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A YEAR GONE BY

Many people experiencing grief share that time moves at an uneven pace. Weeks can disappear into nowhere, and days may seem to slow to a snail's pace. For many, the year mark is somehow supposed to mean that one has "finished" the grief process and "moved on," however, this is not always the case. Time is relative. Although many of the concepts reviewed in this piece of literature are associated with the first year of grief, they are in fact event oriented, not time oriented. In other words, the right time for you is when it happens, if at all. Moments of awareness are based on your experience, not a calendar. Each benchmark may occur earlier for some, later for others, or not at all. The one thing commonly agreed upon is that everyone has times during the year that are significant. It is important to take a moment to remember your loss, and acknowledge what you have been through.

COMING BACK TO LIFE

There are many indicators you can look at to suggest progress since the early days after loss. Often after a year you will find that you can remember the person and share those memories with others without the crushing sadness this may cause early on. You may look forward to holidays or other annual events. These likely look different than they have in the past, but now you can see the possibility of enjoying these events still. You can laugh and enjoy yourself without guilt or fear that you are somehow dishonoring or forgetting the person who is gone. You have begun to develop a life of activities and friends that does not include your loved one. You have more energy, are better able to think, to remember things, to sleep, and concentrate. The cognitive difficulties and "grief-bursts" you experienced in the early days of grief occur less often and last for shorter periods of time.

THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY

The first anniversary of the death of a loved one is a special time. For many, this is the time period in which you "come up for air" to review the year past. A first year of anniversaries, birthdays, holidays and other significant events that you have survived without your loved one. It is often a time to examine how you have adapted to the change, or the ways in which your life has been altered. Many people take the opportunity to begin an annual ritual of

celebration such as gathering with loved ones at a special place. Others choose to simply spend the time alone in quiet remembrance. Whatever you decide, you are encouraged to have some kind of meaningful time to reflect on your experience of the past year. It is commonly believed in bereavement studies that ritual, ornate or simple, public or personal, can make a significant contribution to your recovery process.

MAKING MEANING

One of the most important functions of the grief process is that of meaning making. Moving beyond acceptance and on to experience personal growth and insight that can come from experiencing loss. It may take awhile to see the ways in which you may have grown in your ability to cope with difficulty, in your understanding of your relationships, your day to day skills, or perhaps even your faith. Perhaps as a result of your own experience, you have been able to support others in a way that those who have not experienced loss never could. This does not happen for everyone, and it does not happen in the same way for everyone. However, for many, there does come a moment when they realize that though they would never willingly choose to lose a loved one, positive things have come from loss.



A YEAR GONE BY (CONTINUED)

THE SENSE OF RELIEF

One experience common to many bereaved that few admit to is relief. Americans tend to reject or judge feelings of relief at the loss of a loved one. The model of grief familiar to most Americans is a sequential series of “stages” to be moved through in a predictable way, and often there is little room for variation. This can be extremely difficult for those who experience grief in a way that doesn't fit the expectation of the traditional model of grief. Additionally, bereaved persons often feel shame and guilt around the sensation of relief.

There are many significant reasons why one might feel relief at the death of a loved one. Some relationships are fraught with unresolved conflict and difficulty. Addiction or mental illness can turn a loved one into someone you didn't even know. Alzheimer's and other dementia related disease often results in years of many slow and agonizing losses for both the patient and the family. The burden of care giving can become overwhelming and exhausting, creating anger and resentment. All of these can contribute to a bereaved person feeling more relieved than sad when a loved one dies.

RECOGNIZE YOUR OWN ACCOMPLISHMENT

A movie character once observed that loss is sometimes so painful it feels like you can't possibly survive it, and yet, you do. One thing that people who are grieving often forget is to recognize their accomplishments. There is such relief at no longer being in acute suffering, that there is little effort put to recognize all that you have accomplished in the past year. Simply continuing to move forward from a day to day basis can initially be a heroic effort.

Navigating bureaucratic paperwork, keeping a household running, or caring for family members can be trying under the best of circumstances. Somehow you have walked through this first year and are still going. Perhaps life has not settled into a new normal yet, but chances are good that this process is well underway.



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