

Relating With In-Laws After a Spouse's Death

by Janet McGinn

While attending a widowed grief group, a discussion began about the association of surviving spouses and their in-laws. As I listened, I became absorbed with the emotions expressed in the room and thought of a proverb to describe what was happening, "He that pities another remembers himself." When I left that night, I couldn't stop thinking about the grief group and began to hypothesize these questions: Does the family relationship prior to death affect the kinship after death? How does the type of death, i.e. natural vs. suicide, terminal illness vs. sudden tragedy; alter the closeness with grieving in-laws? What would cause relationships to change over time?

Not finding anything on this topic in the grief books at hand, I will share the concerns of members from that meeting. I will describe a few possible in-law scenarios. (Do any of these describe your situation?)

- 1) The in-laws continue to remain an extended family, supportive and needing you in a long-term kinship. This is especially true if the in-laws are biological grandparents. A mutual respect between the families allows positive interactions that are reciprocated. It is favorable for some families to remain in close contact, accepting the surviving spouse and offering as loved ones, as if death had not occurred. (After four years, this is where I am.)
- 2) The in-laws would rather not remain in close contact, but you find yourself wanting to hang onto a relationship with them. One explanation for their reluctance could be that you are a constant reminder of their own loss. In some cases after a sudden death, the denial of the death by in-laws is a survival reaction enacted without meaning to hurt you. It is possible that you will experience feelings of abandonment. (This happened to me during the funeral week.) Try to be patient and time and space will allow them the opportunity to miss your friendship.
- 3) Your in-laws need you to be a sounding board, but you wish they didn't want to stay so close. To use a cliché, "Misery loves company", to this I would add my thoughts "grief needs companionship". One member of the group, whose wife was an only child, befriended his mother-in-law because he knew she saw him as the last link to her beloved daughter. He explained how listening to his in-law would recreate memories that served as emotional triggers, surfacing at times when he was not prepared to grieve. As in the widower's case, contact with in-laws may even cause some depression, and, although originally well intended, expressions of their grief may now prevent you from moving on. Other special circumstances could arise if your spouse is an only child or if your loved one died from a lingering illness or had a parent who was already widowed.