

How We Deal With Loss

By Amy G Martin APRN, RhD

On October 23, 2008 my 79 year old father died unexpectedly, after a long battle with cancer. When I say unexpectedly, it was, in that he suddenly developed acute shortness of breath, was found to have spread of the disease into the lung, and died within a few days. That was it, boom, he was gone. Of course it is the natural progression of life, and yes, it is a blessing that he went without long months of suffering, but still, he was my father, and now he's gone. I am sad. My Dad was a very hands-on, involved, loving parent and grandparent, and his absence will be felt.

As we were dealing with funeral arrangements, writing his obituary, notifying family and friends of his passing, we began to receive phone calls, letters and emails from the many people he was involved with during his life. It was at that moment that I began to see him differently, from the point of view of his colleagues and long time peers. Hard to believe that even as adults, we still consider our parents in the limited framework that we did as children. My Dad was a writer, reporter, editor and publisher for all of his working life. Even though he made us feel like we were the center of his life, the truth is he had a whole identity that was separate from us. Of course I knew this rationally, but knowing something in your head and seeing it are two different things.

As we all deal with the loss of someone we love, we deal as well as we know how. It was ridiculously difficult to stop and feel any feelings at all while surrounded by friends and family during those days following his death. At one point during the blur of days, my sister's friends couldn't find her in the house. "That must've been during the moments I was hiding in my bedroom," she said. Each of us wanted to hide some, just to quietly acknowledge to ourselves that our father was really gone.

The stages of grief and loss all seem to follow a similar pattern, but in no particular order. I couldn't believe he was actually gone, (shock and denial.) I was upset with his Oncologist for not warning us that this was happening, (anger.) I wished I would have known he was dying the last time I saw him, thinking I would have had more heartfelt conversations or may have had the chance to say good bye, (bargaining.) In this last month I have missed deadlines, note this column is one month late, have felt exhausted, no amount of sleep can give me the energy I need, have had trouble

concentrating and feel a heaviness in my being, (depression.) The comfort and support of those around me, the gratitude I feel for having had my father's love, and a reminder of the reality of loss as a part of life, is what is helping me into this next stage, (acceptance.)

We all deal with loss in whatever way we know, and it's usually commensurate with our personalities. Some hold their feelings tightly inside, until those emotions become either diffused or explode. Some just become numb and feel nothing for a time, until some other unrelated matter wakes up their feelings. Some put it away for the duration, either dealing with it eventually, or not. Then others just ride them out, allowing the flow of emotions to take them through the ups and downs of the loss.

I often compare the waves of feelings that we, as humans, experience, to the ocean. That 'ocean of emotion' is there to help us feel more fully alive. The only way one can drown is if the overwhelm is so great that one becomes lost in the depth of feelings. Sometimes we forget that we are not our emotions; these feelings may seem out of our control, but do not define us. When we feel a sense of our own wholeness, remember the integrity of who we are, that gives us the strength to cope with the ups and downs of life, negotiating our way through heartfelt loss.

So in this short time since my father died, I have gained a little more understanding of life and loss and even immortality. Dad's gifts to all of us were many, and beyond our wonderful memories, the stability and firm foundation of family, the aptitudes and talents he nurtured in us, above it all, the gift of his love will live on forever in his children, grandchildren and every person any of us have the opportunity to touch. *That*, is immortality.

I would love to hear from you who enjoy this column at amymartin@time4healing.com and please include "Time For Healing" in the subject line.

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