

No one can take away your pain, but I'm sharing some of the things that I have learned while following my own journey of grief. These things helped me survive. I hope that some of my thoughts can maybe help to ease your pain too.

- Some days I found that my emotions ran close to the surface and I found myself in tears for no specific reason at all. I know that many of you find yourself in that place too! **It's OK to cry; our hearts ache.** Tears are therapeutic and help to ease that ache. It also gives those around you permission to cry with you. Often those that love you are also grieving and need to be allowed to cry too.
- **I used any excuse to hug someone.** If I hugged them, they hugged me back, and I truly needed that closeness. Hugs connected me. I seemed always to be cold, and hugs warmed me both inside and out. Hugs don't need words.
- **Healing happens more readily when the hurt is shared with others.** Spend additional time with friends and family and share your feelings and your memories. Consider joining a bereavement group or attend bereavement meetings to talk and listen to others who are also grieving. Help each other. It's good for you to talk about your loss; it's part of the healing process. We need to share our heartache! Those around you feel that they are helping you just by listening. When you listen to others and offer your own experiences, they may be encouraged by your words.
- **Allow yourself to mourn;** there is no right or wrong way to do this. Everyone is different. Grief takes time and we all travel at our own pace. There is not a fixed period for mourning. Ignore people who tell you it's time you were over your grief.
- Although your loved one is not physically with you, they are forever in your heart. I've learned that the times I am most saddened, are the times that I remember the best memories. **Share these thoughts** with family and friends and hold those thoughts close to you.
- **If you need help, ask for it.** Those around you feel they are in some way making your burden lighter. Allow people to help with tasks that you cannot tackle just now; allow people to pamper

you; and allow people to assist with the day-to-day burden of just living.

- Some people find that doing yoga or tai chi or concentrated meditation helps them. Others just need **quiet times**. Relaxation exercises and deep breathing helped me. Did you know that when you breathe deeply, you cannot be sobbing at the same time?
- **I rock** in my rocking chair and that reminds me of my mother and those happy times help. I feel that she is rocking with me. If you have young children in your home, you both might find it comforting to share this quiet time rocking together.
- **Being quiet** gives me an opportunity to replenish my energy and I can believe in the future. If you do not live alone, do not feel obligated to explain to your family; just say that you are having a quiet time, go to your room and recharge your emotional batteries.
- I believe in a higher being, and find that during these quiet times **I share my sadness with my God**.
- I've found that listening to the tinkle of a small water fountain is soothing. Listening to music that I enjoy is calming.
- Many people find **physical exercise** helps also. Run, work out, vacuum, or shovel the snow. I have found that going for a walk is calming. When I'm really upset, I power walk, swinging arms and moving with purpose. I've also found that flattening a chicken breast with a few good whacks also feels good. Pounding on a pillow works almost as good, although the sound isn't as satisfying. Shutting a cupboard door with force makes a very satisfying bang and reflects my feelings. Do what works for you.
- **Your grieving experience is personal and totally unique**. I hate it when people say to me, "I know exactly how you feel." They don't. It is MY child, MY parent, MY friend. They are grieving for their child, their parent, their friend. We grieve differently. What we do share is an understanding of the grieving process, the feelings of sadness, and we share the hurt. Our hearts ache.

- **I light candles** for everyone throughout the year, but particularly on the special days. The light, the scent, and the beauty comforts me and soothes my aching heart.
- **Making decisions** was difficult for me; so I tried not to make any except the absolute ones that were necessary. I asked for advice from people who knew me well. The experts tell us not to make a major decision until a year has passed.
- **Special days** – birthdays and holidays, were celebrated with family traditions. The Birthday cake was always the same and special; pumpkin pie and turkey for Thanksgiving; Christmas decorations were put in the same place each year; and on and on. I suspect that's the same with you as well. I learned that it was easier for us, if I varied everything just a bit. I think that sweeping changes would have been too hard, so I made subtle changes. I've changed all the menus somewhat. Oh, we still have a birthday cake, but it could be an ice cream concoction or something with fruit and whipping cream – just different. I have learned that it was OK to do that.
- **I keep the beginnings of three sentences** on my refrigerator:
 - I don't want to
 - I don't need to ... and
 - I don't have to ...
 When people begin a sentence with, "You should ... ; I respond with, "I don't want to do that just yet. Most people accept your decision at this time.
 Remember these sentences, write them down, put them where you readily see them, use them as you need to, and don't explain. You're entitled. This is one of my most valuable lessons learned.
- **Don't rush from one task to another and don't take on added responsibilities.** Remember those three sentences.
- **Try not to set unrealistic expectations for yourself.** When one is devastated by the loss of a loved one, we realize just what the important things in life are all about. So what, if the vacuuming doesn't get done; so what, if you don't bother putting on makeup today. You WILL do it tomorrow when you're feeling less sad. If you don't have the energy today, don't bother. I've

learned not to take on added duties. I've learned to say "no". I've learned to say, "I don't want to attend the community meeting." Do what is most appropriate to get through this minute, this hour, and this day.

- **Allow yourself to smile and find the humour in the day.** It's OK to laugh and you do not have to feel guilty about enjoying something for the moment. I found that using levity for some situations made them tolerable. Someone once said that if you couldn't laugh at life's trials, you would always be crying. Bob Hope said, "I have seen what a laugh can do. It can transform almost unbearable tears in to something bearable, even hopeful."
- **Some people journal,** each day writing about their feelings and their hurts. Some people write a poem and read it during a family gathering, perhaps on the death anniversary. Some people make a memory book to commemorate the events of their loved one. None of these were useful for me in my early stages of grief, but maybe those things WILL work for you. I periodically journal now, but only the important, memorable challenges and successes. I've learned to try many things, some help, some don't.
- **Beware; do not opt out of living.** Someone told me that at least you know you're still alive if you're hurting. Don't allow yourself to fall into such a black hole that you can't find a light out. Stay involved at some level.
- **Be gentle with yourself.** Grieving depletes your energy. I deliberately pampered myself weekly – perhaps a bath with wonderful scents and candles. I would purchase a favorite food, or enjoy a special sweet. Sometimes, I wrap myself in one of Mama's quilts and read in front of the fire. Some people find they can't concentrate, but I found that I could become involved in the story, which meant that for the moment, I could leave my sadness behind. Whatever works to ease your aching heart.
- I've learned that I needed to **test my own bravery.** Some days, I couldn't handle it at all, which was OK. Another day, I could look at my son's pictures or listen to his music. I would feel close to him then. If you find it too difficult, don't worry, just put aside for another day that which you found too difficult for today.

- **I've learned to take time off from grieving** and I consciously tell myself that for the next three hours I'm going to allow myself to enjoy a movie with a friend, or the theatre, or skating, or a coffee and muffin. Do not feel guilty that you are having fun. Remind yourself of the fun times you shared with your loved one. They're the happy memories.
- I've also learned to **allow myself a specific time set aside just for grieving**. When things are just too overwhelming, I lie on my bed and let the sorrow come. I cry and, oh how my heart aches. But, when that storm has passed, I wash my face, and am better able to get on with life.
- **I set mini-goals for myself at the beginning of each day**. At the beginning, I talked to the eyes in the mirror because the image of this haggard, sad woman is certainly not me! I tell those eyes, "Today, I will ..." Sometimes, the goal was just getting out of bed. Each night, I tell the eyes in the mirror, Today, was a good day, because Ending the day with a positive helps. It brings me hope of better times and it works for me. I continue to do this even though I have come a long way, and now my goals are far more challenging and are often fun.
- We will never forget our loved ones; we'll never stop loving them; but we are learning how to live without them. What choice do we have?
- I believe that **friends** are quiet angels who lift us to our feet when our wings have trouble remembering how to fly. I thank God for all of them who come when they are most needed and help to ease my aching heart.

My wish for all of you is that you are provided with the strength to move along your particular path of grief, that you find your way out of the darkness, that you are able to bring happy memories to mind, and that your aching hearts are soothed.

Marie Tilk

Dedicated to my son, Ross, and my mother