

Caring for families

# Along The Way

Helping you understand your  
journey through grief.

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# Feeling Stressed?

By Dr. Bill Webster

I am sure you have noticed the proliferation of T-shirts bearing the logo, "Keep Calm and Carry On."

The statement is based on a catchphrase that appeared originally on a Second World War British public safety poster, which has become popular again in recent years. Except now, in this entrepreneurial world, the phrase has morphed into a series of messages centred on the semantic template "Keep Calm and ....." with suggestions ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous.

Some examples: "Keep Calm and Call Mom"; "Keep Calm and Wait for Friday"; "Keep Calm and Carry on Knitting"; "Keep Calm and Eat Chocolate"; "Keep Calm and Carry a Big Stick." Or my favourite: "I'm Scottish. I Can't Keep Calm."

So, in the midst of a stressful life, how do you relax? Keep calm, have a cup of tea and consider the following suggestions:

**1. Accept this moment as it is.** This is where you are at, whether you like it or not. Resist the urge to blame or criticize yourself or others for what you think should have happened. Instead focus on the moment. What is happening now ... and what can you do

about it? This is far more productive than worrying about what has or could happen.

**2. Take charge of your body's stress reactions.** Learn to recognize the signs and symptoms of tension in your body and learn stress-reduction techniques. Use deep-breathing techniques or meditation to calm your body and mind. Listen to a peaceful CD with guided relaxation or imagery.

**3. Plan ahead to remain calm.** Imagine yourself in that difficult stressful situation and picture yourself handling it.

**4. Eat healthy foods.** Keep track of what you eat for three days. Include everything, especially those little snacks and treats you manage to slip in there. Check with a nutritionist to analyze your diet. Sometimes the things we consume that we think are healthy and good for us can be just the opposite.

**5. Get regular exercise.** Walk, skip, run, cycle or whatever you want. Even some stretching exercises can help to reduce pent-up tension. But do what you like to do, remembering that regular exercise releases endorphins, which are our "feel good" hormones.



*So may I just quietly ask you the all-important question:  
Are you feeling the stress?*

**6. Use humour.** Lighten up a stressful situation. And yes, there may even be ways to lighten up grief if done with sensitivity. Think about, or get someone to tell you about a humorous incident from the person's life. It changes the atmosphere for you and for them. Sometimes we need to laugh with a movie, a book, or over a meal or drink with friends.

**7. Take up a hobby.** Whether it is a sport, gardening, stamp collecting, cooking or any other activity, hobbies add value to your life and decrease a lot of stress.

**8. Spend more time outside.** My family invested in a deck and some lawn furniture a few years ago. How nice it is to come home after a stressful day and just sit and relax in that environment for a while. Or go for a walk or a bike ride ... consider driving somewhere to where you can do a different itinerary each time.

**9. Music can have a great calming and inspirational quality.** I find that singing along in the car with a CD can really lift my mood in heavy traffic. So what if the guy next to me is giving me funny looks. Besides, singing in the car gets fewer complaints than if I sing in the shower!

**10. Talk to yourself.** That's right. You heard me. Tell yourself not to get so hot and bothered. Remind yourself what getting aggravated will do to your blood pressure. Tell yourself to relax and just let it go. Realize that a week from now this won't matter as much as it does in this moment. Or my favourite technique: remind yourself that you will "look back on this and laugh." So why not let it go, and have a chuckle now.

**11. Speak up for yourself.** There are times and situations that

leave us frustrated and angry, when we do need to speak up and make a point, and fair enough. However, it is always wise to choose your battles carefully and make sure this really is an issue you shouldn't let go. I usually write my "complaint" or "grievance" against someone down on paper. Then I revise it, then I soften it a bit more, then I do it over again. By then it is out of my system so I don't need to send the message. The danger is in allowing those negative emotions to linger which is what causes us to react with stress.

**12. Let go of the idea of a perfect life.** Not everything in life works out perfectly, no matter how hard you try, or how much you want it. Sometimes we have to forgive ourselves for being human. As Robert Burns wrote in his poem To a Mouse: "The best laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft agley, and leave us naught but grief and pain for promised joy." That's life! We can accept it or struggle against it, but we can't change it.

So may I just quietly ask you the all-important question: Are you feeling the stress? What have you done for you lately? I try to take an hour a day, one day a week, and a weekend a month to do something – anything! – just for me (which can include family) to recharge the batteries and look after myself for a while.

So why not take five minutes, lower the lights, turn on some calming music and just take a few deep breaths. Imagine yourself in a peaceful place like a garden or a quiet beach. Think about what you would like to do with "one hour for me" today, and the one day for yourself this week, and that weekend next month.

So now that you are calm ... carry on!



# COULD IT

By Dr. Bill Webster

# Get Any Worse?

*Sudden and unexpected death is always complicated and difficult, and this couple felt like their life, with its hopes and dreams now seemingly shattered, would never be the same, and they were probably right.*

***“This is the worst thing that could have happened.”***

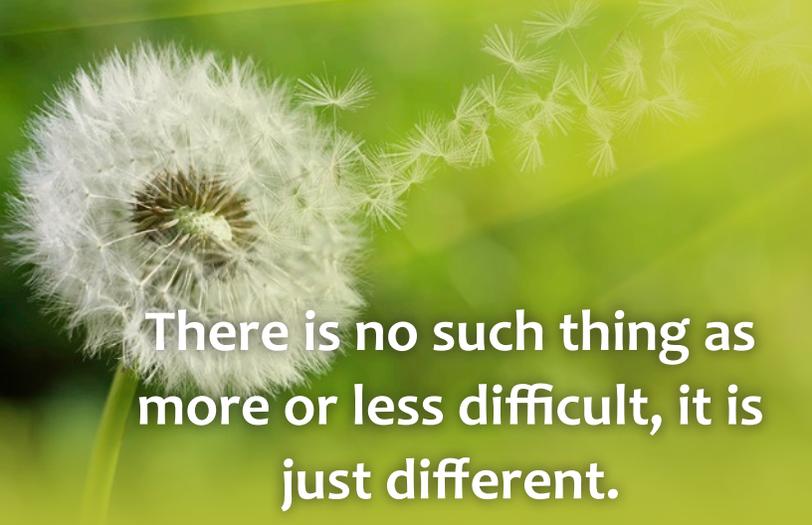
I struggled to maintain my professional composure as I listened, my heart going out to the young couple who sat crying uncontrollably in my office. The death of their six-year-old daughter, the result of a vehicle accident caused by someone driving under the influence of alcohol, was a devastating loss that touched the family, the community and everyone else very deeply. Sudden and unexpected death is always complicated and difficult, and this couple felt like their life, with its hopes and dreams now seemingly shattered, would never be the same, and they were probably right.

***“This is the worst thing that could have happened.”***

Only a few hours later, a young woman sat on the same couch lamenting the death of her mother who had died only six months after being diagnosed with cancer. The daughter had dedicated herself to caring for her mother, day and night, in the hopes that her vigilance would result in a cure or remission. But in spite of her best efforts, her mother had steadily deteriorated and had died. She felt like it was the end of the world.

***“This is the worst thing that could have happened.”***

It was the very next day I heard those all too familiar words again. The gentleman sitting before me had recently lost his wife of 53 years. Actually, he had lost her some years before, not to death, but to Alzheimer’s disease. He had cared for her at home for several years but, as the disease progressed, it became impossible, and she entered long-term care. In the final year, she did not recognize him, and had become increasingly violent. Nonetheless, he struggled with guilt over the situation, and, when she finally died, where one might have expected a sense of relief, grief had overwhelmed him.



## There is no such thing as more or less difficult, it is just different.

Three very different situations, all very difficult to cope with, and all leaving those directly affected feeling like their experience had been the most awful thing that could have happened.

So which of these three did in fact experience “the worst kind of loss”?

It is a question I am asked often. “Is it worse to lose a spouse or to lose a child?” “Is it worse to lose someone suddenly and unexpectedly, or is it worse to see someone die after a long lingering illness?” “Is it easier if you have a chance to say goodbye, or more complicated when there is not that opportunity?”

Good questions. No easy answers.

Of course, there are very real differences between sudden death and anticipated death. It can make a difference in the grieving process if there is an opportunity to say goodbye, or if there is unfinished business that was never reconciled. It is different to lose a spouse than it is to lose a child or a parent. We lose different aspects of our life with each of these losses.

But here is my viewpoint. There is no such thing as more or less difficult, it is just different. Every loss is difficult, however dissimilar the situation. People, in an attempt to bring comfort, often say, “Others have it worse. At least you should be thankful that ...” and then follow with a list of ways in which the situation could have been even more horrible.

Such comments, however well intentioned, are less than helpful. The grieving person could care less how badly others have it. As far as they are concerned, this is a disaster because it is their per-

sonal loss. They feel like this is the worst thing that could have happened, and that it has happened to them.

That is why, when I am asked about which is the worst kind of loss, I always reply with the same answer: “The worst kind of loss is yours.”

Whatever the loss, whatever the circumstances, this feels like the worst thing that could happen in the worst way at this time to this person. Circumstances make every situation different, but regardless of the specifics, every situation is difficult. You may feel like you have lost everything.

While this has turned your entire world upside down, it does not mean your life is over. It is never easy. It is always a struggle.

We cannot change what has happened. All we can do is decide what we are going to do now that the worst thing that could happen did happen. Loss is inevitable, but what we do about it is optional. We can choose to be down and out, or decide to get up and get going.

The grief process is what enables us to survive, to find ways to live beyond this experience of loss, to find the strength, the courage and the resolve to go on even in the light of what has happened.

Then suddenly, something just clicks. You begin to recognize what is important and what isn't. You learn not to worry about what other people think and more about what you think yourself. You eventually realize how far you've come, and you remember with a smile the times when you were convinced that things were such a mess you would never recover.

And you finally recognize you are really proud of yourself and the person you have become because of the struggle.

Wishful thinking? Pie in the sky? I can understand you may feel that right now in the midst of this experience.

But I myself, along with thousands of others who have experienced “the worst thing that could have happened,” have come to the place ... often, admittedly, a good ways down the road ... where we can say these words because they are true for us.

And if you struggle your way through this grief that you feel after your loss, they will be true of you as well.

*Paradise Row*  
111 Paradise Row  
Saint John, N.B. E2K 3H6  
**506-634-7424**

**B**renan's  
 **FUNERAL HOMES  
& CREMATORIUM**  
*www.BrenansFH.com*

*Bay View*  
1461 Manawagonish Road  
West Saint John, N.B. E2M 3X8  
**506-634-7425**