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Along The Way

Helping you understand your
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Coping with Change

By Dr. Bill Webster

Benjamin Franklin once wrote, “In this world, nothing is sure but death and taxes.”

Most of us know the reality of that statement. But perhaps we could consider one other certainty: change! Everything changes – times change, circumstances change, people change. Nothing stays the same for long.

Some changes can be positive. Yet even the positive changes produce some losses, and we dare not neglect the fact that every loss results in a deprivation of one kind or another. Perhaps you have had an experience where you wondered why you were feeling sad after experiencing what was supposed to be a happy event or situation. Whether change is positive or negative, there is always a dimension of loss to that change which produces some measure of grief.

But other changes are not so easy: the death of someone we care about, or who cared about us; the loss of a job; the loss of your home or of a treasured possession; the loss of health, independence or relationship. Loss is a fact of being alive in our world. No one is immune from it.

And when it touches your life, it is painful beyond words.

When my wife died, I felt like my whole world had changed. A death precipitates many changes in your life: the loss of a relationship; the loss of companionship; the loss of affection; the loss of someone to do things with or talk things over. For some it may mean the loss of financial security, their independence or the loss of their role as part of a couple, a parent or as a caregiver.

For many, it is the loss of their hopes and dreams of “the way they thought life would be”; for others the loss of meaning, courage or faith, and a future that will not be the same as expected.

Every time we experience change, we grieve what we have lost as a result of that loss. You may experience an explosion of emotions with surprising intensity. A myriad of reactions such as confusion, forgetfulness, lack of concentration, anxiety, fear, impatience, restlessness, crying among others can assail us. Often we feel oversensitive, and everything seems to touch a raw nerve.

While this emotional reaction may be considered normal, it is fair to observe that it is a new definition of normality. It is important to acknowledge that grief is a normal response to what is always an unwelcome event; but it is just as important in the next breath to say that even though it is normal, we should never minimize its complexity. Losing someone or something you care about is one of the most difficult experiences of life.

Some people try to comfort us with clichés that suggest that grief is not so bad. They tell us that “this is a blessing in disguise” or “maybe it is for the best.” That makes this a good thing, right? The trend in some areas is to focus on “acceptance.” Some use the concept of “good grief” and even suggest that grief is somehow a positive or good thing.

But let’s think again. Going to the dentist to have an aching tooth filled may be a good thing, but it is not something we are usually thrilled about or look forward to. It is necessary but not enjoyable. I believe we should think of “good grief” in the same way. To grieve is good, but we are rarely happy about it. Grief is usually an unwelcome experience.

But perhaps you are thinking: How am I supposed to cope with something that has torn me apart?

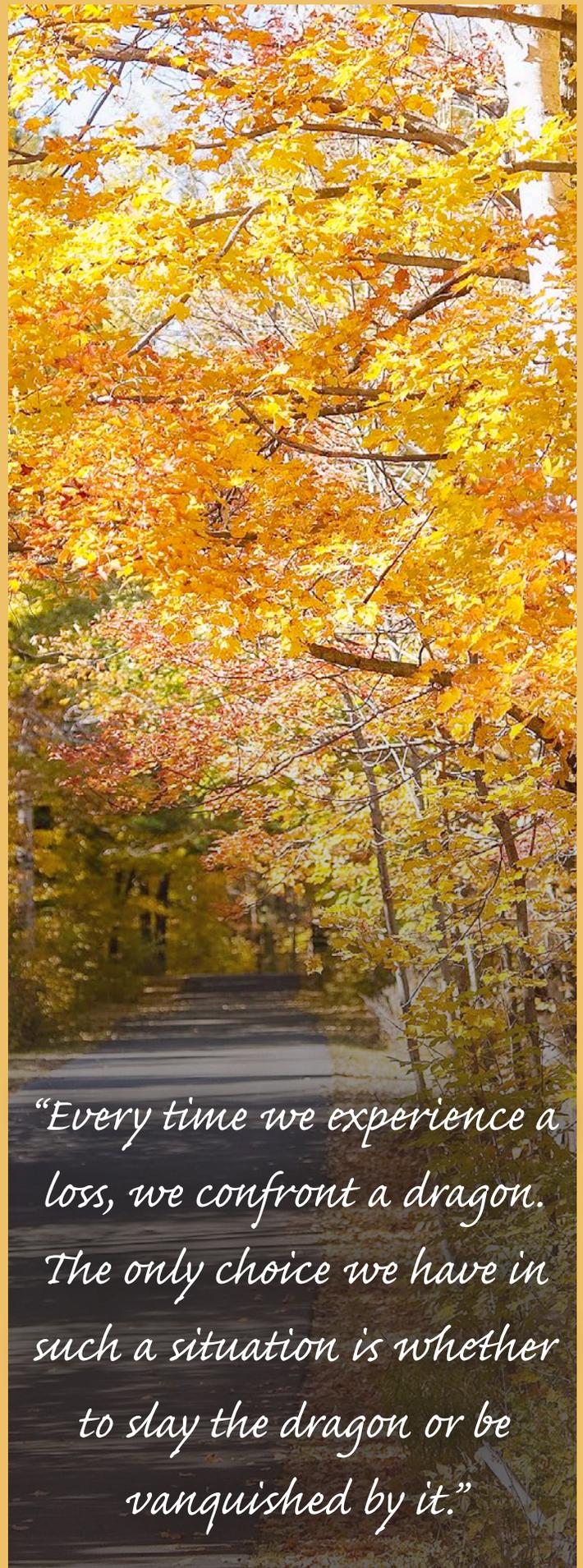
Good question! The word “bereaved” comes from the root word “reave” which means “to be torn apart.” The root word for “crisis” means “to separate”; to be “ripped apart.” That’s what losing someone we loved feels like. And like Humpty Dumpty, maybe some days we wonder if we will ever be able to put the pieces back together again. But grief is a natural albeit difficult part of life, helping us not to get “over” the experience but to get “through” it.

I think you begin to learn to cope when you are willing to take the following steps:

- Coping means that you do not allow the past to totally destroy the present.
- Coping means that despite going through a negative and even destructive experience, you still have your heart and your soul, your self-respect and your life.
- Coping with grief means you are learning to live with the sorrow without allowing it to plunge you into despair.
- Coping with grief involves finding the confidence to go on. What many people do not realize is that there can be a fundamental loss of confidence that affects a grieving person. Things that normally they would have taken in stride become herculean labours. Everything is a big deal. Going out can be a big deal. Doing tasks that before you would have done with hardly a thought, now are a big deal. People say, “C’mon, what’s wrong with you? You’ve done this before; pull yourself together.” But they do not understand that the person’s usual coping mechanisms have been affected.

Every time we experience a loss, we confront a dragon. The only choice we have in such a situation is whether to slay the dragon or be vanquished by it. Grief can be a challenging experience, but not more powerful than your ability to work through the process. It is hard work, but as often happens, good things can come out of struggle. The more we work through the struggle, the closer we come to slaying the dragon.

Remember the smallest victory is a major triumph. As Viktor Frankl put it, “To live is to suffer; to survive is to find meaning in the suffering.”



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Helping Children Cope with Grief

By Dr. Bill Webster

When someone dies, or is suffering a life-threatening illness, we are often concerned about how children will cope. Following are a few suggestions on understanding and helping children after a loss.

- **Children have many questions about death, and these are usually different than the ones adults have.** Children's questions deserve simple, straightforward answers. The first task of a grieving child is to make sense of the factual information about how the loss occurred. A caregiver's simple, direct, concrete explanation of the facts surrounding the death will help the children begin to come to terms with what has happened. They may ask to hear the facts a number of times. They may also want to share the story with many others – friends, teachers, strangers – in order to try to comprehend this unimaginable thing that has happened.
- **Children's perception of loss and their grief has to be understood according to their developmental levels.** Death, or indeed any loss, means different things to children of different ages. Inquire and try to figure out what this loss means to this child at this particular time in life. What they feel they have lost will be an indicator of what they are missing.
- **Address any fears the child may have.** Children are often afraid that someone else in the family, or they themselves, could die also. Every child is afraid of being abandoned, so if one parent has died, the remaining parent needs to give the child reassurance that he/she expects to live a long time, and that the child will be OK, allaying their fears.
- **Every child's response to loss is unique.** As children share their grief with others they trust, they will tell us what they are feeling and experiencing rather than we adults assuming we know what the child is going through. By showing respect, acceptance, warmth and understanding, the child senses that they are being taken seriously and will be more open to sharing what they need by way of support.
- **Children express themselves in many different ways after a loss.** Some of these may include: an apparent lack of feelings or emotion; acting-out behaviours due to feelings of insecurity and abandonment; behaviours that invite punishment, for children would rather be punished than be ignored; regressive behaviours; fear, guilt and self-blame; doing better or worse at school; and feelings of loneliness.



arose. “Why did Mommy die?” “Where is she now?” “What will we do if you die too?” I tried to answer the questions they asked simply and honestly, without giving too complicated responses. They discerned that I was making them a part of it all, and was being open about everything, and accepted that.

- **Children like to “do” something in such situations.** Devising simple ceremonies such as lighting a candle next to a photograph; placing a letter, picture or special memento in a casket; releasing a helium balloon with a message attached for the person who died; or placing a special flower on the grave, can be effective goodbye rituals. Children themselves can be wonderfully creative with meaningful and symbolic ideas, so let them decide what they would like to do.
- **Speak in simple language.** Ask the child what he/she thinks, knows and feels, and respond specifically to these concerns. Try not to give excessive or gruesome detail, and make sure you check how the child is putting the information all together.
- **Be honest. Avoid half-truths.** Never tell a child something he/she will later have to unlearn. Don’t avoid the word death, because sometimes the alternatives (asleep, gone away, in a better place, etc.) create worse difficulty in a child’s mind.
- **Be open about the situation.** When my wife died, my boys were nine and seven years of age. As much as I might have wanted to, there was no avoiding the questions that

- **Initiate the conversation.** Children may not ask questions because they are not sure if they will upset us adults. They may not know what to ask, or be able to put their uncertainties into words. They know that something unusual is happening, and are scared by it. Instead of asking questions, they may turn to whining or other negative behaviours, which add to your emotional stress. In response, rather than helping them cope, adults may get upset or angry and this adds to the reluctance to talk. Try to be sensitive to opportunities to ask children how they feel. We might ask, “You’ve probably been wondering about ...” and pose the question that the children may be asking.
- **Sometimes our concern for the children can mask a deep need to resolve our own adult grief issues.** Sometimes it is easier and more socially acceptable to say, “I am concerned about the children,” than it is to say, “I’m having a hard time dealing with this myself.” So be careful not to transfer your own fears and anxieties on to the children.
- **Often a child may benefit from a support program.** Talk to your doctor, spiritual leader or other community resource people to see what programs are available for your children.

Above all, let the child know that these feelings of grief are natural and a necessary part of the grieving process and that their grief will pass. Assure them they are not alone, and that others, including you yourself, feel sad as well. Assure the child, however, that these feelings will pass with time, and that life will return to normal.

Remember that children are wonderfully resilient, and with support and understanding, caring adults can help guide children through this difficult time and make it a valuable part of personal growth and development.

There is no greater gift we can give our children.

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