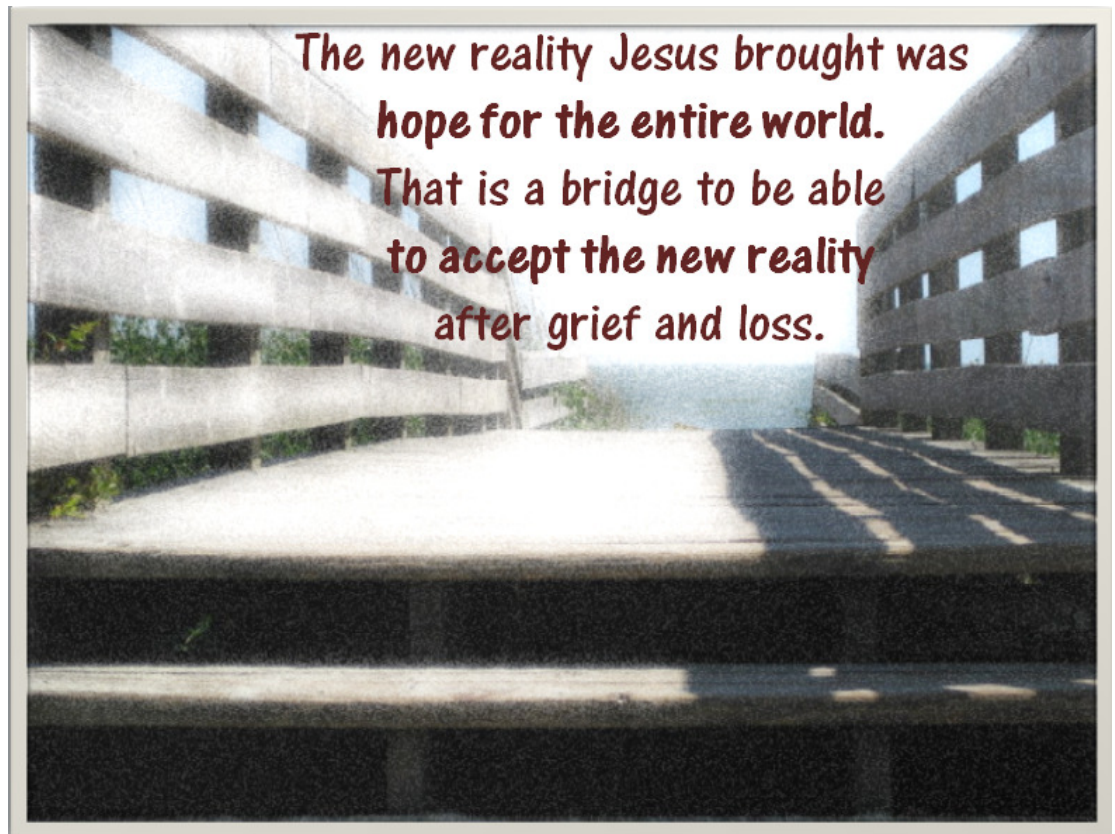
Closure allows us to step over the challenges of pitfalls without losing the attachment to our loved one we lost.



"Adore Him," (Verse 2) Kari Jobe

Expectation turned to mystery,
for nothing was like anything they dreamed
anticipating a royal and those honored by this world.
Instead they gazed in the awestruck eyes of a lowly peasant girl
holding her child
Come let us adore him
Oh come let us adore him
Oh come let us adore him

So the wise men saw a new reality as their expectations were indeed fulfilled, but in a most unlikely manner. This would be a template for the whole life of Jesus.



Simeon the Prophet sought a new reality that would bring hope to all:

Luke 2:21-29: (KJV) ²¹And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called JESUS, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb. ²²And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord; ²³(As it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;) ²⁴And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons. ²⁵And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Spirit, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for him the custom of the Law, ²⁸then he took him into his arms, and blessed God, and said, ²⁹Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, according to Your word;



Being aged, the only thing Simeon looked forward to in his life was a glimpse, just a glimpse of God's gift of redemption. He sees the baby, takes him in his arms and knows that his life is now complete. He knew in his arms he held the hope of the world, a new reality.



"Now that I Have Held Him," (Verse 1) Michael Card

That old man in the temple
Waiting in the court
Waiting for the answer to a promise
And all at once he sees them
In the morning sunshine
A couple come and carry in a baby
Now that I've held him in my arms
My life can come to an end
Let Your servant now depart in peace
Cause I've seen Your salvation
He's the Light of the Gentiles
And the glory of His people Israel

Grief cannot be delineated by timing because people grieve in different ways. Closure cannot be rushed, but you can feed it the right kinds of input. The plan of God takes time as well. It takes longer than we expect it to or would want it to, but it just takes time and we must respect that.

Luke 2:30-33: (KJV) ³⁰For my eyes have seen Your salvation, ³¹Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²A Light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel. ³³And his father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about him.

Simeon realizes the full import of redemption. He is a light that even reaches to all Gentiles. He is a light that is the Glory of Israel! This light was now just a baby, but this baby was the hope of the world...a new and wonderful reality!

Our Sixth Theme: Perspective

Perspective is a destination: Once we have been pierced with pain and sorrow, battled with uncertainty and having found a humble strength which unlocks our endurance, we finally approach our new reality - and perhaps for the first time in a long time - gain perspective. Perspective has a way of making that which seems overwhelming merely big and that which seems unattainable possible. Perspective is a good place to live...



"Where's the Line to See Jesus," Becky Kelly

Christmas time was approaching; the snow is starting to fall
Shoppers choosing their presents, people filling the mall
Children waiting for Santa with excitement and glee
A little boy tugged my sweater, looked up and asked me,
Where's the line to see Jesus? Is he here at the store?



If Christmas time is his birthday, why don't we see him more?
Where's the line, Where's the line,
Where's the line, for the Lord?

We have to get our perspective and look towards hope. How do we get to hope? We have to learn to cope with the situation at hand.

Matthew 11:28-30: (NASB) ²⁸*Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*

Jesus is saying we can come to him for rest. He understands the pain and sorrow and suffering we are experiencing. That is why he is here.

Matthew 11:2-6: (NASB) ²*Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, Are you the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else? ⁴Jesus answered and said to them, Go and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. ⁶And blessed is he who does not take offense at me.*

Even John the Baptist had doubts. Jesus' life, death and sacrifice solved the world's problems - we just do not see the full results yet.



"Where's the Line to See Jesus," Becky Kelly

Where's the line to see Jesus? Is he here at the store?
If Christmas time is his birthday, why don't we see him more?
Where's the line to see Jesus? He was born for me.
Santa Claus brought me presents, but Christ gave his life for me.
Where's the line
Where's the line
Where's the line
for the Lord

It takes time, but we need to put our sorrow into perspective.



A caller suggested: John 1:5: *The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.*

Matthew 5:3-8: (NASB) ³*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. ⁵Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. ⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. ⁷Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. ⁸Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

There is a promise to those poor in spirit and those who mourn. Jesus feels our pain - he lived it! He knows our weakness - he sacrificed for it! He embraces our despair - he died for it! He is the hope of the world, and as we approach Christmas let us truly appreciate his gift to us. The perspective Jesus gives us helps us to cope. It is not going to miraculously fix us, but it helps us to bear the burden. Hope is there when you are ready.



*So what hope can there be in the face of such tragedy?
For Jonathan and Rick and Christian Questions,
Think about it...!*

*And now even more to think about...
only in the **Full Edition** of CQ Rewind!*

This week we thought we would focus on finding tools for dealing with the grieving process. For most of us, we grieve from afar because it wasn't our child or family member that was killed. That doesn't mean we don't grieve, it just means our grieving will be different and perhaps easier to manage. The principles in these articles can work for any who grieve.

(Source: http://belovedhearts.com/Grief_Center/Coping_as_a_parent.htm)

Ways Parents Can Cope

- It is most important to be gentle and kind to yourself. Have patience with your grief. Over a long time the intensity and frequency of the emotions will lessen.

Husbands and wives tend to grieve differently. It is very difficult for one to meet the needs of the other when grieving styles differ. Couples may need to negotiate when and how to talk about their grief. Don't expect your partner to be able to read your mind. They cannot know what you need unless you tell them. If because of their grief they cannot provide the support you need, find others to talk to.

Give yourself permission to mourn:

- * Reading books on parental bereavement and joining support groups for grieving parents (like The Compassionate Friends) can be very helpful.
- * Talk about your child. People may avoid mentioning your child's name, because they don't want to cause you pain. Unfortunately it's up to you to let them know how important it is to you.
- * Keep a journal or write about your feelings. This helps to express the emotions. Over a period of months you will be able to see how things change for you.
- * If talking and writing don't feel helpful, find something active to do. It may be related to your child's interests or a way to remember your child. Some people, particularly men, find active working helps them work on their grief.
- * Memorialize your child. Write down memories as they occur. It's a good way to ensure that you won't forget things about them. Actively create a memorial or ritual to continue your child's part in your lives.
- * Be mindful that in the first year, you experience all of the firsts (e.g., Mother's Day, family gatherings, holidays) that trigger your grief. In the following years, you have a better idea of what to expect. You may want to think of starting some new traditions on these days.



These tips will help to ease the emotional roller coaster:

- * Get plenty of rest. If sleep difficulties persist for many months, you may want to speak to your physician.
- * Maintaining a good diet is essential. While you may not feel like eating meals, eat numerous healthy snacks throughout the day.
- * Exercise on a regular basis.

When to Get Professional Help: If depression and anxiety or panic attacks continue past six months to the point that you cannot maintain normal activity, you may want to contact a grief therapist and/or your physician.

(Source: http://belovedhearts.com/Grief_Center/Holiday_Grief.htm)

Grieving During the Holidays

Grieving during the holidays is difficult, especially the first holiday cycle after the passing of a loved one.

Whatever your age, whatever the cause of death, holidays lived in the absence of a loved one can be a very difficult time. Customary routines are ended, never to be repeated in quite the same way. Easygoing laughter, once flowing so naturally, may become awkward or even altogether missing. Gift giving, once so filled with fun, may seem somehow empty and sad. Familiar songs, once so comforting, may catch in your throat or bring tears to your eyes.

All this happens against a backdrop of significant questions you may find yourself asking: What exactly is happening to me? Can I possibly survive this, and do I even want to? How long will this turmoil last? Is what I am feeling normal? Am I losing touch with my sanity?

The holiday period itself adds its own share of questions: How can I make it through all the events of the holidays while missing so desperately the one I love? Would I be better off to ignore the holidays this year? Should I act as if everything were normal? Should I make major changes in my holiday rituals?

If you're like most people in grief, you will have many questions. It's important for you to know at the outset that there are few universal "right" and "wrong" answers. There may be various answers, depending upon the unique factors of your situation: who you are as a person, what your family is like, who it was who died, when and how they died, what your relationship with the departed was, and the role that person played in your holiday rituals, to name only a few. It's also important to remember that not all your questions will have ready answers. Sometimes you must learn by doing, and then learn even better by trying it another way.

Keeping in mind there has never been a loss precisely like yours, there are still some general guidelines bereaved people have found helpful through the years. I will propose three of them. I hope you will treat them as suggestions rather than as prescriptions. Use them as ideas you can expand upon. Shape them to



fit your distinct circumstances and to serve your personal needs. Above all else, remember that others, *many* others, have faced something similar to what you're facing right now. They have learned what it is like to endure and to survive and often even to grow through their experience. What they have learned is what you can learn, too. The ways they have persevered are ways you can adopt as well.

Most of all, I hope you'll choose to believe this: your holidays can still be a significant time for you. They will be different, but they can still be meaningful. They may hurt, but they can also hold hope -- even great hope.

1. Accept the likelihood of your pain.

When you're facing your first holiday without the one who has been so close to you, a good starting point is with this awareness: chances are it will be a painful time. You may wonder how you will ever make it through.

This may or may not comfort you, but it is true: your pain is a sign you have been blessed to draw very close to another. You have loved and you have been loved. The hurt you feel is an indication of your wonderful humanness, your sensitivity, your openness. It is a proof that another has touched you deeply, even as you have touched them. While you may wish you did not hurt as much as you do, you dare not forget that your pain is none other than the result of your joy.

Even so, you may feel you would like to bypass the entire holiday period and not participate in it at all. That's a common response. During the final two months of the calendar year, however, holiday reminders are visible almost everywhere you look and audible in almost everything you hear. It's impossible to avoid the impact of this season. The energy you would spend evading what is going on all around you will be more creatively spent adapting to the reality of what this particular season holds for you.

Similarly, it is probably unwise to pretend everything is perfectly normal, and that this year's festivities will be no different than any other year. The death of this important person in your life has created a conspicuous void. You may feel that, of course, any time of the year. But this is especially the case during the holidays. You expect to include those you love in our holiday celebrations -- with the cards you write, the gifts you give, the meals you share, the rituals you re-enact.

The loved one who has died, however, cannot be included, at least in the way you wish. And you're reminded of this time after time in the way families are portrayed on television, in the way loved ones are referred to in holiday songs, in the idealistic images everyone carries inside about these special times.

Remember this: few holidays are as picture-perfect as we'd like to believe. It may help to admit that from the start.

It is equally important not to decide in advance that the approaching holidays will necessarily be horrendous. While it may have its difficult moments, the approaching holiday time does not have to be an absolute catastrophe. More often than not, people report that the experience itself did not turn out to be



as trying as they feared. Chances are good that can be your experience, too. Yes, you will probably feel pain. Yes, you may wish this year's calendar would skip over November and December. But, no, it does not have to be awful. There are things you can do to help.

2. Feel whatever it is you feel.

You may be learning what many others have learned: some people will try to hurry you through your grief. Some may insist on continually cheering you up. Others may give you advice about what you should and shouldn't do or how you should and shouldn't feel.

Whatever else you do this holiday time, do your best to claim your own feelings.

As much as you are able, own up to the fact that something terribly important has happened in your life, that this naturally causes a reaction within you. You're not a robot -- you're a responsive human being who is capable of all sorts of emotions.

No one else will feel what you do, in the same way, at the same time, with the same intensity. But some of the general feelings people in your situation often report include these:

- *Sadness.* It's sad to think about what you've lost, what can never happen again, what you'll have to learn to live without. It's doubly sad to experience this at such a happy time of the year.
- *Depression.* More than feeling glum, you may feel desolate or despairing. You may feel depleted of all energy, listless and alone. You may find doubt you'll ever feel any better.
- *Anxiety.* You may feel nervous and jittery, ill at ease and full of uncertainty.
- *Fear.* You may be afraid of how you'll cope, what you'll do, even if you'll survive.
- *Anger.* Being mad is a common response -- mad at people who don't understand you or support you, angry about how the death happened and who was involved, even provoked at the loved one who died. You may be upset with yourself, or with God, or with the whole world.
- *Guilt.* You may dwell upon what you did or didn't do while the loved one was alive. You may feel guilty you're living or that you have moments of happiness in the midst of your grief.
- *Apathy.* You may find that you experience almost no feelings at all. You may feel numb and impassive. Or you may feel confused and disoriented.

There are many other feelings, of course: relief, respect, pride, joy, compassion, and love all come to mind as well. Whatever it is you're feeling these days, remind yourself that feelings are normal, whatever they happen to



be. They're a sign that you're human, that you care deeply, and that whatever you feel today, you can feel differently tomorrow.

Your feelings seldom lead you astray. They usually lead you to yourself.

3. Take charge where you can.

There is much in your life, of course, that has moved beyond your command. The loss you've experienced and the resulting inescapable changes have robbed you of a power you may have taken for granted. Yet there are some actions you can take and some decisions you can make that are within your authority. Begin to take control of your life in specific ways, even if those ways seem small.

If the death you've experienced isn't too recent, this may be a good time to evaluate the holiday traditions you've established through the years. Which ones are meaningful, ones you want to keep? Which ones have outgrown their usefulness? Which ones might you forego for a year or two, and which ones are so important to you that you *must* perform them, even if it's hard to do? Which ones can you adapt to fit this year's circumstances?

Generally speaking, this is usually not the best time to make drastic changes, like starting life over in a new town, or celebrating the holidays in a faraway place among people who do not appreciate what has happened to you. But some changes can be healthy and even important to make. It might make sense to change your holiday meal routine, by dining out at a restaurant rather than at home, or by having the main meal in another's home. Changes might be made in how holiday decorations are done. Or how gifts are given out, or when, or where. Consider designing new rituals -- ones that will include opportunities to remember the past while acknowledging that the present has changed.

Keep in mind there are other ways for you to assume some control over your life. Eating healthful and drinking wisely is a good start. Maintain your exercise program, or begin one if you've not been in the habit. Research has demonstrated this will help you feel better, mentally as well as physically. A brisk walk each day is one of the best exercises you can perform, especially if you can do it out of doors. Consult your physician if you have any questions.

Another action you can take is to try to get your proper amount of sleep. Go to bed early enough to get the rest you need. If you're sleeping too much, limit your time in bed. It's not unusual, however, for your sleep patterns to change for awhile, even a long while.

In general, choose life in all the ways you can. Be among people who offer you vitality. Practice those disciplines that bring you energy. Do those things that give you satisfaction. Take charge in little ways and you'll find they're not so little -- they're important.

Adapted from the writings of Jim Miller, author of *What Will Help Me: 12 Things to Remember When You Have Suffered a Loss and How Can I Help?*