

Maximum Living Newsletter

“Dedicated To Our Families As They Take The Grief Journey”

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The Gift of Forgiveness

by Kay Talbot

When my nine-year-old daughter, Leah, died suddenly in 1982 from an unexplained brain seizure, I had not thought a whole lot about forgiveness. I was mourning the death of my marriage to her father, having divorced him the previous year. I was still riding the emotional roller coaster of ups and downs that are part of grieving a loss. My daughter's death meant I was destined to continue riding that roller coaster much longer than I would have ever imagined.

Over the years I came to realize that guilt and anger were key emotions behind the pain that was searing my soul. Through a long process of study and reflection, I have come to realize that feelings of anger, resentment, and guilt are part of the grief process for most people. Often our anger is directed at others such as doctors, nurses, clergy, police, family, friends, God, and/or the loved one who died and left us. This is especially true when the death was a suicide or murder or might have been preventable in some way.

I live with the “Why?”

Like so many bereaved parents, I felt guilty for not being able to keep my daughter alive, somehow. An autopsy revealed no answer for why she apparently suffered a brain seizure that caused her heart to stop beating that day. And so I live with the “Why?” question, as so many others do. For a long

time, I believed that I had failed in my duty as her mother. I should have taken her home with me the day I visited her at camp and learned she had caught a cold. I was guilty of not being diligent enough. At the same time, there was the guilt I felt because of the freedom I now had from the exhausting responsibilities of being a single parent raising a handicapped child.



“we cycle back and forth between resting, remembering and releasing our emotions”

It was only through a long process of counseling and spiritual exploration that I finally concluded my guilt was misconstrued. I did not have the power to keep anyone else alive, not even my beloved daughter. Sometimes it is easier to live with guilt than to feel powerless. Ultimately, I had to admit I was indeed powerless in many ways. I came to believe that for reasons unknown to me, Leah had followed her destiny. Gradually this process of re-examining and changing my beliefs allowed me to relinquish my guilt and forgive myself.

Anger and Grief

Anger is another emotion that commonly accompanies grief. We can be angry at ourselves for things we did and didn't say or do, most often preceded in our thinking by the words, “if only...”. Sometimes we may be using our anger to avoid the pain of our loss or to avoid communicating with others about what we are feeling.

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Ten Things to Tell A Child About the Death of a Loved One

by John D. Canine, Ed.D., Ph.D.

Tell the child as soon as possible about the death.

It is important to start with what the child knows. For example, if a grandfather has been going to the hospital for chemotherapy treatments, one might begin a conversation by saying, “Remember all those trips Grandfather made to the hospital?” When appropriate, it is also important to touch the child. This gives the child a sense of security. Be gentle and trustful, and chose a place to talk that is comfortable, safe, and familiar.

Be truthful.

Do not make up stories that will have to be changed later. This only confuses the child and promotes emotional instability. Also, withholding information can be a threat to the child. Emphasis needs to be placed on the facts. For example, “dead is dead,” and “buried” means “in the ground.” Euphemisms such as “passed away,” “expired,” or “departed” should be avoided.

Share only the details the child is ready to hear.

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The Gift of Forgiveness

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Anger can be a very useful emotion. My anger was directed at God...how could he allow such bad things to happen to His people? My anger kept me in dialogue and relationship with God. Ultimately, I came to believe that God did not choose for Leah to die; it was merely her time to shed her earth suit and continue her spiritual journey in God's world.

Today, in my work with grieving people, I often find that forgiveness is misunderstood. What does forgiveness mean? Let's look first at what it doesn't mean. Forgiveness does not mean condoning or pardoning insensitive or abusive behavior or acting like everything is okay when we feel it isn't. It does not mean forgetting what has happened or naively trusting others who are untrustworthy.

Robin Casarjian, (from her book, Forgiveness: A Bold Choice for a Peaceful Heart, 1992), helps to clarify this:

"What we are forgiving is not the act, not the abuse or the insensitivity. What we are forgiving is the people, the people who could not manage to honor and cherish themselves, us, their families, their spouses, their children or others. What we are forgiving is their confusion and ignorance and desperation and whatever it happens to be. It's not about what you do. It's about how you perceive the person and the situation."

An Act of Self-interest

Forgiveness is a conscious decision to stop hating both ourselves and others. It is an act of self-interest—something we do for ourselves to find greater freedom and peace. Even when we have suffered a severe trauma, we can work through our appropriate anger and choose forgiveness as a powerful way to cast off the role of the victim. When we choose forgiveness, we recognize that we cannot change others, but we can change ourselves—gradually, over time, and often with difficult, emotional work.

Psychologist, Richard Gayton, journeyed through this difficult process after his wife was murdered in their home.

"We became frightened and confused when we notice that our grief and fear are as strong or even stronger, for brief periods, even many months after the death than it was during the first periods of shock," says Gayton. "In fact, we customarily cycle back and forth between resting, remembering and releasing our emotions as the healing part of our minds brings up each aspect of our loss for healing. It's as if the mind selects 'chunks' of the experience that are just enough for us to deal with at that moment. Healing takes place through accepting and learning to change our thinking."

Not a One-time Event

Forgiving becomes a process we embrace over and over. Memorials and rituals are tools we use to continue this process. Forgiveness is not a one-time event that absolves us of all future feelings of anger or guilt. Guilt, like anger, can be a useful emotion. Appropriate guilt stirs up our consciences and makes us realize we need to ask for forgiveness. Whereas, inappropriate guilt keeps us from feeling forgiven and from creating a healthy future.

In my evolving grief process, I have learned to identify, express and release anger and inappropriate guilt, to forgive, to seek and receive forgiveness. The person I am becoming is a gift from my daughter. Not one I would have chosen, but one I cherish nevertheless. My hope is that all who grieve will find such gifts within the legacy of their own lives.

(Adapted from Living with Loss, March/April, 1999
Bereavement Publications, Inc.)



Note: Seen on page 1, *Angel of Grief* is a 1894 sculpture by William Wetmore Story which serves as the grave stone of the artist and his wife at the Protestant Cemetery, in Rome. A replica made in 1906 exists at the Stanford Mausoleum at Stanford University.



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Tomorrow's Child
Lansing, MI

Grief Resource Center

For Additional Resources, please visit the [GRIEF RESOURCE CENTER](http://www.maximumlivingconsult.com) at: www.maximumlivingconsult.com

SUGGESTED READINGS

- A Grief Observed.** C.S. Lewis. Bantam Books, 1961.
- The Challenge of Living.** John D. Canine, Ed.D., Ph.D. (call 866-540-0047 to order) Ball Publishers, 1983.
- How To Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies.** Therese Rando, Ph.D., Bantam Books, 1991.
- When Mourning Dawns: Living Your Way Through the Seasons of Your Grief.** J. Miller. Willowgreen, 2000.
- The Bereaved Parent.** Schiff, H. Crown, 1977.
- Children and Grief: Big Issues for Little Hearts.** Hartnett, J., Good Mourning, 1993.
- Empty Arms: Coping with Miscarriage, Stillbirth and Infant Death.** Ilse, S., Wintergreen Press, 1992.

ORGANIZATIONS FOR SUPPORT

- Compassionate Friends for Bereaved Parents**
P.O. Box 3696 • Oak Brook, IL 60522 • 630-990-0010
<http://www.compassionatefriends.org>
- Widowed Persons**
1909 K Street, NW • Washington, DC 20049
WidowNet: <http://www.fortnet.org/WidowNet>
- Gifts From Within**
1 Lily Pond Drive • Camden, Maine 04843 • 207-236-8858

WEBSITES WORTH SURFIN'

- Beyond Indigo**-<http://www.beyondindigo.com>
- Willowgreen**-(James E. Miller)-<http://willowgreen.com>
- Bereavement Magazine**-<http://bereavementmag.com>

Ten Things to Tell a Child About the Death of a Loved One

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Children will accept a crisis much like an adult. Therefore, to make it real in their mind, they need a logical explanation of why the person died. However, they may not be ready emotionally or cognitively to accept all the facts surrounding the death. Children mentally reprocess the information about the death of a loved one at each developmental level. It is not uncommon for a child later in life to ask a parent, "Tell me again how my brother died." This provides the adult with the opportunity to deliver information that was previously not shared.

Encourage the child to express feelings.

A child relies upon the adult for permission to "feel" the loss. For the first few years, children get their understanding of grief through their senses, so it is important for adults to "feel" their grief in the presence of the child. Cry together, get angry together, be sad together, and, most importantly, don't be afraid to hold each other.

Take the child to the funeral.

Seeing is believing, and even young children should be able to view the body. The child: does not have to be present during all of the visitation hours; should have the security of having an adult present at all times; should be allowed to touch the body but not be forced to do so; should be allowed to participate in the rituals for the purpose of expressing grief and recalling the event later in life, and should be able to observe those who are mourning.

Take the child to the cemetery, even if the person is already buried.

The child will find comfort in knowing where the body is buried and how to get there. The grave site can be where



the child makes "contact" with the loved one. Furthermore, periodically taking the child to the cemetery lessens the chances of the child denying or avoiding the death.

Let the child tell others about the death.

Often when children are accompanied by an adult and the child is questioned about how the loved one died, the adult will respond and "talk over" the child. The child feels more in control and has greater understanding of the loss when he or she can explain it to another person.

Encourage the child to talk about the loss.

When a child talks about the death, not only are feelings generally expressed, but if the child has incorrect ideas about any aspect of the loss, it can be brought to the attention of the adult and corrected.

Be available to answer the child's questions.

Adults need to answer each question as sincerely and accurately as possible, and with the understanding that some questions cannot be answered. What is important is not so much the ability to answer each and every question, but being available to discuss each concern as it arises.

Never say "You shouldn't feel like that."

The child should be encouraged to express anger, sorrow, loneliness, fear – any feeling the child has should be expressed. If the child is told "not to feel" by the adult, the message the child receives is one of coping with loss by emotionally "playing dead." This type of repression potentially creates interpersonal conflict in later life due to the child's inability to communicate emotions.

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Maximum Living Support Groups

The purpose of the Support Group is to come together and draw strength and support from each other during this time of loss. The meetings are part of the community outreach program of our Funeral Home and are available at no charge. Please feel free to attend and know that your friends and family members are always welcome.

The following Support Group is available in your area, for a complete listing, please go to: www.maximumlivingconsult.com
