Stepping Stones™

NEWSLETTER

UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT GRIEVING PATTERNS IN YOUR FAMILY

BY MARTY TOUSLEY

Grief is a family affair. When one member of a family dies, the entire family is affected, as each person grieves their own personal loss in their own unique way. Roles and responsibilities shift; relationships change; communication and mutual support among family members may suffer. Over time, the family must identify what the roles and functions of the lost member were, decide whose job it will be to execute those duties now, and learn how to compensate for their absence.

Men, women and children are very different from one another, not just in personality patterns that affect how they think, feel and behave, but also in how they grieve. When someone dies, they will not experience or express their reactions in the same way. Failure to understand and accept these different ways of grieving can result in hurt feelings and conflict between partners and among family members during a very difficult time.

Personality patterns differ within a family. Differing personality patterns among family members will affect how each one individually expresses, experiences and deals with grief. While we all have the capacity to think and to feel, personality research shows that typically a person trusts and prefers one pattern of response over the other.

Thinkers experience and speak of their grief intellectually and physically. They are most comfortable with seeking accurate information, analyzing facts, making informed decisions and taking action to solve problems. Remaining strong, dispassionate and detached in the face of powerful

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emotions, they may speak of their grief in an intellectual way, thus appearing to others as cold and uncaring, or as having no feelings at all.

Feelers experience a full, rich range of emotions in response to grief. Comfortable with strong emotions and tears, they are sensitive to their own feelings and to the feelings of others as well. Since they feel strong emotions so deeply, they're less able to rationalize and intellectualize the pain of grief, and more likely to appear overwhelmed and devastated by it.

Still others may experience profound grief and have very strong feelings about it, but for one reason or another are unable or unwilling to express it. Such individuals are more likely to turn to drugs or alcohol in an effort to numb the pain of loss, or to lower their inhibitions so they can let loose their emotions.

In general, when men suffer the loss of a loved one they tend to put their feelings into action, experiencing their grief physically rather than emotionally. They deal with their loss by focusing on goal-oriented activities which activate thinking, doing and acting. Rather than endlessly talking about or crying over the person who died, for example, a man may throw himself into time-limited tasks such as planting a memorial garden or writing a poem or a eulogy. Such activities give a man not only a sense of potency and accomplishment as he enters his grief, but also a means of escaping it when the task is done. If a man relates the details of his loss to his closest male friends, it's likely to be around activities like hunting, fishing, sporting events and card games. Although a man may let himself cry in his grief, he'll usually do it alone, in secret or in the dark — which may lead some to conclude that he must not be grieving at all.

Women, on the other hand, have been socialized to be more open with their feelings. They may feel a greater need to talk with others who are comfortable with strong emotions and willing to listen without judgment. Unfortunately, while it may be more acceptable for women in our culture to be expressive and emotional, all too often in grief they're criticized for being too sentimental or overly sensitive.

Children grieve just as deeply as adults, but depending on their cognitive and emotional development, they will experience and express their grief differently from the grownups around them. Their response will depend on the knowledge and skills available to them at the time of the loss. More than anything else, children need their parents to be honest with them. They need accurate, factual information, freedom to ask questions and express their feelings, inclusion in decisions, discussions and family commemorative rituals, stable, consistent attention from their caretakers, and time to explore and come to terms with the meaning of their loss.

Allow for individual differences among family members. The way we grieve is as individual as we are, and our own gender biases may influence how we "read" another gender's grieving. Some females are "thinkers" who grieve in traditionally "masculine" ways, and some males are "feelers" who will grieve in traditionally "feminine" ways. Regardless of differences in personality, gender and age, however, the pressures of grief are still present for all family members, and the tasks of mourning are the same: to confront, endure and work through the emotional effects of the death so the loss can be dealt with successfully. Grief must be expressed and released in order to be resolved, and all family members need encouragement to identify and release emotions, to talk about and share their thoughts, and to accept help and support from others.

We must live through the dreary winter
If we would value the spring;
And the woods must be cold and silent
Before the robins sing.
The flowers must be buried in darkness
Before they can bud and bloom,
And the sweetest, warmest sunshine
Comes after the storm and gloom.

ANONYMOUS

MARTHA'S CRAYONS

By: Barbara Ragsdale

Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap, but by the seeds you plant. ~Robert Louis Stevenson

The phone call was expected, but it still left me feeling helpless and deeply sad. Martha's long battle against cancer was almost over -- cancer was winning.

Friends for many years, Martha and I were sorority sisters in college, and then fellow teachers at a local junior high. As a novice teacher, I envied her boundless energy and amazing ability to successfully teach art to teenagers. I struggled to motivate them with music; she inspired winners. Later, she displayed her impressive watercolors in many shows where my husband exhibited.

Martha's family requested no visitors at the hospital. She simply didn't have the energy. I suspect they also knew that the ICU would be overwhelmed with the countless former students and friends coming to offer encouragement.

In lieu of visiting, I sent cards. Not fancy ones, just daily handwritten notes about anything but get well soon. I told her funny stories, described the weather, and gossiped about her fellow artists. Martha loved to enter juried shows, so I told her about art competitions, hoping against hope that she might get well enough to compete.

Late one afternoon, suffering writer's block about the next card, I sipped a cup of coffee and stared at the discarded wads of paper littering the kitchen table -- my frustrated start and stop attempts at writing. Without warning, the kitchen door opened, and in waltzed Kate, a five-year-old neighbor girl who frequently dropped in to visit, because, as she put it, "I didn't have no fwiends."

"Whatcha' doing?" she asked, standing next to my chair, one foot propped on top of the other.

"I'm writing a card to a sick friend."

Her gaze roamed about the kitchen but stopped when she spied a large painting of Martha's leaning against the wall. She moved to it and bent closer. Awarded first place in a recent show, the blue ribbon hung from the frame.

"I can draw," she said casually. Hands on her knees, she peered outside at "The Sentinel," a massive oak standing guard over my home. As if on alert, its huge leafless limb cast a protective shadow across the house.

Stooped, she looked at the painting a long time. Finally, she looked back at me over her shoulder. Her head cocked, her innocent blue eyes intense. "Who did this?" She emphasized each word.

"A friend. The same one I'm writing the card to."

"Oh, my. What kind of crayons does she use? I need to get some of them."

Eyes wide in sheer surprise, I laughed out loud. Kate had given me the thought for the next card. I grabbed her for a big hug. She looked bewildered when I plopped a kiss on top of her curly hair. "I don't know, Kate. I'll have to ask her."

Martha died a few days later. Her husband, Tim, pulled me aside at the funeral to thank me for the notes. "She loved the one about the crayons," he said. "It was the last time I heard her laugh."

Tears welled up as I squeezed his hand. "I hoped she would. I did," was my quiet reply. Turning to leave, I offered a silent prayer for the amazing innocence of a child. For Tim, time would remove the footprints of the day with all its care and sorrow. I was thankful that he would have the memory of the last laugh.

High Flight

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth
of sun-split clouds -- and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of -- wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air.
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark, or even eagle flew --
And, while the silent lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand and touched the face of God.

John Gillespie Magee, Jr, RCAF (1922-1941)
A Canadian fighter pilot killed in action in World War II

We are pleased to continue our tradition of caring through these complimentary issues of *Stepping Stones Newsletter* and our professional staff.

If you have enjoyed this reading, please let us know! We'd love to provide you with additional grief materials and resources to help you cope during this difficult time. If you would like more information, or if you would like to speak to someone who can assist you with filing for veterans' benefits, Social Security and insurance benefits, or who can help you prepare your own or a loved one's funeral plans in advance, please reply to this email, and a funeral home representative will contact you shortly. We sincerely hope that we have been able to brighten your day with this edition of *Stepping Stones*. Please don't hesitate to let us know if there is anything we can do to assist you.