

BY YOUR SIDE

SUPPORT IN BEREAVEMENT

SUMMARY

Josée Jacques

Better weather ahead

A young woman attends to her father until his final moments

Self-help and support groups



REORGANIZING YOUR LIFE

When her husband Simon died, Laurence was in such pain she thought she would go out of her mind.

However, the months went by, and gradually Laurence's sadness seemed to reduce in intensity. She felt much less tired. She even decided to register for a dance class with a co-worker, who had become a close friend since her husband's death. One evening as she was leaving the dance studio, however, she saw a man who looked like Simon. This "apparition"

plunged her back into nostalgia for a moment. Sad, she decided to go home early, but as soon as the next morning she felt much better.

A few days later, she began clearing out Simon's wardrobe. She found a hunting jacket which brought back the long days she spent alone with the children while her husband was out tracking deer with his brothers. "My relationship with Simon wasn't always a fairy tale," she thought to herself, surprised. In fact, in the early

days of her bereavement, she really thought herself the widow of a saint. Today she stands a little further back when she considers their life as a couple. This is typical of the reorganization stage, where the bereaved person, in ever greater control of her life, takes a more distanced view of the loss she has suffered.

This second instalment in a series of four is intended to support bereaved persons who are reorganizing their life after the departure of a family member.

Produced by the funeral cooperatives movement, this publication is designed to offer support to persons in mourning. The participating funeral cooperatives provide this publication free of charge to persons in mourning who have ordered funeral services from them for a family member.

Presented in four instalments, the *By Your Side* series gives you a better understanding of the emotions associated with bereavement. Offering clear, accessible information, the instalments present some thoughts, personal accounts, concrete methods and resources that can help people through their mourning process.

Part 1: Shock, denial and disorganization

Part 2: Reorganization

Part 3: Reclaiming your life

Part 4: Transformation and healing

Attentive to the suffering of persons in mourning, your funeral cooperative understands how important it is to face this trial in an atmosphere of respect. May you find the strength and comfort to move forward on your path to peace and serenity.

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Josée Jacques

Psychologist and author of the book *Les saisons du deuil*, la mort tisserande de la vie, Josée Jacques tells us how the mourning process can be an enriching time of life.

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Josée Jacques

Better weather

Like a major spring housecleaning after a winter of shivering cold, the post-disorganization stage comes at the perfect time to usher in a period of renewal. Questionings, new relationships, future plans: the reorganization stage brings glimpses of a return to life and the end of oppressive grief. Josée Jacques, author and psychologist, invites us to better understand how bereavement, like the cycle of the seasons, progresses to bring us to phase of change and discovery. The person whom we still occasionally mourn thus maintains his or her rightful place in our life.

How does a person feel in a period of reorganization?

During disorganization, we generally tend to feel guilty for laughing or enjoying ourselves. During reorganization, little by little we feel like seeing other people and getting involved in new activities.

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At this time, the need to be in a relationship with the deceased is far less present. For example, we may decide not to go to the cemetery every day, as we did in the beginning. Whereas pain monopolizes the life of a person at the beginning of mourning, new projects increasingly find their place in the reorganization stage.

Does the bereaved person still feel the emotions of the disorganization stage, such as anger or guilt?

Naturally, there are still vestiges of grief, but the person nonetheless succeeds in thinking of the deceased without experiencing great inner upheavals. We feel much more at peace with ourselves, but also with the person who has passed. We have learned to love the deceased, even if the person is no longer there. Of course there are still times of sadness, but that is simply because we are unable to avoid the more difficult moments of life.

ahead

What is the nature of the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased at this time?

The bereaved person then finds himself or herself "interiorizing" the deceased. The qualities of the one who has died, our relationship with him or her, all of that is now part of the special memories of that person's life. This is also when we come back to reality... we acknowledge the great times we had with that person, but also the more difficult ones.

The fact of maintaining a certain kind of relationship with the deceased does not automatically mean that the mourning is extended or becomes more complicated.

So regardless of what we decide to do to remember the deceased, the important thing is to feel good about what we do. For example, some people will create a little sanctuary with souvenirs of the family member who has passed. Being able to invest ourselves in new emotional ties or new activities, those are the real signs of eventual healing.

Is this the right time to resolve conflicts or unfinished business with the deceased?

Yes. In cases of conflicts or unfinished business, telling the deceased person what we did not have time to express before can be a great help. It is also possible to write to the deceased, and then imagine how he or she would answer. This role-playing allows us to explore what we may have needed to express to the person before he or she passed.

Does the experience of a bereavement cause us to relive the past losses in our lives?

Indeed, past bereavements often become mixed up with the present one. So going through this process is an excellent opportunity to resolve the other bereavements in our life, if we have never achieved closure on them. We should also keep in mind one positive aspect which is undeniable: having suffered losses in the past often better equips us to face the future ones that life sets in our path.

Of course there are still times of sadness, but that is simply because we are unable to avoid the more difficult moments of life.

Does mourning allow us to know ourselves better?

I know that people hate to hear this at first... but yes, mourning makes us aware of our inner resources. Often, at the end of their process, people I meet will say to me: "Yes, it was hard, but I think this is the thing that has made me grow the most."

Does a person change after a bereavement?

A bereavement will cause you to make a thousand and one discoveries about yourself, and also to develop certain qualities. For example, some people will display greater compassion or have a greater appreciation of the simple little joys of life. Others will revise their priorities, ▶

Josée Jacques is the author of the books *Les saisons du deuil, la mort tisserande de la vie, Psychologie du deuil et de la mort* and *Des souvenirs pour la vie*.



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sometimes radically. Usually, bereaved persons will subsequently establish relations with others that are more meaningful, more authentic. For instance, I will

rediscover or redefine my values because of this experience, often bringing about changes in the people around me. After a trial such as bereavement, the person

may also turn to new interests, decide to take up new activities. That is when the most lovely period begins... The bereaved person feels he or she is calmly moving closer to the light at the end of the tunnel. The end of mourning is truly a period of enrichment.

Tips and advice

PHOTO: CLAUDE CROISSETIERE



Writing or recounting our personal experience allows us to better understand the meaning of what is happening to us, but also the impact that it can have on us. Telling the story of our relationship with the deceased sheds light on the happy and not-so-happy aspects of life with the person who has passed, giving him or her a healthier and more human image.

This exercise suggests a few lines of thought that will allow you to make an assessment of the relationship which, unfortunately, has had to come to an end.

Some scraps of my history with:

A joy shared is a twofold joy; a sorrow shared is half a sorrow.

Jacques Deval

Some scraps of my history, which lasted _____ years.

My three finest memories are:

The three greatest qualities

of _____
were:

What I miss most is:

I realize that there are aspects of our story about which I am not at all sorry, but also certain things that I am relieved I no longer have to deal with:

SOURCE: PINARD, Suzanne. *De l'autre côté des larmes*, Boucherville: Éditions de Mortagne, 198 p.

Exercise published with the author's permission.



Mélanie Dion is a family adviser at the Coopérative funéraire du Plateau.

The death of my father: the most intense moment of my life

My father and I have always had a very special relationship. Even in my twenties, I would still follow him everywhere.

It was in the car, coming back from the hospital, that I heard the news. I asked for the truth, and that is what I got: "It's cancer, no possible remission". Our decision was spontaneous: my mother and I decided to care for my father at home, until the end.

A long battle

At first, he was more or less independent. But at the time, we thought that cancer meant imminent death. So every ten minutes we would be asking him how he felt. We didn't realize at the time that he still had a lot of time left ... two years, to be precise.

Little by little, the cane was replaced by the walker, and the walker by a wheelchair. When he became confined to his

"Either I picked myself up and looked ahead, soldiered on, or I stayed crumpled in a heap, closed up in my suffering. I chose to move forward, hoping that the grief would fade with time...."

bed, we installed my father in the living room, so he wouldn't be shut up in his bedroom. We would take our meals there, by his side.

Throughout his illness, I told my father everything I wanted to tell him, all my regrets from the past, and above all, that to me he was the best dad there could be. When he died, I had no feelings of guilt. I had said and done what I had to.

The bereavement

This ordeal brought my mother and me much closer together. Today, when we eat together, we still sit down in the living room, as we used to do alongside my father.

For the first six months of mourning, we lived for each other. We had just lost too big a piece of our lives. If one of us lost control, the other would inevitably follow.

So I told myself I had two options. Either I picked myself up and looked ahead, soldiered on, or I stayed crumpled in a heap, closed up in my suffering. I chose to move forward, hoping that the grief would fade with time... And that is what happened. The grief is still there, of course, but now I can live with it.

At life's borderline

Being with my father right to the end offered me the privilege of accepting to restore to God what did not belong to me in the first place. My father departed in my arms and in those of my mother, the two persons who were dearest to him. You might say that we followed him to heaven's door. His leaving was the saddest moment of my life, but also the most lovely and the most intense.

I have since put my priorities back in place. Every day I want to remind myself that life is fragile and death is waiting for us all.

The next milestone of my life will be the arrival of a child. Like yin and yang, birth and death are the two most important stages. Each must be justly celebrated.

Mélanie Dion

Where do we turn for help when family members do not react to a death in the same way?

A family that loses a member is often very little help when it is time to mourn. This is normal: these are all wounded people. One will deny the loss; the other is angry; one feels guilty; one doesn't know what he feels. That is why community is important in a bereavement. It is often thanks to a self-help group, or through reading, that people will move on. Often the family confines us to a particular role: it might reject the transformation that a bereavement brings. Sometimes it is important to seek help on the outside.

Jean Monbourquette
Author, priest and psychologist



FUNERAL COOPERATIVES

A humane, responsible approach

"In cooperation, humanism is the soul of the system, and what prevents it from being nothing more than an economic mechanism."

Michel Marengo, ex-president of the Fédération des coopératives funéraires du Québec.

Bereavement plunges us into a situation of great vulnerability. Making decisions becomes the most difficult of tasks. At these times, being able to rely on people who are attentive to your suffering is not only lucky: it is a necessity.

What does "a humane approach" mean?

To offer the best possible support to families, all funeral cooperative staff are constantly adapting to the emotions of the people they serve. What does a humane approach mean to us? Quite simply: compassion, respect, listening, human warmth, and availability.

A responsible approach

In an atmosphere of respect and dignity, the funeral cooperative staff, all of them appropriately trained and sharing the same values, welcome and accompany people through this trial. They provide families in mourning with access to all the information they need to make informed decisions in accordance with their needs, their values and their situations. So bereaved families can rely at all times on quality services, but also on the empathy of the staff.

Apart from funeral services, cooperatives also offer their members and customers literature on grieving and information on the support resources available.



PHOTO: FRANÇOIS LAFRANCE

Her latest medical examinations leave no doubt: Diane has a serious cancer. No hope of recovery, only death at the end of the illness. After the shock of the news, many discussions follow with Jacques, her husband. Then at last the decision: Diane will spend the time she has remaining at home with her husband.

Unlike an accident which plunges everyone into a state of shock, disease brings a series of acts of mourning which prepare the family for the departure. That does not make it any less painful, but this is a situation that can cause family members to experience bereavement in different ways.



Being with a family member until the final breath

“A man told me that every time he and his sick spouse took advantage of a sunny day, he told himself that maybe this would be the last time she saw the sun...”

A process of early mourning

Being with a person we love until death comes, whether in the hospital or at home, gives us the opportunity to tell that person everything we want before the end. This allows us to bring closure to situations that have been left unresolved.

“As soon as we learn that a loved one is going to die, we immediately begin to mourn,” explains Julie Lamontagne, a doctoral student in gerontology. “As soon as

there is nothing more to do and the person enters palliative care, we know that death is coming soon.” Then begins a series of acts of mourning, large and small. “A man I met during my research told me that every time he and his sick spouse took advantage of a sunny day, he told himself that maybe this would be the last time she saw the sun.”

Julie Lamontagne adds that many activities are no longer possible when illness progressively limits a person’s physical and sometimes mental capacities. And so other little acts of mourning gradually take place, as the possibilities for the sick person become increasingly reduced. Though it is always there, the shock of death is less difficult.

Most of the people Julie Lamontagne met in the course of her study said they were happy to have been able to accompany their loved one on their final journey. “Being with them helps to resolve things

in the past and to develop a calmer relationship toward the end. This requires a lot of courage to fight the illness, and that brings people to develop immense admiration for their spouse. Most of them have positive memories of their spouse. The other members of the family also take advantage of this opportunity to resolve situations, because a lot of things can be left hanging over the course of a lifetime.”

“Despite the many difficulties that have to be faced by those accompanying a loved one in a terminal phase, including that of seeing the person suffer daily, most of the people interviewed for my research said that it was a rewarding experience, one that allowed them to close their relationship on a positive note,” says Julie Lamontagne by way of conclusion.

Julie Lamontagne is a doctoral student in gerontology at the research centre on ageing at the Institut de gériatrie de Sherbrooke. As part of her master’s program, she examined the experience of helpers who accompanied their elderly spouse in palliative care.

Self-help and support groups

In bereavement, it can be very beneficial to be able to share our emotions with others who are going through the same experience.

For example, there are self-help groups for bereaved persons. Together, they share their stories under a theme proposed by the facilitators, who themselves have lived through similar experiences. Sometimes objectives are set to help these people make progress in their efforts.

Support groups are different from self-help groups in that there is more involvement by professionals, and one-on-one support is also possible. There is more focus on problem solving and the helping relationship. This type of group may be offered by certain professionals in private practice.

Self-help and support groups are often organized by local community service centres (CLSCs), community organizations, palliative care centres (which are located in hospitals), parish officials, suicide prevention centres, funeral cooperatives or hospital centres.

Where do I find them?

CLSC:

Look under “local community service centres” in the white pages of the phone book.

www.clsc-chsld.qc.ca

Community organizations:

Look under “associations”, “foundations”, “agencies” or “social and humanitarian services” in the yellow pages of the phone book.

Hospitals:

Look under “hospitals” in the white pages of the phone book.

www.ahq.org/accueil/accueil.asp

Funeral cooperatives:

Look under “cooperatives” in the yellow pages of the phone book.

www.fcfq.qc.ca

Source:

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