

HOSPICE *of the* VALLEY

Bereavement Literature

LIMITED VISION

Recently Joan, a woman in a grief group that I facilitate, shared that one of the most helpful phrases she heard during grief was “limited vision.” Joan had a son who died from a drug overdose. Like many mothers in such a circumstance, Joan was troubled. Had she done enough to help? Should she have been more forthcoming? Should she have tried a “tough love” approach? She spent a great deal of time obsessively reviewing every single one of her actions.

While each situation of loss is different, Joan’s concerns are one way or another, often shared by others who are coping with their grief. Merle, for example, wondered whether they should have allowed additional chemotherapy as her dad died of cancer. Ted, whose young daughter died of a rare viral infection, wondered if anything could have been done had it been recognized and treated earlier. Ashley wished she had not gone to the store the morning her husband died. Though he was under the care of a hospice home health aide, she felt guilty that she was not there when he died.

All of these feelings are expressions of guilt. Guilt is often a way in which grief is manifested. We may feel guilty about many things. We may feel guilty that we had some role in causing the death. Perhaps we focus on something we did or neglected to do. We may feel a “moral” guilt, a sense that this death is a personal punishment. We may feel guilty about our role — wondering if there was something else we might have done. It is easy to become haunted by the “if only’s.” *If only I had known that he would die then. If only I had known about the virus.*

Joan was haunted by those “if only’s.” That is why the comment about limited vision was so helpful. It reminded her of her own personal limits. Given what she did know, she was able to affirm that she had done the best she could. Her vision was limited. She could not see the future. She could only act with the best information she had at the time.

Recognizing our limits is one way to deal with the guilt that we may experience as we grieve. But this is a process, one that requires time and effort. It means that first we need to be able to sort out all the different feelings that accompany grief, exploring each one. It helps to have people, perhaps friends or family, perhaps a self-help group or counselor, to listen as we explore and sort through our feelings.

We may need more information from others as well. It helped Ted, for example, to discuss his daughter’s illness with the attending physician. As they reviewed her illness, Ted was reassured that they had done all they could.

Sometimes we may need to do something tangible to release our sense of guilt. Joan wrote a letter to her son explaining all of her feelings and confusion as she dealt with his addiction. She reminded him that she loved him deeply, that she tried to help as much as she possibly could, that she was human, and that her vision had been limited.

—Dr. Kenneth J. Doka, in *Journeys: A Newsletter to Help in Bereavement*