

GRIEVING PROCESS AND PLANNING AHEAD FOR THE LOSS OF A LOVED ONE

Compiled by Charles (Chuck) Maack – Prostate Cancer Advocate/Mentor

Having been asked by a patient how one deals with the loss of a loved one, I provided my initial thoughts as follows:

In pondering your question, I think much depends upon the support of family members and friends. They need to not just “be there,” since that means the grieving person has to “go to them” for support. They need to team up and make sure of regular, though not intrusive, visits. Plan activities to include the grieving person. A regular phone call to chat. When discussing the person lost, seeing to it that the discussion regards all the good things remembered from the past; not bringing up difficulties from the past. In discussion, particularly if the grieving person is of a religious persuasion, encourage the thought that one day we will all be together again. And I guess I could go on and on in encouraging thoughts such as the foregoing.

For the grieving person who has no such support, it cannot help but be an extremely difficult journey unless that grieving person takes personal charge and goes out and involves herself/himself in activities that will involve others, and better yet will involve “helping” others. When we volunteer in activities that help and encourage others, it regenerates into our own souls that we are doing something important, good, and encouraging.

A lengthy and somewhat difficult to wade through study was published in The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) back in February 2007, see <http://jama.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/full/297/7/716#JOC70007T2> that, most noteworthy, contains this statement:

Models that tested for phasic episodes of each grief indicator revealed that disbelief about the death is highest initially. As disbelief declined from the first month post-loss, yearning rose until 4 months post-loss and then declined. Anger over the death was fully expressed at 5 months post-loss. After anger declines, severity of depressive mood peaks at approximately 6 months post-loss and thereafter diminishes in intensity through 24 months post-loss. Acceptance increased steadily through the study observation period ending at 24 months post-loss. Because of the minuscule probability that by chance alone these 5 grief indicators would achieve their respective maximum values in the precise

hypothesized sequence, these results provide at least partial support for the stage theory of grief.

Disbelief is lower in people who have lost someone to long, chronic illness but somewhat higher if the person was diagnosed less than 6 mos before death. "Thus, the manner and forewarning of the death appear to affect the processing of grief."

I asked for experiences from those widows and caregivers who participate in the Us TOO sponsored "Promise" support list; an online support list for those grieving a loss. The list also offers help and support to those with a spouse, partner, or family member in the last stages of life. (To subscribe, go to: <http://www.prostatepointers.org/mailman/listinfo/promise>). A caregiver wife who had an extremely close and intimate relationship with her husband both prior to and then through a ten year journey dealing with progressing prostate cancer said that three years past his death she still is unable to easily get on with her life. She is self-sufficient, but continues to deeply yearn and miss the intimacy that she feels can never be replaced. She remarked: "I still can't believe that he is gone. I get depressed sometimes. I get angry on occasion, but I am so much better than I was two years ago or a year ago. I suspect the longer that the cancer journey is, the longer that it might take to get over. In the bereavement group that I attended, most widow and widow's only had to support their loved one for two years or less. Many of them were well on their way to recovery at the one year point. Several of them were in relationships and married by the two year mark." Another provided this commentary: "There isn't a time line when it comes to the grieving process. When my husband was told that he will no longer benefit from treatments and that he had only quality time at home left that is when the grieving started for me. After his memorial everyone I knew when into the walls. I was my only support until I found American On Line Widows and Widowers Chat room. The people in there helped me big time, but I was still home alone. I went through the stages but each stage was different. I came under the conclusion that the first year is a year of shock, second year was the acceptance, and the third year was to get on with my life. It was after the first year that I kicked grief in its rear and started to get control of my life. I still struggled because I had no one to turn to. I ended up a gambling addict because I had the wrong support. I woke up 5 years ago. I felt as though I disappointed my husband. I have been trying to get control of my life since then. I kept getting to walls and I have go over those walls."

For those interested in going beyond the support of the "Promise" support list, go to the internet search box and enter "support groups for widows and widowers"

then click the “go” or “search” icon to find listings of several such support organizations for not only widows or widowers, but for all who grieve the loss of a loved one. I would stress to be cautious should you receive responses that appear to be too intrusive into your life and/or location. I would expect you are seeking support through learning of the experiences of others to succeed through your grieving process, not seeking companionship of others with the same problem.

The following are some important considerations for those who may be reading this to have a better understanding on what they may have to deal with in addition to grieving issues when their loved one passes on.

If your loved one currently does the primary managing of finances, takes care of bills, keeps track of those bills that are paid quarterly, semi-annually, or annually, maintains files of those requirements and receipts, and performs minor repairs, it is important that you spend time learning how to assume those responsibilities before it absolutely becomes necessary. Make note of the telephone number of the banking facility where finances are maintained or bills may be automatically paid. Determine credit cards held, have some idea of balances, know when monthly payments are made and how made, make note of telephone numbers to call when necessary. Locate and review life insurance policies and who to contact when necessary. Locate and make sure a will has been prepared and is up-to-date; if it has not, insure that a will is prepared. Determine if you are to be executor of the will. If you believe you will not be up to that responsibility, arrange that the will be corrected to name the trustworthy person/family member who is willing to assume that responsibility. This is extremely important. Determine ahead of time if prior planning has been performed for funeral arrangements as well as a cemetery plot (many people pay into funeral services and cemetery plots in advance – this can be very helpful since the facility that provides the funeral service will often take care of everything that has been pre-planned). Have the name and telephone number of your church/pastor handy. Determine the phone number of the Social Security office you must call when that becomes necessary, since if your loved one is your spouse and receives a higher Social Security income than you do, the Social Security Service will make changes so that your future Social Security income is at the amount your spouse received. Make note of phone number of those financial institutions, companies, organizations to whom bills are paid each month so that when necessary you can call to report the death of your loved one and advise that the next payment may be delayed but will be made as soon as funeral services have been completed and you have had time to get things in order. Check with your loved one’s prior employment if receiving a retirement income to determine if you are eligible for any of that retirement. If your spouse is

retired military, determine ahead of time the military finance office you must call immediately to report the demise of the retired military person. This, too, is very important. If your military retired spouse paid into a Survivor's Benefit Plan (SBP) so that you would receive a continued percentage of retired income, that military finance office will arrange for that continued percentage to come to you monthly. Go to or call a nearby military facility and ask for assistance to take care of any reporting required when a retired military member dies. They can also assist in arranging military honors at the funeral and cemetery.

I am sure I likely left several items out, but the foregoing provides an idea of what is important to look into prior to the loss of a loved one, and preferably well ahead of time.

I hope the foregoing will ease this burden of concern when the information and recommendations listed become required.

I can edit this paper at any time, so if any reader has other suggestions, please email me at maack1@cox.net so that I may make changes/additions as necessary. The more information we have to help others, the better.