

8 Ways to Grieve the Loss of a Loved One

My mother died last week at age 93 after almost three years of dementia. My father died four years ago this week. And last year I lost three close friends. You'd think by now I'd be an expert in how to grieve a loss but I've felt quite helpless when it comes to how to process my emotions.

I've read many books and articles about grief and talked to pastors and counselors. But everyone's journey with grief is different, depending on the circumstances of death and our own unique personalities. But one thing that has helped me is knowing I'm not alone. Plenty of people have walked this road before me.

Because I have a habit of making checklists, I created these guidelines to help me grieve. I hope it will help you or someone you know who is going through a painful loss:

1. Cry. I love John 11:35, which reminds us that Jesus wept after His friend Lazarus died. Jesus was the Son of God, but He was also fully human and He experienced the same emotions we do. Crying is not a sign of weakness. Charles Spurgeon said, "Tears are the diamonds of heaven." When we cry, it's like letting the pressure out of a steam kettle; it's never healthy to hold back tears.

2. Laugh. When my father was brain damaged, he said a lot of funny things and I started keeping a list of them in my phone. After my mother died, I sat around my kitchen table and laughed with my wife and daughters about all the funny comments my mom made when her memory had faded. Laughter is medicine and we need extra doses of it when someone we love dies. If our loved ones are in God's presence now, certainly we can rejoice even while we grieve.

3. Be still. It is vital for us to hit the pause button after a death and savor the memories. We need to mute the background noise of life so we can meditate on all the ways our loved ones blessed us. Music is also a gift in those sacred moments. Sometimes I listen to my dad's favorite Big Band music from the 1940s because it reminds me of him. I have also found incredible strength from the hymn "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross," which we sang at my mother's funeral last Saturday.

4. Think about heaven. Colossians 3:2 (NASB1995) says: "Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on the earth." It does the soul good to meditate on the reality of eternal life. After my dad died, I read the excellent book *Heaven* by Randy Alcorn; now I plan to read Lee Strobel's new book *The Case for Heaven*. Don't lose sight of the fact that if your loved ones were Christians, you are going to see them again.

5. Make a memorial. Both my parents are buried in a cemetery near my house, so I can visit that special place. But you can also enshrine your memories in other ways. I have a corner in my study where I keep my dad's photos. And because my mother loved birds, I plan to put some birdhouses in my backyard so more birds will visit. Their singing will remind me of her.

6. Talk to others. It's tempting to hide in a cave when we are at a low point. But the worst thing anyone can do after a loss is to isolate. We need each other, especially during times of mourning. Join a grief support group, talk regularly with friends and make sure you are processing your emotions. You need hugs, loving words and extra encouragement.

7. Write down your thoughts. Journaling is so important when you are grieving. I'm making lists of my favorite memories of my parents and friends, and I'm also sorting photos in special folders. The flowers you received during a funeral will die quickly but the special memories you write down will last a lifetime.

8. Stay active. Some people say grief can sap your energy and make you tired, and some people even experience insomnia after a death. It's important to get plenty of rest – but don't sleep all day or abuse alcohol, drugs or food to find the comfort that only God can give. After my mother died, I canceled some trips on my schedule but I kept my daily exercise schedule because I function better emotionally if I feel good physically.

Jesus had you on His mind when He said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:4). That's a promise. Take the time to let His comfort saturate your soul.
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