

HOSPICE *of the* VALLEY  
*Bereavement Literature*

## WHAT DOES TIME HAVE TO DO WITH GRIEF?

What does time have to do with grief?  
Everything.

Just consider how, in “normal life,” our lives are run by the clock and the calendar. Some of us have a clock in every room so we can keep close track of the time. Few of us have the courage to live without wearing a watch because we're afraid we might be late for something. Time is precious to us. We live in a society that reminds us that every moment counts, and some of us are masters at cramming as much activity as possible into every moment.

And when we are grieving our experience still has much to do about time.

### **Time stands still.**

When we are grieving we may feel like the rest of the world is going on as usual while our life has stopped. Just last week, after my friend died, I passed a neighbor watering his lawn. He seemed totally unaffected by, and most likely unaware of Sarah's death. How could that be? He only lives a block away. Didn't he feel the same shift in the universe that I felt when she died? Doesn't he realize someone really special is missing?

### **Time's up.**

Most people will allow us about a one month grace period where we are permitted to talk about our loss and even to cry openly. During this time our friends will probably seem to be attentive to our needs. But when the month is up they may be thinking, if not actually telling us, that it's time to move on, and that we need to get over “it”. They want us to get back to normal. We may be surprised how many of our friends (and relatives too) will become uncomfortable with our need to dwell on our sorrow. They may not appreciate that it takes time to readjust our life to the loss. Maybe what they are really saying is, “Time's up for me to be able to be present to you in your grieving time.” Because of this we may need to redefine what is normal for us, and choosing some new best friends—friends who are willing and able to walk along side us on our personal journey of grief, and who will allow us to determine when our “time's up”.

### **Doing Time.**

Grief may make us feel imprisoned in our own version of hell. We won't like who we are. We won't like it that our loved one has gone. We won't like it that our friends can't make us feel better. We just want out of here, and we're not sure we want to do the work that grief requires in order to be set free from this bondage. Some of us will remain in this uncomfortable place for a short time while others of us may feel like we have been given a longer sentence.

### **Wasting time.**

Though in real life I pride myself in being a master at multitasking, in the land of grief I'm much less sure of myself. I find it hard to make decisions because, in my new situation, I don't trust myself to make the right choice. I want someone else to be responsible if something goes wrong. Sometimes my wasting time is about not having the energy to get started. I am physically exhausted and my body refuses to make an effort to reclaim my former self. And I admit, quite frankly, that I'm not sure I even care enough about anything to make the effort. What's the use, since it seems like

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everything I love sooner or later gets taken away from me.

**Looking back in time.**

When we grieve we spend most of our time, at least at first, looking back. It seems safer that way. That's where our missing loved ones are. If we were to look forward, that would mean we would have to imagine our lives without those we have lost. And that's what we aren't ready to accept--not yet. So we spend a lot of time thinking how we should have been able to prevent their dying, or wondering if we used our time with them well, as we remember the good times, bad times, silly and sad times. We think we have to keep those memories in front of us, or surely we will forget those whom we have lost.

**First times.**

It is natural for us to gauge our life after a loss as we anticipate and then go through the first times --first day, the first week, the first month, the first time we venture out in public, the first time we went back to school, or church, or work, the first summer, the first Christmas, the first vacation, the first time we laughed. These first times are like benchmarks, notches in our belt that prove we are surviving when you weren't sure we wanted to, or didn't know we could.

**Dinnertime.**

There's an empty chair at the table. There's the conversation that seems to be just noise, having little to do with the absent one about whom we are all thinking but not daring to speak. We still prepare more food than we now need because we haven't yet figured out how to cook for one less person. Sometimes the food seems to have no taste, and is not able to do what we want it to do--to fill that huge hole within us.

**Time out.**

Sometimes what we need to do is to take a time out from our regular activities to reflect on what has happened to our personal world, as we knew it before our great loss. To do so is not to run away from life but simply to realize that to act as if nothing has happened doesn't work. This loss is too big to allow us to pretend that it hasn't had a big impact on us. It's in the quiet time, when we shut off our thinking, and empty out the chatter in our head that the healing begins. Others will have to be okay with our need to bow out for a while. Remember that during grief our job is to take care of ourselves, not to take care of our friends. When it's time to re-enter a normal routine, it's our choice what we will reinstate and what we decide to lay aside. Loss tends to redefine our priorities. What used to be important may not be as important now. And that's not necessarily a bad thing.

**Time heals what reason cannot.**

In the end, time will change things. The intensity we experience when grief is new, where we can see nothing but our loss, and where every moment is filled with thoughts of the one who died will gradually diminish and become softer. Time forces the big picture of life back into our vision whether we like it or not. This happens in our lives all the time. Remember how when we first fell in love with someone, we were totally preoccupied with only that other person, until gradually a more balanced existence was restored. Or when we did (what we thought was) some terrible thing and we were sure everybody would never let us forget it, we came to find out a few months down the road that most people had forgotten the incident.

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In the months (maybe years) following a loss, life will eventually start to re-emerge, and life on this planet will once again seem possible. This will not happen because we come to understand the death more clearly but because, with the passage of time, the unanswered questions will become easier to live with.

Time will not remove grief entirely. The scars of our grief will remain and we may find ourselves ambushed by a fresh wave of grief at any time. But needing to know the answers to the “why” questions won’t seem quite so important as it once was.

Time is a gift that we have taken for granted. We’ve been given our lives one moment at a time. This is good.

-Pat Schwiebert R.N , in Grief Watch Newsletter Volume 3, Issue 3, October 2003