When Death Has Passed: Living From Here

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VITAS® Healthcare

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This book is dedicated to all the bereaved families, caregivers, friends and partners we have cared for over the years. Their courage has inspired us. We have learned from them how to care for and companion the newly bereaved persons that we will continue to encounter day by day.

Acknowledgements

A book like this arises from reflection on the experiences of bereaved individuals and families who have faced and survived what they never thought would happen to them. It comes from the cumulative experiences and collective wisdom of the social workers, chaplains and bereavement volunteers who accompany and care for them. It comes from the commitment of healthcare administrators to provide supportive resources. It takes form through collaborative efforts of the communications professionals who produce it.

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I will be forever grateful to the bereaved individuals and families, co-workers and friends from whom I've learned whatever I have to share here…and to VITAS, for the invitation to write this for you.

Love lingers.
Her perfume
I smell all around me.
Her voice
I hear soothingly in my dreams,
Where she still lives.
Her touch
Awakens my skin and my soul.
Her smile is etched in my mind,
Where it warms my heart.
Her pain
Speaks to me of her courage, the
Strength of her last days.
Her gentleness is reflected in those
Who gave her care.
She vanishes.
And I am overwhelmed with grief.
But her love lingers
And gives me strength.

—Richard Fife

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Introduction: In a New Place

The unthinkable has happened! He who was always there has slipped away, leaving silence and emptiness behind. She who brought warmth to our days has gone and taken the light from our life. Time seems to stand still.

We pick things up…and put them down again. We don't know what to do with ourselves…or how to get going. There are things to do. Eventually. But then what?

Without our loved one close at hand or just a phone call away, what will daily life be like? Will things go on much the same? Or will everything be different? Will we be different?

We know our world has been shaken—we've been shaken—by the death of a loved one who helped shape our lives. We can't yet estimate the total effect this will have on us, nor do we know how others will be affected, what they'll need, or what we can give.

We've never before gone through something like this. Death has ushered us into a new place. Waves of grief move through us and raise so many questions: Am I doing OK? Are these reactions normal? What is normal? Whom can I ask?

Family and friends who stay close may help us make our way through grief and adjust to changes. But family or friends aren't always available. Or they may not be able to help. Where else can we look for help to understand and deal with what's happening to us?

At VITAS we continue to care about you. We know you may face new challenges, so we offer varied resources and services to help you make your way. In this booklet, for example, we offer information about common reactions and practical concerns that may surface during grief, and about ways to care for yourself during this time.

We know information can't protect you from feeling distress that's common in grief, but we hope the information we offer will help you feel less anxious about whatever you experience. We hope that understanding natural differences—among one another and the ways we grieve—will help you be accepting of yourself and supportive of others.

And, finally, we hope this booklet will help you see that you're doing the best you can for now, and trust that you'll feel stronger and more confident in your own good time.

VITAS bereavement services are available 24/7. Please call us when you need information, or want to talk…or just want to let us know how you're doing. We continue to care about you and wish you well. We support you in your desire to live well from here.

Your VITAS Team

Chapter 1: Understanding Grief

I know others who seemed to do OK after their loved one's death and I hoped I would too. I expected it would be hard, but I figured I could handle it. Now I'm not so sure. I'm not doing very well—not like I'd hoped. I just don't understand what's happening to me.

Statements like this are common from people who have lost a loved one. If we don't know much about grief in general, we may underestimate the potential challenges of grief and be surprised—either by our own reactions or by the reactions of people we love.

If we aren't familiar with the range of reactions common in normal grief, we too quickly may presume that what we are experiencing is "not normal." In that case, we may add anxiety to our grief—and create even heavier burdens for ourselves and/or for others.

Getting accurate information about the varied reactions that may occur in normal grief enables us to recognize that reactions unusual for us are normal in grief. Knowledge of grief dynamics can help us adjust our expectations for ourselves (and others) and adopt effective ways to ease distress. So…what is grief, anyway?

Personal Reaction to Loss or Separation

We live counting on the people closest to us—to love us, to help us feel safe, and to ensure we retain a continuing sense of purpose and meaning in our lives. Cherishing as we do the people, places, activities and belongings that bring us pleasure, we expect them to continue to be a part of our lives.

When we experience separation from a loved one, or a change in our familiar routines, or if we lose something really precious to us, our personal well-being is disrupted and we react. Grief is the entirety of our personal reactions to loss or separation.

Most of us have had experiences with loss of one kind of another. Over the years, we've lost some friends; beloved pets have died; treasured belongings have gone missing. We've faced losses due to such life changes as a child leaving home, divorce or relocation. We somehow got through the hurt of all these losses—maybe without even noticing how we managed.

The death of this loved one may affect us as nothing has before. But, however deeply we are affected, we can live beyond this loss. We may in time discover we still can find joy and live well. In the meantime, *we need to know enough about grief so we're not too surprised—or unduly alarmed—by any of our reactions.*

Grief is Varied and Unpredictable

Grief may bring surprises. No two people grieve the same, even for the same death. We each experience grief in our own unique way.

Our grief reactions also vary in duration. They may be fairly short-lived. Or we may experience an extended season of grief. Our grief, whether fiercely intense or slowly smoldering, may continue to produce unexpected flare-ups.

We may not know what to expect of ourselves—from day to day or from hour to hour: "I was OK, just driving along; then a certain song started, and suddenly tears were running down my face!"

Grief is a Process

Grief is a gradual process of recognizing and responding to a significant loss. This process unfolds over time. Separation from a loved one, especially the final and ultimate physical separation by death, can have an impact on every dimension of our being. It takes time for the shock of death to ease and for our reactions to the loss to set in.

We absorb the full reality of our loss only gradually. It takes time to recognize the rippling effects—all the practical implications—of the physical loss of our loved one. It takes time to realize the effects and make the practical adaptations this loss requires of us.

As each new awareness of what this separation means comes to us, we may respond with fresh resistance and acute distress—until we become able to face and accommodate yet another aspect of this change in our life. This takes time. The process develops unevenly, stalls, backtracks, advances, but generally smoothes out and stabilizes in time.

Grief Progresses

It would be misleading to speak of "stages of grief" as if there were some orderly and sequential steps we could expect to follow to make our way through grief. We can speak, however, of some general experiences commonly occurring during the grief process.

We initially may experience a sense of "unreality" about the death and our physical separation from our loved one. We know the facts: He or she has died. We know this is true, but we don't believe it's real. We delay letting the harsh

reality sink in by telling ourselves, "He's away on a trip." Or we say, "This is just a bad dream. I'll wake up."

As reality sinks in, we begin to feel the pain of the loss. We miss our loved one. Other reactions may unfold from there: "My arms are empty. I feel empty inside—and scared. Everything seems harder. I have more to do and less to work with. I'm angry. It isn't fair. I'm simply overwhelmed. I can't focus. I can't handle anything. I don't even want to try."

At some point, we begin to see that this is how it is now. Slowly facing reality, we begin to become more grounded and gradually to adapt. We find some fresh energy stirring in us. We begin to want to make some changes. We begin to want to take charge of our lives.

Even more importantly, we remember that we loved and we were loved in return. We realize we're still lovable, still loved and that others still need us. We draw on the remembered presence of our loved one to accompany and encourage us. Although it seems impossible or unbelievable, we begin to feel like ourselves again—a renewed version of ourselves!

Grief has a Purpose

When someone we love has died, we may feel for a while as if we also have died. We may wish we had died or wish we could die, because we fear we can't live without our loved one. Or, we may be frightened by or frustrated with the reactions of another loved one grieving from the same loss.

Grief allows us to suffer, endure and then heal from the effects of being physically separated from someone precious to us. Grief focuses our energies on absorbing the profound reality of our loss so that we may ever so gradually become able to:

- Survive the separation
- Adjust to the changes daily life now requires
- Engage again in life

Grief is the difficult process that serves as a bridge from *how life was* to *how life is now and can be*. Grief brings us along—from the moment of physical separation from our loved one and through a challenging present—toward a future when we can find life-giving ways to reconnect with our loved ones.

We may discover we're able to access the continuing presence of our loved one by nurturing the practice of remembering. We remember events and challenges we faced together. We remember things our loved one did and said that can help us now.

When we draw upon his or her remembered presence in a way that can sustain us or give us joy, we may find new energy and renewed purpose in our lives. When we sense renewal happening, we know grief has accomplished its important work in us.

Chapter 2: Seeing Grief's Effects

I expected to be sad. I expected to cry. I didn't expect to ride an emotional roller coaster. I didn't know I'd be exhausted and in so much pain. I didn't know I'd be mentally scattered, and I never would have guessed that I'd question my faith. Nothing feels the same!

Physical Effects

We connected with our loved one through our senses: we saw, heard, smelled and touched our loved one. We embraced and shared so much. Repeated experiences of pleasurable contact programmed expectation into our nerve endings. Separation leaves us yearning for that same contact. Loss of our loved one may literally make us ache.

The continuing ache of missing becomes an invisible burden—weighing on us and sapping our strength. Every action we perform seems to take more effort. We become fatigued more quickly and seem to feel tired all the time. Yet despite being bone-weary and heartsick, we may find that sleep fails to refresh us.

We may have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep. We may delay going to bed, hoping exhaustion will yield us sleep. If we do fall asleep, we may awake emotionally exhausted from troubling or frightening dreams. We can't function without getting enough sleep, so performing even ordinary tasks becomes challenging.

Grief may generate other physical distress. We may exhaust ourselves crying, or we may get headaches. We may feel a lump in our throat or feel tightness in our chest. We may suffer from stomach aches, muscle cramps, respiratory problems

or gastro-intestinal upset. We may eat too much—or not be able to eat at all. We may drink too much alcohol.

Grieving persons often feel depleted or become ill. That's because the stress of grief can cause our immune systems to become impaired. Widowed persons are particularly prone to illness, and some even die shortly after their spouse. *The potential physical effects of grief are significant; they need to be taken seriously and should be discussed with your doctor.*

Mental Effects

Certain truths—that death is final and that our loved one is not coming back—may seem alien or incomprehensible to us. We need time for these realities to sink in and be absorbed. We may need to review everything that's happened, or go over events in our mind again and again until they become real.

But we have only so much mental capacity to store information and perform mental tasks. If our mental energy and storage capacity are given to processing the past, they are on "special assignment" and not readily available for performing current mental tasks. Our performance of mental tasks temporarily may be inconsistent or not up to par.

We may forget to pay bills, or we may put keys or papers down and then not remember where. We can't easily concentrate; we can't seem to absorb what we see or read and we can't make decisions. We need people to repeat what they've told us. We may forget directions to familiar places or arrive somewhere wondering how we got there because our attention was not on driving.

Such episodes of mental lapse are inconvenient and even frightening when they occur, *but they're normal in someone who is grieving.* Our minds, while on "special assignment" for processing grief, can handle only so much. But they still keep working to help us.

In bizarre or troubling dreams we may find ourselves reliving old memories or revisiting old fears. Mixing elements from the past and present, dreams may surface fears we haven't felt ready to face in our waking hours. Even in sleep our minds help us grieve.

Grieving people report a variety of experiences that make them question their sanity. They describe searching for the face of the deceased loved one in a crowd or noticing something that gives the grieving person a strong sense that the loved one is somehow present or has visited. *(See Chapter 10 for further discussion.)*

As we absorb the reality of the death and make changes in our lives, our minds will settle and be able to focus better on the tasks before us. Until then, we can help ourselves: keep a calendar, write ourselves notes, return items to their usual places, ask someone we trust to review decisions or transactions. And, we can keep telling ourselves, "This is temporary!"

Emotional Effects

Grief finds expression in varied emotional reactions. As we get over the shock, we may want to scream, "No, no, no!" We're not denying the death. We're simply objecting to it—fiercely!

Anger says, "It isn't right, it shouldn't have happened—not to him or to her or to us or to me!" Focusing on what should have been, we may feel anger toward doctors, our loved one, others, ourselves, God or the universe. This is a natural response to feeling robbed of the one we love. When it surfaces, anger needs safe avenues of expression—in order to spend itself and clear the way for us to live in the present.

Guilt focuses on past things we wish we hadn't done, things we wish we had done or things we wish we had done another way. Guilt springs from knowing our time together is past and wishing we had done better while we were still together. Focusing on guilt about the past may just distract us from our current pain, or it may help us make better choices in the future.

Sadness is the heavy, aching reaction we feel when we know we can't have our loved one back. Sadness is the sore feeling that wells up again and again when we feel the gap between how things are now…and how we wish they could be.

Relief is a lightness that comes in recognizing a release of our burdens—our loved one no longer suffers; we made good on our commitments. Relief may be coupled with gratitude that we were able to face things together, that we were able to communicate and care for one another. Relief and gratitude may bring moments of surprising joy.

Grief feelings can change as swiftly as colors shift in a kaleidoscope. This is normal. We can't know how we'll feel or how we'll manage by ourselves if feelings do well up. If we fear embarrassing ourselves or other people, we may need to remember: "The world won't end if I cry…I'll stop eventually. I always do."

Spiritual Effects

Whether or not we hold certain religious beliefs or perform spiritual practices, the death of a loved one can be disorienting. Regardless of the nature of our beliefs or how strongly we hold them, we walk through life believing we have an overall sense of how life holds together. We have some idea of how things work, and who or what we can count on.

Then a terminal illness or death of a loved one comes along and pulls the rug out from under us. Instead of walking upright and facing forward, we're suddenly lying on our back looking up. From this new angle, nothing looks the same. Nothing is where it was. We become disoriented in our own environment.

We may feel disappointed or disillusioned that things didn't work out as we hoped or prayed for. Or we may suddenly have many questions for God: "Aren't you as powerful or caring as I thought you were?" Just by asking questions like these we may feel we're doing something wrong or fear we're losing our faith when we need it most.

Given how important our loved one was to us, given how deeply our life has been shaken by his or her death, it's no wonder we might start to ask questions. We're trying to make sense of how this happened, trying to grasp what we can continue to count on, trying to sink our spiritual roots deeper to sustain us through grief and into our future.

We may find ourselves saying, "Thank you, God, for your love and care. Thank you for giving me the strength to take care of my loved one." Or we may pray, "I don't understand any of this. It's not what I was expecting. I'm sad and mad and scared…but I need to trust you. Where else can I go? Help me!"

Spiritual questions can seem daunting when we face them alone, but we don't need to face them alone.

VITAS chaplains can provide spiritual support for more than a year after the death. Call the VITAS bereavement services manager at any time to talk about the ways grief is affecting you—physically, mentally, emotionally or spiritually.

Chapter 3: Confronting Self-Doubt

I thought I was a strong person. I've faced some pretty hard things in my life, and I managed to get through them. But this…! One minute I'm doing fine, and the next I just lose it. I'm getting scared. What's wrong with me?

We don't experience the same reactions to grief or react to the same degree—but we notice some reactions, and we may not like any of them. We may notice reactions that "just don't seem like me," and wonder, "What's happening to me?"

Normal Grief Reactions

Reactions we usually consider not normal actually may be normal reactions for certain conditions: Red spots aren't normal, except with measles; diarrhea isn't normal, except with flu; contractions aren't normal, except during labor.

Putting the car keys in the freezer isn't normal for us most of the time, but minor mishaps like this are not a particular cause for alarm while we're grieving. Mental lapses or strong feelings naturally occur during grief. Preoccupied with processing all that has happened, we quite naturally become distracted or feel upset.

We Get Worried

Many of us aren't familiar with the variety of reactions that may come with normal grief. So if we experience something upsetting or troubling to us while we're grieving, we may become afraid that something is really wrong with us.

Missing someone close to us, and adjusting to daily life without his or her presence, can be hard. We may ache from our loss. We may be overwhelmed with taking care of tasks that our loved one used to do. We may not be able to focus and get things done. We may get scared that we don't know how to go on, or don't want to keep going.

Our reactions may be more intense than we want to admit. We may not want to tell others who care about us that we're having a hard time. We don't want to scare or upset them. If they get scared, then we'll really get scared. So we tend to keep quiet and worry alone.

What's Wrong with Me?

Somewhere along the way, we may get upset with ourselves. Without enough information about normal grief reactions, we may presume that we're just not doing this right, not handling this as well as others. We start to ask, "What's wrong with me?"

Or, we actually may be doing OK with grief ourselves, but we're worried about someone else: Mom or Dad, our sister or brother-in-law, a child or friend. We may worry that another person is taking this too hard and ask ourselves, "What's wrong with her?"

The best answer to that question is: "There's probably nothing wrong with me (or him or her). What's 'wrong' is, a loved one has died…I'm facing a lot of changes, and the pain of missing him or her is really hurting me. I'm grieving and *this is hard*!"

We Don't Have to Like It

Grieving is hard, and we don't have to like it. We may, in fact, get upset with ourselves or with others because of our grief. We may wish we could rise above it, or we may expect others to do the same. We may think we (or others) should get over this quicker or easier. We may find grieving inconvenient, disruptive, painful or annoying.

Grieving certainly may be all of the above and more. But grief is the natural reaction to significant loss. Sometimes, and for some people, grief is hard. It may be very hard. We just don't want grieving to be any harder for us or for anyone else than it needs to be.

How could it be harder? When we ask, "What's wrong with me?" or start being hard on ourselves because we think we should be "over it," we are prone to feel worse. We may even become depressed. But as long as we can keep our attention on the real problem—my loved one died—we can help ourselves avoid depression.

What Can We Do?

We can refuse to berate ourselves for experiencing grief reactions. If we had the flu, we wouldn't demand of ourselves, "Just get a grip on yourself and stop that vomiting!" If we were in labor, we wouldn't demand of ourselves, "Don't make those contractions harder than they need to be!" So why would we consider berating ourselves for grief?

We can say instead: "This grief is here for a reason. I'll work with it—not against it."

We can commit to doing the following to help ourselves:

- Recognize our grief reactions.
- Acknowledge when we (or others) are grieving.
- Admit our reactions and ask for support.
- Accept that our grief may continue for a while.
- Trust we'll make our way through this and that we have a future.

We can promise to be our own best friend and to encourage ourselves as we make our way through grief: "There's nothing wrong with me…I'm grieving… for a good reason!" We can be patient with ourselves and let our grief process take as long as it takes.

Chapter 4: Shifting Our Focus

At first, I did pretty well. Having a lot of people around me helped. Then I worked on insurance and bills. It took forever. I couldn't wait to finish that. Then I didn't know what to do next. So I tried clearing out her closet, but I couldn't… I keep thinking she's going to walk through that door.

Grief Changes Over Time

Our reactions change because our appreciation of all that this death means for us changes. In the beginning, we may be in a state of shock, barely able to take in what has happened. We may know the facts, be able to tell the story to others and make necessary arrangements.

Others may stay close, providing food, comfort and companionship. We greet those who come to console us, or attend the funeral or service of remembrance, but we're somewhat detached. None of this seems real. We may in fact go through some weeks after the death feeling as if we're playing a part in a play, or watching someone else's life unfold.

As reality sinks in, we may begin to feel a lump in our throat, a kind of resistance to this dawning awareness, a not wanting to accept what has happened. We may begin to feel a soul-wrenching separation from the one who has died. We don't want it to be true.

Days pass, routines begin to return to normal for those who have spent extra time with us. We may be forced to return to other obligations. Or we may find ourselves quite alone, puttering around but not accomplishing anything.

Whatever our situation, we may go through the motions, but feel like we're not really there.

Feeling the Impact of Our Loss

We may now face tasks we never had to do before. Financial and practical arrangements after a death can be daunting: death notifications; communication with insurance companies, pension boards, Social Security. Nothing goes as easily or as quickly as we expect. And we may have others to look after when we feel barely able to take care of ourselves.

Depending on our relationship with the loved one who has died, we may miss the frequency of phone calls or being able to share the details of our life with someone who understands. We may miss having someone across the table or sharing our bed. We miss having someone to do things for or with. We miss the talking and touching. We miss being the most important person in another's world.

Life goes on around us and we can't understand how. How can others possibly act so ordinary when our loved one has died? Events come and go; we may have little to no interest in them. The only thing that matters to us is that our loved one is not here with us.

Discovering Ripple Effects

It doesn't get easier right away. We gradually discover more ways we miss the one who died. We start to realize all the roles our loved one played, and to recognize the countless ways that he or she provided comfort, companionship and practical help.

He fixed things—before they were broken. She was always there to listen. Decisions were easier because we made them together. We never wondered who'd be with us when we needed a companion, or who would celebrate a birthday or holiday with us. Now we wonder about a lot of things—and how we'll do them without our loved one.

And now, there seems to be so much to do. Mail comes, bills appear and other things that demand attention pile up. We may rearrange the piles—but accomplish little. We used to share tasks. Now they're ours alone to handle. We may not know how to do everything. And we don't want to bother anyone else.

For a while, we may feel overwhelmed, incapacitated, resentful or angry that our loved one has left us. We may not have the energy or interest to take care of things. Or, we may drive ourselves crazy trying to do everything in record time. However we handle things, we begin to find a rhythm and a pace we can sustain. Or we learn to ask for help.

Ups and Downs…Over Time

There is an expectation that bereaved people feel their worst right after the death, then steadily improve and get better every month. Social research on how widowed people felt and functioned over the 24 months following their loved one's death, however, presents quite a different picture. Many people reported they did fairly well in the first three or four weeks after the death. They noted that more difficult times came later. They acknowledged stretches of time when they felt better, but described being surprised sometimes by unexpected drops in their sense of well-being, even quite some time after the death.

We could speculate about what affected their well-being at different times. The point to take from these findings, however, is that grieving is a dynamic, variable process that progresses over time through possibly repeated experiences of ups and downs.

Recognizing Readiness

Experience shows us that we don't generally do things until we're ready. This readiness factor seems to apply whether we're learning to crawl, learning to read, or developing new skills or relationships throughout the course of our lives.

If we try to do something before we're ready, we may struggle mightily to succeed—but gain only minimal results. When we're ready, things seem to flow naturally. With readiness, we can take on and succeed at new tasks or experiences with relative ease.

We could understand the shifting focus of our grief as a sign of how we gradually become more ready to absorb the loss. As we become ready to accept ways the loss has affected our life, we become more able to adjust our expectations and make changes.

We can't force or hurry along the process. It takes as long as it takes.

We simply focus on what we notice in the present, and do what we can do today. We can trust that by living with what comes today, we're creating our readiness to embrace what life may yet hold for us.

Chapter 5: What Affects Our Grief

After my friend's dad died, her mom seemed to create a new life for herself. She found new activities and made new friends. I wish my mom could do that. Since Dad died, she just wants to stay home or be with me. She doesn't want to shop or even go to church. It's like all the life has gone out of her. How can they react so differently? Will my mom be OK?

We expect some difference in how people react to grief, but we may be puzzled by the many differences we see among those who grieve. What accounts for these differences? How can one person appear utterly devastated by a death, and another appear able to grieve, to regain personal equilibrium and to adjust to life's changes, with relative ease?

Nature of the Relationship

The more invested we were in our loved one, the more time and energy we gave to him or her, the greater may be our sense of loss. The more of our personal identity we found in our relationship or the more meaning and satisfaction we derived from loving and being loved by this person, the more intense may be our grief.

If the person who died provided an anchor for our personal identity, and if losing the person acutely threatens our sense of place and purpose in the world, we may feel we have lost not only him or her, but ourselves as well.

The more we received from this person, the more vulnerable or lonely we may feel after the death. The more dependent we were on our loved one (for emotional safety, financial security, practical help, companionship or recreation),

the more we will have lost when he or she died. The more we've lost, the more deeply we may grieve.

Personality Differences

Some of us feel things keenly. We know when we're upset, and we express our feelings freely and openly. In grieving, we may be overwhelmed by our feelings and fear that we'll never be OK again. We appreciate or can easily seek support and reassurance from others. Our grief may appear to be quite intense because we express grief freely.

Others of us may try to distance ourselves from our feelings or become uneasy when others express their feelings. We're more comfortable stating facts, analyzing or taking action to solve problems. Though less apparent because we express our grief indirectly or with less emotion, our grief actually may be more intense than we or others recognize.

Male and Female Differences

Whether due to neurological development, social conditioning or other factors, men and women seem to deal differently with separation and attachment. How we attach with or separate from others will affect our response to loss.

Sometimes it is thought that "Men don't grieve." Men actually do grieve, but they don't all grieve the same way; nor do all women grieve the same way. It is more accurate to say that some people grieve affectively, others grieve cognitively and still others grieve both ways.

Affective grievers focus on their feelings and tend to want to talk about their grief. Cognitive grievers focus on taking action, solving problems, creating tributes, checking items off a grief to-do list.

While more women than men grieve affectively, and more men than women grieve cognitively, any man or woman may express grief either affectively or cognitively—or both. Neither way of grieving is right or wrong. Applying sexual stereotypes to ourselves or to others is limiting. Male or female, we need to find our own way of grieving.

Cultural or Faith Tradition Differences

Just as personality and gender may affect how we express grief, cultural values or practices also may influence our expression of grief. Some cultural groups tend to be more expressive. They may show grief physically, by weeping or crying out. Other cultural groups may be more restrained. Their expressions of grief might be subtle or seem less intense.

Some faith traditions emphasize the passage of the deceased to a blessed place or state of being. In such traditions, the bereaved are encouraged to focus not on their own loss but on the well-being of the deceased. Members of other faith traditions express both sorrow and joy; they express personal loss and sadness, but also hope and joy for the deceased.

Differences in Support

No one else will take the place of our loved one. And, for a while, as we are focused on missing the one who died, we may take less pleasure than usual in

the company of those who still share our lives. They may not count as much to us for a while. Just sensing their care, however, helps us more than we may realize.

When people call us, check on us, spend time with us, help us with tasks and invite us out to do things, they remind us that we're not as alone as we may feel. Knowing that they care about us bolsters our confidence that we will make our way through grief.

Support may come from family, neighbors, long-time friends or associates, social or professional groups, or members of our faith community. Not all of us, however, have a network of family, friends and associates on hand to support us. A lack of adequate or accessible support may intensify our loss and grief.

Need for Support

If we provided care to our loved one for some time, we may have given up activities we once enjoyed or lost touch with friends because we simply didn't have time or energy for anything beyond the care of our loved one. Now we have the time, but we may feel out of touch. Even if we desire to renew contact, we may hesitate to call. We wonder what to say, or how former friends may respond to our call.

We may have moved. Maybe family members or others once close to us now live at a distance. They may call often to support us, but can't spend time with us. We know they care, but we wish they were closer so that we could be with them.

Some of us were content just being with the one who has died. We enjoyed doing things together. But now, we miss our companion. No longer content doing things by ourselves, we don't know how to reach out to others. Being alone at this time can intensify our sense of loss and our grief.

Beyond Appearances

How deeply we are affected by grief and whether or not we reveal our grief in our appearance and behaviors are two different matters. We may feel one way, but struggle mightily not to show how we really feel. We may try to maintain an appearance of calm lest we appear foolish, or fear we'd never regain composure if we let our guard down.

Beyond Judgment

We do grieve differently from one another—for good reasons—but grief is not a contest. We don't need to grieve better than someone else. We don't need to grieve more expressively, more intensely, more publicly, more privately, or with greater or less apparent restraint than someone else.

We need not succumb to the judgment of anyone else about how we grieve or about whether we're doing it right. We also need to avoid temptation to pass judgment against ourselves by thinking, "I should do better" or "I should be better by now."

However we grieve, the goal is to:

- Take care of ourselves.
- Acknowledge the impact of the loss on our life.
- Give ourselves time to experience our reactions.
- Adapt to the changes in our lives.
- Carry the memory of our love forward.
- Choose to live as well as we can from this point

As long as we know we're working on these goals, doing the best we can day by day—however intensely or subtly we're grieving—we know we're doing just right, for us!

Chapter 6: When Life Complicates Grief

Grief? That's the least of my problems. I can't afford to grieve. I've got too many other things to deal with right now to have any time to grieve.
I don't know which way to turn first, really!

If we had significant challenges in our life before our loved one became ill or died, we probably have the same problems after his or her death. If our loved one helped us manage or cope with those challenges, we may find life harder now without his or her support.

Grief and other life challenges can complicate one another. Intense grief weighs on us, colors our daily life and taxes our ability to cope. Problems that existed before our loved one's death—and have continued into the present—may compromise our ability to address our grief. Consider these examples:

Financial Problems

Grief may interfere with our ability to face and resolve financial problems. On the other hand, asking for help and doing whatever it takes to solve these practical problems may keep us from having to face our grief.

If our income is affected by the death of a loved one, we may have to adjust our expenses. If we can't afford our home, we may need to sell our house, move someplace with lower rent, move in with someone or find someone to live with us. Some of us may suffer the added loss of our familiar surroundings.

We may have to return to work, or get a second job. We may have to spend more time away from home and other loved ones when they need us most. We may need to learn about resources for financial assistance, and we may have to ask for help.

Health Problems

We may have physical or mental health problems that occupy our attention or limit our ability to manage daily life. Perhaps the one who died had been our caregiver, took us to medical appointments, reminded us to take our medicines and helped us manage our medical condition.

Perhaps we both had health problems but helped one another and managed to get along. Without our helpmate, we may not be able to take care of ourselves. We may need to have someone else help us. If so, we may worry about paying for care. We may need to move where help is available, but we resist giving up our home. Our losses pile up.

Health problems that require us to manage medical appointments or focus on medical treatment leave us no energy for grief. If we've had a history of mental illness or substance abuse, or have developmental delays, the upheaval caused by our loved one's death may compromise our ability to grieve and function well at the same time.

Multiple Losses

This death may be hard because it's the first significant death in our lives and we feel completely unprepared to respond to this loss. Or this death may be especially hard because it comes on the heels of several others.

Having had the experience of grieving before may help us with our current loss. If, however, we have suffered from the death of many people close to us, or if recent deaths have come in rapid succession, we may feel as if we can't take any more. We may feel raw and vulnerable, unable to grieve another loss.

Concurrent Crises

Hospital emergency room staff can't take everyone in crisis at the same time or even on a first-come, first-served basis. They follow criteria to identify, or "triage," medical priorities: Heart attacks and strokes take priority over broken bones, for example.

So, too, we have to set priorities in our lives now. Our natural need to grieve may have to give way to other acute needs that demand immediate attention. Dealing with the results of a car accident, a fire in our home or a natural disaster, or getting care for a health event, may take priority over addressing our grief.

Even positive life events may divert our attention from addressing our grief. Planning a graduation, celebrating a wedding or helping care for a new baby may claim our time. We may need to put energy into a major work-related event. Despite the death of a loved one, life goes on and demands that we keep up with ongoing needs that press upon us.

Social Isolation

By temperament, we may enjoy our own company, cherish our memories and find satisfaction in solitary ways. If this is the way we have always coped with life's adversities, it might be normal for us to cope with our current loss in this way.

For many of us, regular contact with others helps us feel loved and cared for. Nurturing social interactions helps us hope that we will feel better sometime and that we still have a life to look forward to.

If we have no family or friends, we may feel socially isolated. If no one calls or knocks on our door, we may have little reason to think anyone knows or cares about us. Continuing such isolation may deprive us of a potential source of support and hope.

In the long run, if we have no one with whom to talk about our grief or about our memories of our loved one and what he or she meant to us, we may be at risk for becoming even more isolated in the future and losing interest in life.

Getting Help

Such complicating factors as those just described deserve to be taken seriously. Addressing them may require us to seek help or use community resources. If we have long-standing problems of one kind or another, we already may know whom to call for additional help.

If, however, the death of our loved one caused or coincided with a new crisis for us or for others for whom we care, we may not know where to turn. Remember that help is available from VITAS for more than a year after the death of a loved one. VITAS can provide information, support, practical help and community referrals to help us cope with grief and related problems.

Red Flags: Help Needed

Ordinary grief is taxing. But how do we know when our reactions exceed normal grief? How do we know when to seek help? *If we experience feelings so intensely*

or for so long that we become alarmed by our reaction, we definitely need to consider seeking professional help.

Other danger signs would be: uncontrolled bouts of crying, inability to sleep or eat, staying in bed, ignoring personal hygiene, missing work and/or other commitments or isolating ourselves at home for an extended period.

If you see these red flags in yourself or another, call VITAS. Speak with the bereavement services manager or the social worker or chaplain on call. Tell this person what you are experiencing. Depending on the urgency of your need, the VITAS staff person will visit you, schedule an appointment or make an immediate referral or recommendation. You also can call your doctor, a mental health professional or clergy person.

Emergency: Help Needed Now

If you start thinking you can't go on like this, if you think about hurting yourself (or another) or if you start to make a plan to kill yourself, call 411 and ask for your local suicide hotline number—and call it immediately. You also can call VITAS and let the person answering the phone know in detail about your intentions.

If you are in imminent danger of harming yourself or another person, go directly to the emergency room of a local hospital or call 911 for immediate help.

Asking for help is not a sign of weakness. Asking for help actually is a sign that we recognize the scope of the problems we face and we intend to address them effectively. We can call VITAS when we need help facing changes and living from this point on.

Chapter 7: Working with Grief

I just hate this grief. I never know when it's going to hit me. I feel so out of control. It's not bad enough I have to live without my husband, but now I have to live with this miserable, uninvited emotional guest. Grief grabs me by surprise, shakes me to the core, and leaves me spent and scared—not knowing when it will return. I hate it!

Grief

Grief is unpredictable. We don't know when it will hit. If we see grief as a fierce enemy who attacks without notice, or as a thief who periodically steals our control, we may quite understandably feel victimized, ashamed or afraid of grief.

But what if we could see grief as an ally? What if we picture grief as a flowing river, moving us along? What if we picture grief easing us from the life we knew, through facing our loss, and bringing us past ups and downs toward a "new normal" we can begin to develop when we're ready?

What if we could work *with* grief?

Physical Alerts

As noted above, we experience grief pressing on us physically. We endure tears, possibly a lump in our throat, a heavy heart. We feel empty inside or we feel tightly wound, as if we're trying to hold ourselves together. We have too much or too little energy. How can these physical signals help us? *We can use them as reminders to be gentle with ourselves.*

Long ago, widows wore black and were excused from social obligations for a year. A black wreath on the door or a black lapel ribbon reminded everyone of grief in process. With such symbols and customs, society provided mourners a safe place in which to grieve.

But our culture now demands: "We need you here…come back to work in three days! Your grief is a bother. Your loss scares us. Your grief makes us uneasy. We need you to be normal and carry your weight…Act as if nothing has happened!"

Without social customs to support us, physical clues alert us to take care of ourselves. Fatigue and tears tell us that this is not a time for business as usual. It is a time instead to expect less of ourselves; a time to slow down, conserve our energy and allow grief to ease us through these changes. We listen to these physical alerts and adjust our pace for grief.

Mental Signals

The house is quiet, the bed is empty, the phone doesn't ring. The reality of the death and all it means for us in daily life gradually sinks in. We need to absorb these changes before we can learn to live with them. Our mind helps this happen by gradually raising awareness of our situation while we continue to perform ordinary mental tasks.

What takes priority? Facing our grief and absorbing the changes? Or paying the bills? Both actually happen at the same time. Our mind juggles multiple assignments. We haven't lost our mind, but our mind is actually performing double duty. That's why our mental functioning can be inconsistent for a while.

Sometimes we can concentrate; at other times we can't. We may read only a few sentences and not know what we just read. We may misplace things, forget details or have trouble making decisions. We feel as if we're losing control. These experiences are bothersome, inconvenient and even may be frightening. How can we use them?

Each time we're unsettled by a mental lapse, we get a confirmation that grief is at work for us. We don't need to like these experiences. But we can choose to take heart from them, trusting that they are proof that grief is still flowing, easing us toward renewed life.

Doing Our Part

We may begin to wonder if the person we used to be has disappeared for good. We may feel disconnected—from our loved one, from those around us, from ourselves, even disconnected from hope! We may wonder what's the point of continuing to try.

The intensity and duration of our reactions remind us of the depth of our connection to our loved one. Our relationship mattered! Death separated us physically and disrupted our lives. We are different. But there's more to the story. We aren't finished yet.

Grief's role is to sustain us through separation to the point where we can reconnect emotionally and spiritually with our loved one. Our part is to stay with the grief process, to remember it's taking us somewhere—trust grief and keep working with it.

Questions, doubts and fears are wearing, but they challenge us to trust the process. Feeling disconnected reminds us we don't need to make our way with grief alone and tells us it's time to reach out to others.

Grief will affect us. We can resent and resist grief—and berate ourselves for grieving. Or we can see grief in a positive light. We can consider grief an ally, and decide to work with it and not against it. We can want to feel better, want to make our loved one proud of us, want to keep doing our part and want to trust grief to take us somewhere better.

Chapter 8: Engaging in Self Care

There's so much to do, but so little seems to matter. Either I do nothing, or I push myself to keep moving, hoping I'll exhaust myself and sleep. But no matter what I do or don't do, I hit the point where I realize nothing is the same, and my empty life comes crashing in on me again.

The death of someone close to us leaves unfilled spaces in our lives. We feel exposed, vulnerable, unsettled. If we lived with our loved one, our daily routines are deeply affected by our loss. Even if we didn't share a daily life with our loved one, his or her passing leaves an empty place in our world and in our heart.

The more significant or intense our relationship, the more we may struggle to regain safe grounding and equilibrium after the death. If we want to do nothing and stay put until we absorb what happened, we risk feeling more alone. But if we try moving fast in order to regain our balance, we risk becoming exhausted and more vulnerable.

What are we to do?

Physical Comfort and Care

While we can't succumb to grief and let it sap us completely, and while we can't run fast enough to escape grief, we can choose each day to care for ourselves. We can comfort ourselves with nourishing foods that smell and taste good, with clothing that feels and looks good, with fulfilling activities, with sights and sounds that calm us and give us pleasure.

Depleted as we may be from grief, we need restorative rest. Choices during the day may help us unwind at night. Limiting caffeine and sugar helps prevent over-stimulation. Mild repetitive exercise like walking, swimming or biking helps discharge anxious energy. Gentle repetitive movements such as these help relax our minds—and tire us physically.

We can't force ourselves to sleep, but we can put fresh linens on the bed, plump our pillows and create a comfortable place for rest. We can develop a routine in the evening to help us transition toward sleep and to signal our body and mind that it is time to rest.

A routine might include any of the following: Turn off the TV and computer, dim the lighting, adjust temperature and air flow for comfort. Take a warm bath or shower to relax. Fix a warm, soothing drink (limit alcohol). Read something uplifting or reassuring. Slow and deepen our breathing. This helps us settle into our center, release tension and relax into rest.

Limits and Pacing

Business matters (finances, sorting material goods, etc.) often loom large, especially soon after a death. Taking care of business gives us a point of focus and helps us feel connected to our loved one. Having a lot of things to complete, however, also may worry us and tax us mentally. We may be tempted to over-focus on business matters and try to resolve everything right away.

We also may face physical tasks, such as moving or rearranging things where we live. Or we may resist making changes or feel unable to get started. No matter how motivated we are, we can do only so much. We need to recognize—and accommodate—the limitations we face at this time.

So we do what we can. We pace ourselves. Given our limited energy, given the limitations of others upon whom we rely, given how long it takes to do things, we adjust our expectations. We set small goals each day, do what we can and make gradual progress. Honoring our limits and pacing ourselves, we move along!

Time Alone to Absorb Changes

A common temptation when we're grieving is to surround ourselves with people all the time. We may think if we focus on other people, get involved with enough positive activities and avoid "thinking about it," we simply can bypass grief.

Engaging in satisfying activity and keeping in touch with other people can support us as we adapt to our changed situation. We do need some time alone, however, to be in touch with ourselves, to notice what we're thinking, feeling and deciding as we journey through grief. We may need time for quiet prayer or simple stillness—to help us face things.

Communicate Concerns, Feelings and Needs

We may not feel like ourselves for a while. We may not like ourselves this way, and we may not want to reveal ourselves to other people. We may not want to burden others (who also may be grieving) with our concerns or to worry them. Or we may think we should be able to handle things by ourselves.

We may not want to admit to ourselves that we're having a harder time than we thought we would. We naturally prefer to minimize or hide things that make us feel afraid. For varied reasons, we may want to keep things to ourselves. But experience shows repeatedly that concerns brought into the open usually shrink to a more manageable size.

We don't need to tell everyone our business, but we can benefit from being honest and unburdening ourselves to those we trust. It sometimes helps to discuss our concerns with someone we don't know—with others in a support group or with a bereavement counselor. That's why VITAS offers bereavement support for more than a year after a death.

Do What We Can

We can't change the fact that death has touched our life and left us changed. We can't help that we react to grief physically, or that our mind gets scattered, or that we sometimes feel lonely or spiritually adrift. But we can take care of ourselves. We can seek wholesome comfort and renewing pleasures. Our loved ones would want no less for us.

Chapter 9: Nurturing Supportive Relationships

I don't know what happened to me. I look like I'm here, but I'm not—not really. I got lost somewhere since my loved one died. How do I tell people what this feels like? They won't know what I'm talking about. They'll think I'm crazy!

When death takes someone central to our life, the resulting changes rippling around us may alter our lives dramatically. Our life may be so changed, and our reactions so unpredictable, that we feel like we've lost the life we knew. We may seem to have lost ourselves in the process. We may wonder, "Who was I? Where did I go? Will I ever come back?"

Questions such as these are deeply unsettling. They're difficult to face, let alone reveal to another person. So it can be surprising to find that others who have faced a loss can relate to our questions. But not everybody would understand. So how do we know to whom we can entrust our story?

Seeking Receptive Presence

We instinctively know that nobody can take away our grief. We don't expect anyone to answer all our questions or solve our problems. And we don't necessarily want advice.

So what do we need? We need someone who will offer us "receptive presence." We need someone to listen without interruption, without minimizing or without telling us what to do, or think, or feel. We want someone who will show compassion or empathy—but not "cluck over us."

We need someone to offer a space into which we can pour out whatever we want. We need someone to listen to what is in our heart and bear witness to what we experience. We need someone to listen so deeply that we will feel safe and hear an invitation to tell even more. We need someone to care and listen as if there were all the time in the world.

It is especially helpful to find someone who knows about grief: Someone who respects—but is not afraid of—grief. We need someone who trusts grief to do its life-renewing work. We need someone who can explain grief to us and help us make sense of what we experience. *Who can possibly do this for us? Where can we look?*

Finding Companions in Grief

Maybe we know someone who experienced the death of a loved one and seemed to get through it and do OK. Perhaps this person could listen and help us. If we have a friend or acquaintance we can trust to listen with understanding and compassion, we may start there and see what happens.

Or we may look to a faith institution for someone who can offer the receptive presence we need. There may be a trained counselor, bereavement volunteer or grief support group available to listen and accompany us through grief.

We may speak with our doctor and ask for referral to a bereavement counselor or a grief support group. We may be referred to a support group specific to our loss—loved ones of those who died with Alzheimer's or AIDS or who committed suicide. We may be referred to Compassionate Friends, a group for those who have lost a child of any age due to any cause.

At any time, we can call VITAS, confident that we'll receive prompt attention and find receptive presence. We can trust that we'll get good information and be referred, as needed, to community resources to provide the understanding and support we need. Bereavement support is available 24/7 at VITAS. *We really don't need to do this alone.*

Are We Getting What We Need?

We may need to reach out to different people, professionals or groups before we find a fit that's right for us.

What indicators help us know we've found "receptive presence"? We'll feel safe, deeply listened to, informed about grief, enabled to make sense of our experience, reassured we're grieving "normally"—or referred to additional resources for more intense help.

We'll feel accepted in our normal ups and downs. We'll feel heartened and hopeful—at least some of the time. We'll listen to others in a group and feel we belong. We may discover that we not only receive from others, but that *we're able to give support to others too.*

Chapter 10: Continuing Bonds with Our Loved One

Driving to your house for dinner last night, I was thinking of my dad and how much I miss him. I was stunned when your father opened the door. He looked so much like my dad that it took my breath away. For a split second I thought it was my dad! It was eerie!

We know our loved ones are not here, but we look and listen for them anyway. We see "his car" and walk toward it. We hear a sound and expect to see her walk in the room. How do we make sense of experiences such as these? And how do we handle them?

Yearning and Expecting

Accustomed to the presence of our loved ones, our brains are set to expect them and our senses long for contact with them. We want to tell them our latest news. We lift the phone to call. Our eyes search for them in a crowd. We listen for their step. We hold a piece of their clothing to our face to catch their fragrance.

We long for contact, so when we sense something that evokes a memory of our loved one, our fast-acting brains may leap to premature conclusions. Glimpsing a head in a crowd, we find ourselves saying, "There he is." Then we remember… and feel foolish. "How silly of me!" We aren't crazy. It takes time for our brains to re-program and for our senses to stop clamoring for physical contact with our loved ones.

Yearning for physical contact is understandable. But we wonder: Might we unwittingly engage in yearning to fill our empty time and space? To show our

continuing love? Or because yearning is the only way we know to feel connected with the one who died?

Perhaps we can develop alternative ways to connect with our loved one. If so, we may ease the pain of yearning and help ourselves access the strength we need for our life now.

Remembering…and Continuing Actions

Memories of our loved one at first may trigger longing—they remind us of what used to be and no longer is. But in time, as we feel less pain when we remember, we may choose intentionally to recall and savor memories for the pleasure they can give us.

We can remember things we laughed about and challenges we faced. We may remember that things weren't always perfect, but we also recall ways that we loved and we were loved. By remembering, we actively call our loved one's presence to mind and heart.

We can draw our loved one's presence into our lives by continuing to do things we did together, and by repeating customs or traditions we shared. We can support projects or good works that were important to our loved one and continue them in his or her name.

We can carry out plans we didn't get to complete together. We can initiate a new activity in the name of our loved one or fulfill an unmet desire, for example by taking a special trip, in his or her honor. We can choose to do something that gives us joy, knowing that this is what our loved one would want for us.

When we act on behalf of our loved one, we sustain continuing contact with him or her. When we do something we know would matter to our loved one, we let his or her presence act through us and fill us with his or her love.

"Consulting" Our Loved One

We may especially miss our loved one when we face a problem, need to make a decision or confront a task we never had to do alone. These times of challenge, difficult as they are, offer a special opportunity to call on our loved one to help us.

We may think about how he or she handled situations. We recall his or her values, principles or ways of doing things. We remember things he or she said. We may ask for guidance. We can take comfort in knowing we rely on his or her continuing influence.

When feeling uncertain, we can listen for what our loved one would say and recall how he or she reassured or encouraged us. When we've resolved a problem, we can listen for how our loved one would affirm our accomplishment.

Sensing Our Loved One's Presence

Continuing bonds woven through our lives keep us connected in countless ways.

Perhaps our loved one has come to us in a reassuring dream. Or when we're awake, we may have sensed our loved one touching us, talking with us or being present there with us. We may have felt his or her protection. We may have felt urged to do or avoid something that we only later learned had kept us from harm.

We may have had physical experiences in which we sensed our loved one. We may have heard a sound, caught a fragrance, felt a temperature change or discovered an object moved. We may have noticed that lights, water or radio mysteriously went off or on.

If we've had experiences like these, we can take comfort in knowing we're not alone in these experiences. Research involving bereaved people has demonstrated that spontaneous experiences of sensing the presence of a loved one are not universal—but they are not uncommon. And, they occur in a variety of ways. We are not alone.

Memory can tell us only what we were,
In company with those we loved;
It cannot help us find out what each of us,
Alone, must now become.
Yet no person is really alone;
Those who live no more still echo
Within our thoughts and words,
And what they did has become
Woven into what we are.

—Richard Fife

Chapter 11: Dealing with Things People Say

I am sick of people telling me what I should think, how I should feel and what I should do. Going through this is bad enough without other people telling me how. What makes them think that they know what's right for me? Why don't they just mind their own business?

Most people actually aren't so smart about grief. After our loved one has died, many of us get advice we didn't ask for. Well-meaning people may say things that hurt, make us mad or lead us to feel disrespected in our grief.

What We May Hear

Depending on our situation, we may hear insensitive comments such as these:

"You shouldn't feel bad…
… She was old…it was her time."
… It was God's will."
… You're young…you'll find someone else."

"What you should do is…
… Be grateful for the time you had."
… Have another child."
… Keep busy…don't dwell on it."

"You must be relieved…
… You don't have to worry about her anymore."
… You can get on with your life."

"I know just how you feel."

Why Do They Say Such Things?

Death and grief make people uncomfortable. They can't make sense of death, and they don't know what to say. So they recycle things they've heard from others, hoping to get past offering awkward condolences with minimal discomfort.

While grieving is hard for us, it also may be troubling to people around us. Others don't want to see us suffer. They may hurt for us or feel guilty that their life is OK. They may get annoyed if grief affects our concentration or our ability to perform tasks. They want us back to normal, and they don't want to wait.

They say things hoping to promote a quick fix for our grief.

What We Can Do

If people truly care about us, but they don't know what to say or do, we can help them to be more supportive. If we discover in time that they are not supportive, we can limit contact with them. We don't need to be burdened by what other people say.

We can respond honestly:
"I know you mean well, but what I really need to hear is…"

We can give our perspective:
"My mother was old. We had a long time together, but the fact is I miss her now. It's going to take a while for me to get used to her not being here. I appreciate your support in accepting how I feel."

"I'm not relieved. I was happy to take care of my wife. It gave me a lot of satisfaction. I miss her. I wish she was still here so I could take care of her."

"I don't want to find someone else. That's the last thing on my mind right now. I need to think about my husband. I will miss him for a while. He deserves that from me."

"You may have had similar experiences, but we're going to react in different ways, and that is OK."

We can explain what would help instead:
"It's enough to say you remember times when you have hurt, and you're sorry I'm hurting now. That would be comforting to me."

"Can you please tell me that you'll go with me or help me look when I decide I'm ready to take another step?"

"I know I can have another child, but please just talk with me about the child I had. Tell me what you remember, and what you miss about her now."

We can be quite firm if someone persists in making unwelcome comments: "I appreciate your concern, but I have other people experienced with grief with whom I can talk about these things. I'm getting the information and support I need."

"I'm doing what works for me."

"I can't talk right now."

Bottom Line

Death is a fierce mystery—the ultimate limit and final separation. We feel humbled and powerless in the face of death, suffering and grief. We don't know what to say…even if we've been through it, we know our experience and reactions likely were different. And then we know nothing we say can make much difference.

When we want to comfort others, we simply say, "I am sorry." Then we keep quiet and listen to what the other one wants to say. We stay close and give what practical help we can.

Chapter 12: Recognizing Family Dynamics

They're hovering over me, smothering me. They call all the time to check on me, wanting to know what I'm doing, where I'm going, whether I'm eating. I know they mean well, but they're treating me like a child!

Families follow different but predictable patterns and dynamics. Family members play different roles and carry out certain responsibilities. They establish expectations of one another, and develop ways of acting and relating to keep the family safe and in balance.

When death takes a loved one, each member of the family is affected, but the family as a whole also is affected. Death alters the whole family system. Family dynamics are upset for a while as individual members start to play different roles and attempt to take on (or let go of) responsibilities in an effort to restore the family equilibrium.

Different Personalities

Some family members appear to grieve more intensely than others because they may express feelings more openly and talk about missing the one who died. Some members may prefer to focus on tasks, go through clothes and belongings, and complete business. Others may appear uninvolved, quickly returning to their own lives and responsibilities.

Some family members may seek frequent contact with one another. They may want to talk about what happened, review turning points and decisions made along the way. Other members may back off from contact, preferring to process things in a different way.

Losing One Another

According to age, personality, common interests and needs, family members form particular alliances with one another. These alliances help maintain balance within the family as a whole. When a loved one dies, family members are affected individually, but their particular relationships with one another may be affected as well.

As members of the family go through personal grief reactions and adjustments to the loss, they may not act in quite the same ways as they had before the death. Individuals may feel as if they've gotten "lost" personally, or they may feel as if they've "lost" other members of the family who no longer act like themselves.

Evolving Relationships

Family members may look to one another for the love and support they received from the one who died. Adult children may now expect their father to give them attention like their mother gave. Or, having lost their father, children may become newly protective of their mother or lavish extra care on her.

Family members may jockey for position with siblings to take on (or abandon) roles the loved one had performed. They may have conflict over an inheritance. Some may try to hold the family together. They may recognize what they're trying to do or make adjustments without being aware of what's happening.

Just Hold On

For a while after the death of a loved one, family members may feel as if they're riding a merry-go-round together. While they're all going through this together, they're also all individual figures, moving in their own ways.

Given our diversity and varied ways of acting, feeling and thinking, it's no wonder that, as family members, we might have a hard time feeling close or staying in sync with one another after a death. Sometimes the best way to stay close is to give one another time and space to react as individuals, each in our own way.

For now, we can decide to hold on, be patient, avoid engaging in conflict, and trust that when the merry-go-round slows down, we'll find firmer ground with one another again.

We can call VITAS if we're having trouble connecting with other family members or if we could use guidance in coping with family dynamics.

Chapter 13: Navigating Social Relationships

I'm amazed by people's reactions to my husband's death. Some of my friends, people I'd have expected to be most supportive, haven't called or come over. Other people I hardly knew before have surprised me by offering practical help and understanding.

We may be surprised to find that others treat us differently after a loved one has died. People who haven't experienced the death of a loved one, even friends or associates who have been part of our lives for a while, may seem to be uneasy around us or back away.

This backing away may take the form of not calling us or not including us in their gatherings. Or it may take such blatant forms as literally turning away or taking another aisle in a store to avoid facing us.

How It Is for Them

They sense we're hurting. Most people feel a natural inclination when they see suffering to want to do something about it. If they can't help, they may feel inadequate, embarrassed or disappointed in themselves. They don't want to be faced with something they can't make better. If they can't help, they want to get away—and stay away.

In addition, people don't want reminders that accidents, illness or death can happen at any time. They don't want to be reminded that these things could happen to them or to those they love. They'd rather think such things happen to others, to people they don't know. The farther away the better!

Our Side of the Story

After the death of our loved one, we, too, are different. Our emotions may surface without warning. Our sleep may be irregular and our energy variable. We may not know how we'll feel from day to day or hour to hour. We may hesitate to make social plans or accept invitations because we don't know how we'll feel when the time comes.

Since our loved one died, we may have a hard time being with other people. We may feel more comfortable alone. But we also may feel lonely and wish others would call. Or we may discover we feel lonely even when we're with others. We don't know what we want—except we want our loved one back!

We may want to be invited to take part in a social gathering, but then feel uncertain whether to accept. We may fear that we'll feel worse after being with other couples or families. Full of emotions, we may fear we'll cry uncontrollably or suffer an outbreak of anger. We don't want to embarrass ourselves or trouble others.

Given our natural ambivalence, we may initially accept an invitation but feel especially vulnerable when the time actually comes and decide to stay home at the last minute. When we don't know what we want, it's hard for even good friends to read our signals.

Taking Small Steps

If we can get beyond judging ourselves for our natural uncertainty about entering social situations, we can begin to give our friends clearer signals. We can explain that we're not sure how we'll feel and tell them we'll accept an

invitation if they'll agree that if we can't handle it, it's OK to call just before and cancel, or, if we do attend, to leave early.

If we want to initiate a plan ourselves, we can identify one or two people with whom we'd feel at ease. We can choose a time and setting that would be comfortable. Recognizing that others might be anxious about what to say, we can take responsibility to set the tone.

When we get together, we can tell them it's OK to talk about our loved one, because we welcome that. We can explain that tears may come suddenly, but they needn't worry that they made us cry. Knowing that we're OK with tears may help them to relax. We can't predict how our time together will go, but we can feel good about reaching out.

Extending Ourselves

If we know others touched by the death of a parent, spouse, child, sibling, cherished friend or relative, they may appreciate what we're experiencing and naturally reach out to us. If so, we may find special comfort in talking with them. We may feel confident that among our circle of acquaintances we have enough good support.

We may worry, however, that we're relying too much on just a few people or that we're taxing their friendship. Worse yet, we may recognize that we do not have anyone in our circle with whom we feel free to talk openly about our experiences.

In either case, we may benefit from going to a support group, either a general bereavement group or a group focused on a particular type of loss (for example, of a spouse or a child). We may be surprised to find among strangers an unexpected feeling of safety and support, and discover that we can both give and receive the understanding and support we need.

If the one who died had been our primary companion for social activities, we may need to find new activities or make some new friends. We can call VITAS to get information about support groups as well as social support and activity-oriented groups in our area. Volunteering for VITAS offers an easy and enjoyable way to meet others.

We may want to reach out for new contacts, but recognize this is really hard for us. If so, we may benefit from talking with a bereavement counselor, mental health professional or clergy person to help us get started. We start wherever we can, but we start!

Chapter 14: Managing Commitments

They've been great at work—cut my workload, given me time off when I needed it. But my boss says that it's been five months since Ellie died, and he thinks it's time I pick up the pace. I need the job, but I still can't concentrate very well. I don't know how I can handle more right now.

Our personalities, life circumstances, the nature of our relationships and our degree of shock at the time of death are factors that influence our experience of grief. We may mourn and adjust to changes with relative ease, or we may struggle for some time and feel unable to meet all our former commitments. Life, meanwhile, goes on around us.

Work/Volunteer Obligations

We may be at a point in life where we don't need to work. We have minimal responsibility for others. We can make personal choices about whether or when or where we volunteer our time. Grieving may be hard on us, but at least we have relative freedom from time constraints, allowing us to experience and move through our grief.

Others of us grieve within multiple and pressing demands of daily life. We have to work, care for children or other dependents, run a household, etc. We may have some flexibility about when we do things, or we may have to follow a tight schedule.

Work and other life activities may offer a welcome respite from grief. Or, we may feel that work demands exceed our ability to keep up. Our responsibilities

may place constraints upon us that impede our ability to take the time to grieve and care for ourselves.

Unrealistic Expectations

Employers may not understand the grief process. They may think, "You take a couple of days off, you may be sad for a while, but…you'll get back into your normal routine pretty quickly, and everything will be as it was." Co-workers may say, "You've got to get over that and move on."

We may have heard references to "the stages of grief" and presumed that grief is usually a fairly predictable, time-limited and orderly process. We may recall when loved ones died in the past that we felt sad and missed them, but it didn't affect us every day and we eventually moved on

We thought our experience would be similar this time, but it's not. We may think we ought to be doing better, too, and feel guilty that we're not!

Reaching a New Understanding

But this grief may be different from any we've ever experienced. If we become discouraged because we're not doing better quickly enough, we need to learn enough about grief to help us make sense of the physical, emotional, mental or spiritual aspects of our grief so that we can recognize and accept and adjust to our current limitations.

Once we understand grief's potential effect on job performance, we may be better able to discuss work concerns with a supervisor or someone in the human resources department. We may even learn that our employer has an employee assistance program with counseling resources to help us.

We can't hurry grief's work, but we can responsibly communicate both our needs and our limits. We can affirm our intention to meet expectations and do as well as we can.

Pacing Ourselves

For a variety of reasons, we may be tempted to throw ourselves into work, projects at home or other activities. We may want to keep busy so we don't think about our loss. We may try to exhaust ourselves so we'll sleep at night. We may want to keep running to avoid being at home. Or we may just want to look and feel normal.

While a certain amount of activity is necessary and helpful for us as we move through grief, we also need to remember that grief itself may diminish our usual supply of energy. We may sleep less well and awake less rested. We may become fatigued more easily.

We can benefit from setting priorities and taking steps toward accomplishing them. We need to set reasonable time expectations and pace ourselves. We may make more progress by consistently taking small steps than by pushing ourselves to accomplish too much too soon.

Stressing or exhausting ourselves physically is all too likely to deplete our mental energy as well as our spirits. As an alternative, pacing ourselves allows us to take care of ourselves while we manage our lives, take care of our responsibilities and honor our commitments to others.

We can do this.

Chapter 15: Celebrating Specials Days… and Holidays

How do you endure, after your loved one dies, the days you used to celebrate? Do you ignore birthdays and anniversaries—treat them like any other day? Do you feel sad or foolish trying to "celebrate" alone? I'd like to just forget Thanksgiving and the holidays this year.

We may not have noticed before how many special days we celebrated. But since our loved one died, even ordinary days are a challenge. Special days present an even bigger test. Each special day reminds us how different our lives are now.

Anticipated or Caught by Surprise

Some special days and holidays have been particularly important in our relationship. Now we can see them coming from a long way off, and we anticipate their arrival with dread. We can't imagine getting through them. We wonder how to protect ourselves from the pain of facing special days alone or how, at least, to minimize their pain.

But even days we never guessed would trouble us may catch us by surprise!

Valentine's Day was never much…no fancy chocolates or roses in our house. But this year I noticed the decorations, and I heard people talk about their plans. When Valentine's Day actually came, I felt invisible, totally left out of what others were sharing—and so alone. I was shocked. How could I be so miserable over a day that I never cared about before?

Being Uncertain How We'll Feel

We miss the physical presence of the one we've loved—on ordinary days and special days alike. We may miss our loved one with an off-and-on dull ache, with acute pangs of distress or with intense yearning. Whatever our experience on ordinary days, we fear that we'll miss our loved one even more on a special day.

"How will I get through it? Can I stand being around other people? Should I plan to be alone that day? Or, do I need to be around other people? Can I be with others without spoiling the day for them? Will I break down and embarrass myself? With whom would I be most at ease? Should I just get through the day?"

Questions like these are natural for anyone significantly affected by grief: The reality is that we can't know how we'll feel. We may feel very sad—whether we're with others or alone. Or we may be surprised that a particular day goes far better than we would have guessed. We may see that our anticipation of the day was far worse than the day itself.

Heightened Activity of the Holiday Seasons

Personal holidays, such as birthdays and anniversaries, are poignant because they were "ours." If others acknowledge the special day, we may appreciate their sensitivity. We can tell others of a special day and invite them to help us celebrate. But, if we choose, *we can keep a personal holiday* to ourselves and observe it or not—without others knowing.

Public holidays are a different story. Whether national, ethnic or religious in nature, holidays are special days we hold in common and observe with others. Thanksgiving through New Year's has become a cultural and commercial holiday

season, one marked by heightened social activity, holiday events, religious rituals and family celebrations.

Unlike a one-day holiday, the holiday season goes on for weeks. If we feel we've been "cheated" by the death of our loved one, we may feel even more angry or sad during this time, and resentful that others seem so joyful. We may feel out of sync with the pace and activities of the season, but we hardly can avoid being affected by them.

Choices: Avoid or Plan

If we receive invitations to holiday gatherings, how should we respond? Others may need us to be with them. But do we want to give of ourselves? Do we still have anything to offer? Can we be ourselves? Can we be honest with others? Do we try to "fake it"?

No matter who we are or what are our life circumstances, we have options and we can make choices. We can try to ignore the day (or season) and treat it like any other. Or we can plan ways to spend our time—at least the hours when we don't have other obligations.

Trying to ignore the day completely is not our best option. The least we can do is say:
Today is a special day. I miss my loved one. He or she would want me to be OK, especially on this day. So I'll help myself through this day one bit at a time—in the morning, I'll _____; in the afternoon, I'll_____; and, in the evening, I'll _____. My loved one would be proud of me.

We can choose to be alone—or spend some time with others. Even if we're alone, we can plan to contact someone. If we choose to be with others, we still can give ourselves some time alone with our own thoughts and feelings. Whatever our choices, we can express our concerns and our plans to others who care about us: "I'm doing the best I can today."

Whether alone or with others, we can find ways to include our loved one in our day. We can remember him or her by preparing a favorite dish, going someplace we enjoyed together, spending time with others who loved him or her, and sharing memories of what we appreciated.

Giving to others in need sometimes helps us look beyond our own pain for a while. We can act on behalf of our loved one—give gifts or provide a service in his or her name to let his or her spirit live though our actions. We can wrap ourselves and others in the memory of his or her continuing love.

Chapter 16: Recognizing Spiritual Distress

I can hardly stand going to church. I feel so alone standing by myself. Some of the songs really get to me. I just wish I knew he was OK. I have questions I never had before. Now, when I need strength most, I have trouble asking for help. What's happening? Am I losing my faith?

For some of us, certain beliefs ground how we view life and help us make sense of things that happen. Others might have a hard time describing what we believe, but we sense an underlying pattern to life that helps us feel safe.

When the death of a loved one challenges our sense of how things work, we may need to test and/or deepen our spiritual foundations. For a while, we may experience spiritual distress.

Indicators of Spiritual Distress

Perhaps at the heart of spiritual distress is feeling disconnected (from others, from God, from ourselves) or feeling anonymous, forgotten, abandoned, unworthy or beyond love and care. When we have lost the physical presence of a loved one, we may feel more alone—therefore more susceptible to spiritual pain—than at any other time in our life.

Experiencing spiritual confusion, expressing intense feelings of anger toward God and asking challenging spiritual questions are all signs of spiritual distress. They may cause us to fear that we have lost our faith. But to the contrary, these are signs that we're troubled by not feeling more secure in our reliance on God. We want to deepen our grounding in faith.

Different Spiritual Reactions

Many of us who grieve the loss of our loved one find comfort in faith. If we have a history of belief and if we are accustomed to spiritual practice, we may be inclined to lean heavily upon our beliefs and practices. We may be happy to have others remind us of our beliefs or hope.

Or, we may long for assurance that our loved one is safe and at peace. We want assurance that we ourselves will survive this loss, or even our own death. Even though we hurt from this separation, we may want to trust that we are safe, and hope that we will be reunited in the future.

Some of us can't understand or accept this loss, yet we cling to God to help us through suffering. Seeking power greater than our own, we may be drawn to spiritual practice, to worship, meditation or prayer. We need hope, faith or trust to sustain us. We need comfort, peace or strength to walk our path. We seek what we need from our source.

Others of us may be confused. We prayed for healing or more time together. We didn't get what we prayed for. Others' prayers were answered—why not ours? We may feel angry, guilty, punished or abandoned. We may be surprised to have such reactions or ashamed to raise such questions.

We naturally may experience spiritual distress when things that happen to our loved ones or to us don't fit our understanding of how God is supposed to care for us. When this happens, we need to identify and express our doubt, hurt and confusion. To help us deal with reactions like these, we can benefit from sensitive and effective spiritual care.

Where Do We Find Spiritual Care?

Spiritual distress and desire for spiritual growth are common, especially among people who have suffered the loss of a loved one. So a likely place to seek the spiritual care we need is from a designated person in our own spiritual community or institution.

Many faith institutions or spiritual communities offer bereavement support and services to their members and to others in the community. Careful attention to the spiritual dimension of grief is an important part of providing effective bereavement support.

We may be reluctant, however, to seek care if we sense that those within our local faith institution might be disappointed to hear of our spiritual distress. We may fear a faith leader would not be open to our spiritual questions or might tell us what we should believe—instead of sensitively exploring with us the areas of our confusion or distress.

If we have such concerns, we can request spiritual care from VITAS. We can call the VITAS bereavement services manager and schedule an appointment to explore spiritual concerns with one of the VITAS chaplains.

We aren't alone.

Chapter 17: Not Getting Better

I kept thinking if I just got past the first year, I'd be OK. I held on to that hope. It kept me going. But it hasn't happened! It's been over a year and nothing is better—I'm not better, so now I feel worse. Is it my fault?

Each of us responds to a loss in our own unique way. We develop our own beliefs, strategies and expectations. We usually do the best we can. Sometimes our strategies don't work as we had hoped. When that happens, we need to find a new approach, new ways to handle things or new resources to help us.

My Fault? No!

Blaming ourselves for not feeling better is a waste of energy and time, and can lead to depression. If a significant amount of time has passed and we have not begun to feel more like ourselves, we need to figure out what may be holding us back. We probably need the support of a bereavement counselor to help us assess our situation and see what actions or resources can help us.

Do We Have a Part?

While prolonged or intense grief is not our fault, we may be holding expectations or opinions that contribute to slowing our passage through grief. For example:

Our expectations of ourselves may be too high.

If we think we should "be better" after a certain amount of time because someone else was better by that time after his or her loved one died, we may be unrealistic in our expectations. We don't know how others have suffered. Just as we're reluctant to let others know when we're having a hard time, others may mask their grief in public, too.

We may not know enough about grief.

As we saw in earlier chapters, each person's grief is affected by many variables, such as the relationship with the deceased, personality, culture, spiritual beliefs, adequacy of personal support and more. We need to take all these factors into consideration when we consider how we're doing or when we compare ourselves to another person.

We may think normal grief doesn't apply to us.

We may have prided ourselves on being strong, expected ourselves to stay calm and handle any situation. It may be simply unacceptable to us that we have experienced any of the disturbing and inconvenient reactions that may accompany normal grief.

Multiple Needs May Stall Grief

Apart from our expectations, we may be affected by life circumstances that either get in the way of our grief work or exacerbate it. If we are responsible for children after a death, we need to provide their basic care and necessities. Work obligations may take us away from our home and children. No matter where we are, we may feel as if we should be someplace else.

Everyone in the family is vulnerable at the same time. We may have trouble responding to our children's grief-related needs because we're grieving ourselves. It seems there's not enough of us to go around. We may have trouble experiencing our own grief because we're attending to others. So our grief may be delayed, prolonged or made more intense.

Children and Teens Grieve, Too

Children and teens may experience a range of reactions similar to those described throughout this booklet. They may feel and express their reactions in ways that reflect their personal bond with the one who died, their particular personality—as well as their age and mental, social and emotional development.

Children typically grieve in shorter bursts than adults. They may express intense grief with words or tears for several minutes and then go off to play. Or children may find it easier to express their grief indirectly (by taking part in an activity or a parallel discussion) rather than through direct conversation.

Children who are grieving generally need more time and more attention, unconditional love and support. Not unlike adults, children may show physical distress in grief. They may have trouble concentrating on schoolwork. They may become emotionally withdrawn or act out their feelings and need direct attention to draw out their concerns.

Children and teens need to know that their reactions are natural and that the adults in their lives understand and care for them. They need to know they can express their reactions when and how they need to. If children aren't supported in expressing themselves, their grief may come out indirectly through disruptive behaviors that hurt themselves or others.

(*For further discussion, see the VITAS booklets* Children and Grief *and* Teens and Grief.)

Some Grief Is Complicated

In an earlier chapter, we considered a variety of factors that potentially could complicate our grief. Some of these were: caregiving responsibilities for children or frail adults, concurrent crises, multiple losses, financial problems, health problems, changed living arrangements, mental health or substance abuse problems.

If any factors such as these directly affect us or someone else for whom we care, our energies are naturally drawn away from grieving and directed to solving immediate, acute problems. Life complications can bury our grief for a while, delay experiencing our grief or so intensify our grief that we become overwhelmed and unable to function.

Sometimes Grief Is Self-Protective

Facing the emptiness and loneliness we may feel from the loss of a precious loved one is daunting. We don't want to face the fear of being alone. So sometimes, without intending it, we can distract ourselves and focus on certain aspects of grief for protection, so we don't have to focus directly on the separation pain.

We may use anger or guilt (what we or others did or didn't do) to occupy our minds. If so, we unwittingly may prolong anger, guilt or resentment as a way to cling to the past, when our loved one was still here. Pangs of anger or guilt may hurt less than directly confronting the pain of separation.

Or we may face the separation, even allow ourselves to suffer intensely, because the pain affirms our love and how deeply we were connected. When we feel the pain, we feel as though we're still attached to our loved one. We don't want to lose touch with our loved one, so we cling to the pain (grief) to maintain a continuing bond with the deceased.

"It Shouldn't Have Happened"

Or we may stubbornly attempt to barricade ourselves against the pain of loss and grief's intent to move us along. We may think that if we can keep up our fierce protest that it shouldn't have happened, that we can keep ourselves from ever having to face that it did happen. And we just won't have to deal with it or "get better."

Depression May Burden Us

Normal grief is challenging enough—and takes enough time in helping us adapt to our new life. But perhaps depression has developed as a companion to our grief, and we no longer know whether we're simply grieving or depressed also. Grief and depression in early stages may share some common symptoms: energy loss, sleep deprivation, appetite changes, feeling sad, frequent sighing.

A chief difference between grief and depression is that grief is fluid and dynamic. It comes and goes. If we are "just grieving," we may not feel very good, but at least our experience of grief keeps changing. And, even while we're grieving, we still can know some moments of joy and a temporary lightening of our spirit. Time seems to help.

Depression is more encompassing, a kind of dull and unchanging heaviness. Suffering from depression, we often may feel like doing nothing. We don't find joy even when we would like to. We may feel as if we're the problem and we'll never get better.

Additional physical symptoms may accompany depression. These can include constant or heavy sighing, dry mouth or a sour taste in the mouth, decreased taste sensation, elevated heart rate, sweating or tremors.

If we suffer from depression, we can't presume time will help us feel better. We need to get professional help to relieve depression.

Key Questions: Are You OK?

If we're seriously wondering whether we're doing OK, we can ask ourselves:

- Do I want to feel better?
- Am I ready to accept that death happens and life goes on?
- Am I ready to accept that my life has changed and I need to face that?
- Am I willing … to ask for help?

  … to take responsibility to change the things I can?

  … to nurture a changed but continuing relationship with my loved one?

If we answer yes to these questions—and if we take actions to follow through—we can trust that we're working with grief. *Life will get better.*

Even if we have complicating factors in our life or if we suffer from depression or other strong emotions, as long as we are willing to ask for help—from VITAS, a bereavement counselor, mental health professional, clergy person or physician—and work with the appropriate resources offered, we can be confident our life will get better.

If we answer no to any of those questions, we at least have a clue about where we may be stuck—and what would be beneficial for us to discuss with a counselor.

One way or another, we can trust that we have been trying to take care of ourselves. At any time, if we see that our way isn't working for us, we can call VITAS and find support to explore new ways to help ourselves.

Nobody else can grieve for us—but we don't have to do it alone.

Tips for Grieving Persons

A summary

Self Care:

- Comfort yourself with nourishing foods
- Surround yourself with pleasing sights and calming sounds
- Limit caffeine, alcohol and other mind-altering substances
- Develop an evening routine to help transition toward sleep; create a comfortable place for rest
- Learn about the physical, emotional, mental or spiritual aspects of grief (internet, books) so that you can accept and adapt to your current limitations
- Recall your special qualities that endeared you to your loved one
- Keep a journal of your activities, thoughts, feelings and dreams
- Listen to your favorite music; do something creative
- Make a list of your strengths. Spend some time each day concentrating on appreciating yourself

Activity Level:

- Engage in mild exercise such as walking, swimming or biking
- Carry out fulfilling activities when you can tolerate them
- Start slowly; set minimal goals; pay attention to fatigue and emotional limitations

- Directly discuss your work concerns/limitations with a supervisor
- Resist making major changes right away
- Adjust expectations of yourself and others
- Let others know that you may need to leave early from a social event or decide not to come at all
- When it feels right, find new activities or make new friends

Support from Others

- Keep in touch with supportive people; unburden yourself with people you trust who can offer "receptive presence"
- Seek others with whom you can share memories of your loved one
- Structure some time alone to be in touch with yourself
- Limit contact with those who are less than supportive
- Let others know specifically how they can help
- Join a bereavement group where others can relate to what you are experiencing
- Seek a grief counselor if you think this might be helpful
- Seek the spiritual care you need from a designated person in your spiritual community

Relating to Other Family Mourners:

- Give one another time and space to allow each to react in his or her own way
- Avoid engaging in conflict. If there are differences among you, trust you'll gradually find firmer ground with each other

Commemorative Activities

- Recall your loved one's values, principles or ways of doing things
- Continue to do things and repeat traditions you did with your loved one, as you're able
- Start new traditions and rituals at holidays and at other special times
- Support projects or good works in your loved one's name and let his or her spirit live though your actions
- Carry out plans you weren't able to complete together
- Affirm the meaning of your loved one's life by recording memories of who he or she was and will always be.
- Visit the cemetery and talk with your loved one

Continuing the Bond:

- Intentionally savor pleasurable memories. By remembering, actively call your loved one's presence to mind and heart
- When feeling uncertain, listen for what your loved one would say and how he/she would affirm your accomplishment
- Ask for guidance from your loved one. Take comfort in knowing you rely on his or her continuing influence
- Find ways to include your loved one in your day—by preparing a favorite dish, going someplace you enjoyed together, etc.
- Examine any "unfinished business" with your loved one by talking it out with a trusted friend, faith practitioner or counselor
- Write a letter to your loved one, sharing things you would like to have said before the death

Finally, remember to tell yourself, "I'm doing the best I can today."

About the Author

Maureen Kramlinger, MA, CT, served for five years as a hospice chaplain, providing spiritual care to patients and families of Hospice of Central Florida and VITAS® Healthcare. As a VITAS bereavement services manager for eight years, Maureen provided counseling, facilitated support events and support groups, and wrote a monthly newsletter for the survivors of hospice patients.

Past president of a local group of grief and loss counselors and other professionals, she initiated VITAS' collaboration with local community-based agencies to produce holiday-oriented grief support events in Central Florida. Maureen has been a frequent presenter at local and national conferences.

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