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Bereavement Services

On the First Anniversary of Your Loss

For most people, the first anniversary of their loved one's death is not just another day, but rather a very significant day. It is a measure of how long you have lived without your loved one, of your first year struggling to discover who you are without this person in your life. It can feel like "just yesterday" since your loved one died, or it can seem like a very long time ago. Sometimes we feel both things at the same time.

For many, the days leading up to the first anniversary of the death can be a time of unsettling thoughts and feelings and intensified sadness. If this is where you find yourself, know it is a common response to the day. Some find themselves reliving the last days of their loved one's life, rooted to painful images or words they thought they had been freed from months earlier, only to find them popping up again. This might leave you feeling as if you've "gone back to square one" in your grief journey, although this is not the case. We need to remind ourselves that healing comes little by little, in baby steps—sometimes one step forward and two back— but overall, we are moving forward. We do not lose what we have gained.

Marking the Day

Unlike the anniversaries in our lives that celebrate happy events, the first anniversary of our loved one's death is not something we feel like celebrating. What we can do is mark the day in a way that is meaningful for us and also honors our loved one.

For many people, the anticipation of the first anniversary of the death is worse than the actual day itself. This is not unusual. I have discovered it is most helpful to have a plan in place to mark the day—whether it is to simply light a special candle on your dining room table, with your favorite photo of your loved one next to it, or to plan something more elaborate. Some find comfort turning to the rituals of

*Memory can only tell us what we were,
in the company of those we loved;
it cannot help us find what each of us, alone,
must now become.*

*Yet no person is really alone;
those who live no more echo still within
our thoughts and words,
and what they did
has become woven into what we are.*

-Jewish Prayer

their faith tradition, such as unveiling the headstone in the month leading up to the first anniversary, or requesting a Mass or special prayers in memory of their loved one.

Over the years, my bereavement clients have shared with me the many meaningful ways they have marked the first anniversary of their loved one's death, as well as other important days in their grief journey. One client honored her husband by preparing his favorite meal and sharing it with family, inviting each one to tell their funniest story about the father and grandfather they knew and loved. Another client marked the day by walking the same beach he and his wife walked whenever they had important news to share with each other. Someone else composed a letter to be sent to family and friends, telling them the many ways her partner had brought meaning and joy to her life. Sharing the gratitude she felt for her partner became a powerful healing ritual, not only for her, but for those who read her letter. However you chose to mark this first anniversary, at the end of the day you will be glad you did, and you will be moving one step closer to healing.

What is Letting Go?

Letting go is a phrase that one hears over and over again in the bereavement support group setting, and many find themselves asking, “What does this mean?” While I think it’s one of those questions that can ultimately be best answered by the one who asks it, I know what it means to me to lose someone I love and to grieve deeply.

I find it impossible to give a dictionary definition to letting go. All things that are bigger than I am—God, Spirituality, Nature, Love, Death—are hard to give words to, and I place letting go in this category. I feel it, and instinctively I know it, but I can’t give it words that truly do it justice.

To me, letting go is a positive thing. It does not come early in the grieving process, and it does not appear all at once—it takes time to develop and become a part of the new normal I will eventually find as I move closer and closer to healing in the months and years after my loved one has died. It does not mean that I am letting go in the sense of forgetting about or giving up my connection to my loved one. On the contrary, once I have reached the place of letting go, I know they will never be forgotten and that my connection is permanent. I can no longer touch or see my mother standing before me, but I remember the feeling of her arms around me and can unmistakably feel her presence in my life. She is with me. Letting go does not mean I will ever stop loving or missing her. I can’t let go just because I know it would be good for me. I might have friends or family who think I am holding on to or obsessing on one particular aspect of my loved one’s death—perhaps the fact that he died too young, that she was misdiagnosed and might not have died if her cancer had been found sooner, or that we had cross words

before he left the house that morning and was killed in a car accident on his way to work. My well-meaning friends or family tell me, “You need to let go of that, you can’t change that now,” as if I could wave a magic wand and no longer wrestle with these feelings. They tell me this because they suffer at the sight of my suffering. They want me to look and act like the person I was before my loved one died. I simply am no longer that person. They don’t understand that I’ll wrestle with these feelings as long as I need to, until I have worked through them at my own pace, and only then will I be able to move on to the next phase of my journey. It is my timetable, not anyone else’s.

The first anniversary of your loss does not signify the end of your healing journey, as some might tell you, but you may be closer to knowing that you will, at some point, be able to rejoin life in a full and meaningful way. As you stop and take stock of this past year—a year that might best be described as riding a rollercoaster of feelings and emotions—it is possible you will discover how you have grown through this time of grief. You are not the same person you were when your loved one was alive, but this isn’t wrong or bad. Who you are becoming can be fuller, deeper, and wiser because of your experience of grief, and the love you shared. Perhaps these words of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross will ring true for you:

The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern.

Hospice of Southern Maine is grateful to have been able to provide care to your loved one and your family. As your healing journey continues, we hope you won’t hesitate to contact us if you would like further information or support.

(207) 289-3640

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