

Healing with Haven

October & November 2008

Discovering Something Greater Than the Answer to “WHY?”

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By Nan Zastrow, Wausau, Wisconsinwings1@charter.net

Each time we start our sudden death learning series, we ask participants, “Why did you come? How can we help you?”

One response always surfaces. “I want to understand ‘why?’” A confirming look appears on the face of others in the group. I’m sure they came hoping that Gary and I would be able to erase the nightmare of events, gaze into a crystal ball, and assure them there is a reason to go on living. It is human nature to ask, “Why?” and there is seldom a satisfactory answer.

Instead of answers, we give the bereaved “tools” to neutralize the reaction that death has robbed them of someone very special and life ceases to have meaning. They are about to embark on an adventure and journey far beyond their imaginations. It’s an arduous task that will challenge a lifetime of beliefs and assumptions—a journey of self-discovery. In the search for meaning, there is a priceless gift offered in return for their suffering—an opportunity to pick up the pieces and start over again.

This experience will transform who they are today and what they can become. During this transition, they have the potential to discover something even greater than the answer to their collective question. They can discover an inner spirit and an extraordinary courage to survive in a changed world. On their individual journeys, here are a few discoveries our group might find.

Discover The Foundation Of Your Core Beliefs

We are raised with values and beliefs that influence who we are. We attribute these to our social culture, our religious backgrounds and our educational pursuits. We build a strong code of ethics that reflects our attitudes and our choices in

life.

Seldom are these core beliefs severely challenged, but nothing challenges them more than the tragic death of a loved one. Our attitude towards what has happened has the potential to “make us or break us,” and our foundation of core beliefs may be the saving grace in times of crisis.

Gary and I can easily remember how dim the future appeared after the death of our son, Chad, at the age of twenty-one, as the result of suicide. Ten weeks later his fiancée took her life, too, perpetuating the anguish and pain we felt. Our religious belief system was temporarily

challenged, because the world seemed unjust, and we held God responsible. We asked questions we knew others couldn’t answer, but we hoped that something would give us a reason to believe again. What we discovered (after our initial anger) was our religious foundation that became guiding factor in acceptance and peace. Our core beliefs enabled us to search for meaning with the confidence and assurance that our quest was natural during grief.

realizing that the person who died will never be forgotten, yet knowing that one’s own life can and will move forward.

When something bad happens in our lives, we may think that God doesn’t care or that he has

abandoned us. Previously, days may have passed in which we thought little about God, until tragedy struck and we called out His name in anger or in a plea for help. Then, we discovered that God was really there all the time. Searching for meaning helps us redirect our thoughts, sort out our feelings and search deeper to obtain comfort from age-old wisdom. For some, a religious foundation is the greatest source of help and hope.



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Discover “Why?” In The Treasures Of A Life, Not The Tragedy.

When searching for “why?” we often put aside our grieving to unravel a daunting mystery. Usually, a satisfactory answer for “why?” doesn’t exist. With no suicidal background or theory about why Chad’s life ended so abruptly, we became exhausted with the search. My family assured me it was a mystery. Chad’s friends didn’t understand it. Some people just turned away. We were so immersed in trying to solve the mystery that we were forgetting the beautiful life of the person who died. When we finally put our tragedy aside, we celebrated the precious memories of who Chad was.

Soothe your uncertainty with memories and celebrate why your loved one was so special. Remember the person, not the perpetrator, and not the unexplainable event. Make a vow to honor your loved one’s memory through ritual and story. You can live with your memories, but you can’t live with your nightmares.

Discover A New Perspective On What’s Really Important To You.

“Why?” causes us to reprioritize our commitments, our relationships and our values faster than any other question in life. We instantly realize that something we valued as very important is gone... and now we must adjust to living without.

As a result of grief, our priorities change to reflect what’s really important to us. Is your career and the number of hours at the office more important than having dinner or spending time with your family? Is living in the fast lane, indulging in rich food and spending large sums of money on luxuries more important than living a modest, healthy purposeful life? Maybe plans for an early retirement and travel suddenly seem essential. Only you can make the choices, but it is likely as a result of grief, you will discover your priorities have changed. Adjusting our priorities helps us live in the moment, realizing that other moments may not exist.

Discover An Acceptable Answer To Why —One You Can Live With.

Sometimes we don’t know or understand the full circumstances of the death—so we ask, “Why?” When answers are elusive, we begin to investigate all the possibilities. When there aren’t answers to satisfy us, or the answers are contradictory to what we perceive, we feel resentment. It’s reasonable at this point, to create our stories with plausible answers that help us to accept the tragedy.

First, explore your theory about why this death occurred in the manner or time it did. What do you believe happened? Why?



A reasonable explanation might be described as: He or she

- A. made a mistake
- B. was reckless or careless resulting in death
- C. ignored health and medical cautions
- D. acquired an incurable illness or disease
- E. was aging and health was declining
- F. was in the wrong place at the wrong time
- G. was the victim of a malicious crime

There is one more possibility that comforts some people. Their belief system supports the concept that “It was his or her time to die. God was calling our loved one home.”

Choose one of the probable causes (or add one of your own) and use it in your story about your loved one’s death. This allows you the comfort of telling your story and moving forward without being burdened by “why?”

Discover A Belief In Something Beyond.

In our search for meaning, “Why?” urges us to grasp for something less concrete—something “magical” and healing. Our innate spirituality allows us to stretch beyond our physical world and reach out for the unknown.

A mother whose young daughter died tragically in an accident feels the presence of angels and a sense of security that her daughter is safe.

A man has a vivid dream of his son who died and believes it was a “message” from beyond. This confirms his belief in the afterlife.

A young woman whose husband died of kidney failure is comforted to know that he is in God’s care where there is no pain—and knows that he would want her to go on with her life.

A wife indulges in meditation after her husband’s death. This helps her concentrate on her inner self, enhances her spirituality and gives her strength.

You can also develop a spiritual sensitivity through meditation, reading and re-building your self-esteem. This, in turn, helps you develop a personal philosophy of life and death. Religious roots can be strengthened by acquired spirituality. The two, working together, have the ability to heal the inner spirit.

Discover That “Why?” Isn’t Important Anymore.

Though you can’t change the situation, you can change yourself. Eventually, to heal your pain, it will be necessary to cease the pursuit of “why?” and move forward in rebuilding your life.

Relentless pursuits of justice can take control of your life. One man was sure that destroying the animal that took his son’s life would be reasonable revenge for his son’s death. A couple felt that after a long, enduring trial, bringing a drunk driver to justice would soften the pain of their daughter’s untimely death. An irate mother tracked down the young men who had been with her son at the time of the car accident,

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and accused them (without fact) of irresponsible driving, use of alcoholic beverages and the presence of illegal drugs.

None of these actions solved the mystery of “why?” Nor do they change what has occurred. These attempts to neutralize the pain are often futile. In the end—even if we accomplish what we set out to do—our loved ones still died. A wilted excuse from either a repentant person or one who feels no remorse will not heal the sorrow we cling to. Revengeful acts or lifelong pursuits of justice only destroy the moral character we value most. They may also result in destroying our own lives and the lives of other loved ones.

When we seek to understand death, we become more

comfortable with life. These discoveries transform the bereaved. For Gary and me, our search for meaning was a healing journey. Now I can live without the answer to “why?” It doesn’t matter how the terrible event occurred. I remind myself that knowing “why?” won’t change a thing. I have beautiful memories to sustain me through the tough times. My faith has given me a firm religious foundation. My spirituality comforts me in the quiet moments by knowing that “Chad is okay.” With my new perspective, I’m ready to face the possibilities of “what’s next?” An my intuitive self whispers, If you really discovered the answer to “why?” would it bring Chad or Jenny back? 🏠

Adapting to the Loss of a Loved One: Three Tips on how to Cope

By Wendy Bridger

Have you ever sat down and played a piano where one of the keys wasn’t working? Or made cookies and left out an ingredient? Perhaps you’ve started listening to a favorite CD, and just when it gets to your favorite part of your favorite song, you realize that there is a scratch in it.

In some ways, losing a loved one is similar. Here you are going easily through life, and then, BAM, they are gone and life will never be the same. That piano piece sounds different because the middle C is broken, the cookies just aren’t the same, and at times, we are frustrated like we are when our CD gets scratched. Unfortunately, with the loss of a loved one, it is more difficult to fix than the piano or the batch of cookies, and your loved one was irreplaceable, unlike the CD. Short and simple, this is what grieving is: learning to cope with the loss of someone who was apart of what made us what we are. So, what do we do? How do we go on after they are gone? I have a few suggestions that might help you through.

First of all, just as each of us has different personalities, each of us grieves in a different way. There is no right or wrong way to feel or act, as long as you are not endangering yourself or others. Some of us cry. Others of us bury ourselves in work or hobbies. If the person is still living and only the relationship has changed, it is very easy for us to do all we can to change things back to how they used to be. At times, it may take a while to truly even admit that they are gone. We just might feel numb. Some of us might even feel guilty if we don’t feel sad enough! So, take your feelings and actions for what they are and be patient with yourself. After all, you have just lost a part of what makes you who you are.

Also, find a way to transition your loved one into your new life¹. My father in law lost his dad last year and he hung a

picture of him up in the living room to remember him. Others write goodbye letters to their loved one, giving themselves a chance to tell them things that they never got to say. Some of us keep a little box full of pictures and memories only to be taken out when we want to remember them, because remembering them all the time would be too overwhelming. I had a friend who’s little brother died. She got married on his birthday as a way to include him at her wedding. Once again, it depends on you and your relationship with the one you loved.

Another thing, you usually don’t ever “get over it.” Your loved one is gone. If you no longer have an ingredient to make cookies, it’s easy to realize that replacing it with a different ingredient would not make the cookies start tasting like they used to. To expect that you will be able to replace your loved one is also unrealistic. This reality may sound even more depressing. Frankly, I love chocolate chip cookies, and the idea of not ever having one again is quite upsetting! But in time, if I had to, I could grow to love other sweets, like banana bread, sweet potato pie, or brownies. So, even if you aren’t going to get over it, in time, you will adapt

to the loss and find fulfillment through other experiences and relationships.

So, be patient with yourself. Losing someone isn’t easy. It turns your life upside down. Naturally, it’s going to take a while to pick up the pieces and transition to life without your loved one. Remember, Beethoven composed some beautiful music after losing his hearing, and you will find happiness and fulfillment again in your life after losing your loved one.

¹Wordern, J.W. (1991). *Grief Counseling & Grief Therapy: A guidebook for the Mental Health Practitioner*. Springer Publishing 🏠



Grief & Loss Seminar Series

A new grief support group has begun and meets the 2nd and 4th Fridays of the month from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Alpert Jewish Community Center in Long Beach (3801 E. Willow St, Long Beach, Ca). This group will be a safe and supportive place for bereaved persons to share their experiences and feelings related to loss, and will also provide educational information on the grief process. For more information please contact Tina Stephenitch at 562-426-7500 ext 406. Pre-registration is required.

Individual/Group Support

The Bereavement Department of Haven Hospice offers individual support. For more information or to make an appointment for an individual meeting please contact our Bereavement Coordinator, Tina Stephenitch at (562) 426-7500 ext 406.

Volunteers

Are you ready to become a Haven Hospice Volunteer? If you are interested in this rewarding opportunity, or you know anyone who is looking to volunteer his or her time, please contact Tina Stephenitch, Volunteer Coordinator (562) 426-7500 406.

Help us keep our mailing list current!

If you no longer wish to receive our monthly newsletter or if the address that appears is not current, please email Tina Stephenitch at tstephen@havenhealth.org or call the office at (562) 426-7500 ext 406. Thank you for your assistance.



Haven Hospice™

2895 Temple Ave
Signal Hill, CA 90755

Call toll-free at (877) 366-4466

