



Life-Saving Tips for those who grieve



Unfinished Business

When life does not provide us with a picture perfect ending

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Sometimes we wish for a Hollywood ending. Maybe we would not want the violent deaths that are all too common in the movies these days: the shootouts, car crashes, or the mortally wounded hero, who summons just enough energy to save the day. But the other kinds of Hollywood deaths might appeal more: the devoted family gathered to receive a final bedside benediction, the deathbed confession or the just-in-time reconciliation. We may hope for dying scenes that bring us understanding, comfort and peace.

Unfortunately, in real life, these final dramatic scenes seldom play out. Scattered loved ones may not be present so the person dies alone. Medication used to manage pain and other symptoms can often make a patient sleepy during the final days or hours, limiting the possibility of meaningful communication. Sometimes mistakes made in crisis moments have dire consequences. During stressful times longstanding conflicts between family members occasionally boil to the surface and, more often than not, those unresolved relationship issues remain unsettled.

By itself, grief is hard enough. It infiltrates every aspect of a person: body, mind and spirit. Although there are no timeframes for grief, it always lasts longer than you expect. It is quite normal to experience a full range of emotions, from profound sadness, guilt, anger and relief, to admiration, gratitude, love and peace. While a certain degree of yearning may remain for the rest of your lifetime, within a year or so, most people are able to progress toward a place of resolution and gradually reinvest in life. Some people however, seem to get mired in grief and they may seek help to find comfort or release.

Bereavement professionals speak of *Complicated Grief* in situations where grief is extended or intensified to an unbearable level, where the person is unable to reinvest in life, or when the person resorts to maladaptive behaviors. Grief

Tip # 4

Externalize

your feelings, because keeping your emotions inside is like trying to bottle a cyclone. I know grief can be overwhelming. The challenge is to find ways to express or channel your feelings in manageable, measures ways. It is a good idea to keep a journal, to do artwork, build something, break something, pray, talk to a professional or friend.

The Grief River Guide

can be complicated by any number of issues including: multiple losses, addiction issues or pre-existing mental health concerns. Mourning can also be compounded by a traumatic or sudden death, a lack of social support and personal problems, such as employment, financial or health concerns. One more stressor can become the proverbial straw breaking the camel's back. Fortunately, all these issues can be explored and often solutions can be found.

Another category of complicated grief, *Unfinished Business*, is usually related to relationship problems that were never addressed or resolved. If you find yourself making statements that begin with; "I wish I had...", "I never got the chance to...", "He/she never told me...", "I wonder why...", or "If only..." you probably already know a lot about unfinished business. Perhaps there was a longstanding conflict and you did not have the chance to express how you really felt. Perhaps a parent was absent or abusive and never asked for your forgiveness. Occasionally a surviving spouse discovers evidence of an extramarital affair or an adult child finds incriminating evidence that destroys their image of their parent. Maybe your loved one died before an important self-disclosure was possible. Maybe an offer of affection was rebuffed or an attempt at reconciliation was rejected. Sometimes dreams are never realized and promises are not kept. Or maybe you simply have mixed feelings regarding the deceased and don't know what to do with them. All of these murky relational issues leave an already grieving person with additional feelings of confusion, anger, guilt, regret, and no clearly identifiable way to resolve them.

Repeatedly, frustrated grieving people have said something similar to "So what can be done? After all, they're dead and buried!" At first glance, it would seem that the possibility of resolution has run out but I would like to offer hope that these stuck feelings can shift, soften and even resolve. It is my belief that when a person dies, the relationship is



changed not ended. If that is true, the possibility of settling unfinished business is plausible.

Admittedly, you can no longer call your deceased loved one on the phone or hold their hand; the familiar ways of communicating are no longer possible. But the deceased person remains present to us in a number of ways. For example, they exist in our memories and in the genetic and behavioral characteristics that are passed down from generation to generation. Linking objects, such as an inherited watch, the smell of their perfume, or even the sight of the coffee bar they frequented, may instantaneously bring an absent person to mind. We continue to learn new information about a deceased person through the stories that other people share. Insight into their character and interesting facts are revealed when we read diaries or old letters. Depending on your spiritual belief system, the possibility also exists that they remain present and we can communicate with them through prayers, dreams, channeling or other forms of spiritual communication.

Counselors speak of another way to communicate with the dead, through the *internalized other*. This works in much the same way as with long married

couples who often finish each other's sentences. We know how the dead person would respond to certain questions; we can even hear the tone of their voice. It is possible to have an entire internal dialogue with a dead person because they were so predictable and we know them so well. If we can open a channel of communication with this internalized version of the deceased we may remove the obstacles that keep us stuck in anger and confusion, and then healing can begin. Truth be told, maybe they don't even need to respond; maybe it's best that they can not really answer; maybe we simply need to tell the other how we feel. To converse with the internalized other I suggest visiting their grave, talking to their photograph or mailing a letter to heaven (or hell).



A counselor or trained professional may recommend other techniques to work through unfinished business. With an empty chair, you might symbolically sit the other person down in a chair across from you and tell them how you feel, then move to the opposite chair and role play their response. This process is repeated until you are satisfied with the results. You might also try writing a letter with your non-dominant hand as if it were written by the other person. People who suffer with post-traumatic stress disorder report success with a technique called alternative endings.

Here, you actually rewrite the final scene the way you would like it to end. Finally, short term talk therapy with a counselor allows you to sort through the mix of emotions that trouble you. All of these techniques provide the grieving person with some sense of closure, plus they can release lingering emotional baggage, exorcise ghosts and create a sense of personal peace.

Unfortunately, many people are unable or unwilling to reach out for help. They tell themselves, "Get over it," and they try to push the unfinished business out of their minds. Sadly, this strategy for coping seldom works for any length of time. Before long, the conflict spills over into other aspects of their lives; the repressed emotions wreak havoc on their health; or the issues reappear when the person is confronted with the death of another significant person. I admit that it is hard work to resolve unfinished business, but if we open up to the possibilities, we might find greater health and well-being.

My belief is that, in order to move forward, you have to intentionally undertake this journey since these changes rarely happen on their own. You will need to invest in achieving a solution that is acceptable to you. As is true of every journey, we take one step at a time. As you explore the unfinished business you may discover that you need to accept the possibility that some things may remain a mystery, or you may consciously decide to offer unmerited forgiveness, if only to allow yourself to move on with life. Remember: you can not force yourself to feel differently than the way you do but you can work through feelings and rediscover hope.

There are no perfect Hollywood scripts for our lives. Most people discover that the scripts written for us are never quite as interesting as the lives we consciously choose to lead. As you contemplate your unfinished business, you might consider how you want this story to end. You might even find that, in spite of the wounds, you have the energy to move toward your peaceful ending.