

What Helps the Most

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Since there is no magic wand to wave or fairy dust to sprinkle over us to take the pain away when we are grieving, it's nice to know there are some things that might lighten our burden of sorrow as we struggle to cope and survive. I wish someone had whispered these ideas in my ear or left a note in my mailbox when I was so raw with pain following the deaths of my two oldest children, 21 year old Denis and 19 year old Peggy, in the same car accident. Peggy died instantly and Denis died four days later, the day after we buried Peggy. We planned and lived through two funerals in one week. Let me share some of the things I later discovered that help my bereaved heart the most:

- ❖ **Funeral Service.** Little did I know at the time that the heartfelt planning of the funeral ritual, choosing readings and music that echoed my children's personalities, deciding what symbols from their life could be brought as gifts to the altar, honoring special people in their lives to include in the ceremony, writing moving eulogies to tell the world how much I loved these children, would not only be a special gift of love to Peggy and Denis, but also one that brought a sense of peace to my heart.
- ❖ **Loving Support.** Being surrounded with caring friends and family who did not put us on a timetable, who let us grieve in our own way and as long as we wanted, helped us a lot. We might not have had the exact people we were counting on for support, but some dear friends stuck with us and some new faces appeared. We might be rewriting our address book, but we were surrounded with loving people who walked the walk with us. We were not alone.
- ❖ **Talking, Praying, Screaming.** Telling our story is the best medicine for us according to the experts. Telling it over and over again as we talk to others, drives home the point that our loved one is no longer with us physically, but is now forever part of our heart. Praying is simply talking to God, telling him what is in our heart or on our mind.

Screaming, whether in the privacy of our car, in the safety of our shower, or in the refuge of the deserted beach, is talking on another level, emptying the raw sadness that fills our being. We find venting our feelings is healthier than stuffing them down inside to erupt at a later time.

- ❖ **Books.** Reading saved my life. It was my lifeline, learning the wisdom from all those who had walked the grief journey before me. I memorized whole passages and wrote down favorite sayings. Anything that spoke to my heart I grabbed on to and held tightly, just as if it were a life preserver saving me from drowning in my sorrow. 155.937 in the public library became my special haven ministering to my broken heart, offering me all those grief support books on the shelves.
- ❖ **Space.** Finding time and a special spot to just sit and think, ponder, meditate, take deep breaths, practice deep sighs, or just plain cry helps our heart deal with our pain. Every day when I came home from work I sat in my recliner which I fondly referred to as "my thinking chair," and as the tears fell automatically like a broken faucet, I read some inspiring passages from a favorite book, looked at favorite pictures, pondered dear memories, and created an experience of sacredness in my day and in my life – my special time for me and my sorrow.
- ❖ **Journaling.** Keeping track of your feelings, the ups and down of the grief journey, is the best way to understand yourself and how you are managing your grief. Writing a few sentences or paragraphs or just a few key words describing what you feel on a particular day can do wonders to unload negative feelings or to simply record the joys that surprise you on the journey. Rereading what we have written can lead us to know what gives us strength and what knocks us down. Journaling is like a roadmap pointing us in the right direction to healing. And the good part is, we don't even have to stop to ask directions, they're right in our own journal.

- ❖ **Anger.** It is not fun to feel angry, but it is a part of grief and it does tell us we are alive. It even catapults us into action. The good news is that many of us channel our anger into a positive voice in memory of our loved one, becoming active in groups and causes like MADD, Cancer Care, The Compassionate Friends, Make a Wish, Breast Cancer Walk, Ronald McDonald House - all making the world a better place. We just have to find the right channel for our anger, always done in memory of our loved one.
- ❖ **Exercise.** This might be a time we develop new ways to get rid of the pent-up rage that consumes us as we discover the wonders of karate, power walking, swimming, tennis, jogging, golfing, racquetball, aerobics, or simply walking the family dog. Others find the tortures of the treadmill, Stairmaster, or abs machines do the job even better. Find what it is that works for you and give yourself that needed release from all those ravaging emotions that overwhelm you.
- ❖ **Permission to Be Crazy.** Whatever it is that helps your heart and doesn't hurt somebody else, do it! Any relief that we can find is welcome. It could be decorating our house with rainbow towels, rugs, curtains and throws, sending heavenward a batch of balloons with messages attached, talking our heart out to the empty chair, writing a letter to our missing loved one or writing a letter from them to us, (saying all the things we never got a chance to or just reiterating all those things we love to say), including our loved ones name on our Christmas cards, filling our home with angels, or simply giving our dog a birthday party. Anything that brings a moment of joy is most welcome.
- ❖ **Music.** Finding lyrics or melodies that speak directly to our hearts can be very healing. Singing along with words that have special meaning to us allows us to say what's in our heart, to empty out that awful sadness that overcomes us, and to make room for peace and serenity to flow in.

- ❖ **Crying.** This is an unpopular part of grieving. We don't really want to cry in private or public and others don't want to see us crying. But, it is a necessary part of bereavement and one that actually helps us feel better. So get those tissues or large hankies out and be ready to let the tears flow, getting rid of all that anxiety and frustration which accompanies grief. Cry unashamedly and teach those around you that it's okay. It's nature's way of helping us.
- ❖ **Hugs.** Feeling comforted and loved is important. To survive, we need 4 hugs a day for survival, 8 hugs a day for maintenance, and 12 hugs a day for growth. You don't have to say anything. Just feel the soothing message that is conveyed.
- ❖ **Healing Power of a Pet.** I can't say enough about the unconditional love of a pet. Our dog Mickey, a lab and German shepherd mix, got us out of bed each morning, walked us around the block, got us to open the refrigerator, snuggled with us on the couch, made us laugh with his antics, greeted us wildly at the door, never gave us any advice, and was always ready to play ball, steal an hors d'oeuvre, or go for a car ride. His gentle therapy nurtured us in our grief and taught us to enjoy the ordinary things in life.
- ❖ **Planting a Garden.** It could be the idea of new beginnings or just the reward of keeping busy that makes planting a garden meaningful to us when our hearts are hurting. Enjoying the new sprouts – vegetables or flowers, sensing new life, feeling connected to a divine order, all refill a spot in our fragile beings that needs careful attention.
- ❖ **Communication.** Staying in tune with our family members, taking the time to discuss how we feel about things, what we can handle and what we dread, helps to keep us on the same wavelength since none of us are mind readers. This does not mean we

automatically grieve the same way. It means we learn to respect each other's way of grieving and do our best to understand it.

- ❖ **Positive Thoughts.** It's what you tell your head that can get you through some tough days. If when I get up in the morning I tell myself I will never see my children again, my stomach does flip-flops and fills with butterflies. On the other hand, if I tell myself I am one day closer to seeing them, my heart feels a wonderful sense of joy. So look for the half-filled glass rather than the half-empty glass. Put some dates on your calendar to give meaning to the day and find a way to reinvest your love – all positive choices. Dwell on your loved one's life not the death and count the blessings that are yours, not what's missing.
- ❖ **Hope.** Hang on to your hope. Don't let minor setbacks rob you of that special quality that keeps you aiming at the future with the new beginnings it holds. Keep believing that you will make it and forgive yourself if you stumble. Let your heart be open to the new opportunities that come your way. Just remember that endings always bring new beginnings – so look for them.
- ❖ **Religion.** Our faith, spirituality, or belief in a higher being can be a catalyst in our healing. It can buoy us up when we are feeling down, alone, or sad. It offers us a chance to talk one-to-one with God, to unburden our heart, to meditate, and to believe that our loved one is secure in God's loving embrace. Our heart knows that God did not take our loved one; and our heart rejoices knowing that God received our loved one.

There are many more suggestions that can help grieving hearts. These are just a few of my favorites. I'm sure you can add some special ones of your own to the list.