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Recommended Citation

Spear, Hila J., "Bereavement and Grief Related to the Loss of a Parent" (2005). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. Paper 14.
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Bereavement & Grief Related to the Loss of a Parent

This brief article describes selected aspects of my bereavement experience related to the untimely death of my mother. This personal account may be of benefit to those who either have been or will be faced with the death of someone close to them or who are in a position to provide care and support for individuals who experience the death of a loved one. The following narrative, based on personal reflection and journaling, portrays some experiences that have transpired during the 11 years since my mother's death.

EXPERIENCING GRIEF

My mother died at the relatively young age of 57. At times, it seems like her death occurred just yesterday. Not a day goes by that I do not think about her. Special memories of the past, such as seeing lilacs bloom in the spring, bring her to my memory, and I think about how much I wish she were here. The temporal separation and inability to talk to her, to be with her physically, fosters periodic sadness and a sense of loss that will forever be a part of my existence.

Approximately 8 months after my mother's death, I was supervising nursing students on a medical-

surgical unit. I went to the clean utility room to obtain a few personal care items for one of the patients. When I pulled open one of the supply cart drawers, I saw several packets of pink sponge applicators used for oral care. Immediately, my eyes filled with tears of sadness, and I could feel my heart pounding and my respiratory rate increase. I was emotionally transported back into my mother's hospital room, and recalled how the nurses and I assisted her with mouth care during the last several days of her life. Surprised by this strong emotional and visceral response, I took several moments to regain my composure and completed the busy clinical day without difficulty.

When the 1-year anniversary of Mother's death approached, I experienced intense feelings of sadness. I had diminished appetite, suffered sporadic bouts of insomnia, and became somewhat withdrawn. My family physician suggested I consider a short course of antidepressant medication; I declined. With a strong family support system and my personal faith, I was able to work through this particularly difficult time of sorrow and sadness without any negative residual effects.

I recall a conversation I had with my then 14-year-old son about approximately a year after Mother's death. When I stopped by his room to say goodnight, he initiated a conversation about how hard it had been for him to attend my mother's funeral, to realize that she had ceased to exist in the physical realm. We talked about how my mother loved her little dachshund dog and was an avid sports fan. My son and I laughed and held back a few tears together. Just before leaving his room, he embraced me and said he would never be able to survive if his father or I died. I told him that, although the death of a parent is a painful and overwhelming experience, he would be able to go forward with his life. I also told him my mother lives on through me and my children. Nevertheless, I acknowledged that her death would always leave a permanent void.

REMEMBERING MY MOTHER

Although not as intensely nor frequently as during the first year or so after Mother died, everyday experiences can cause me to have visions of my mother, to hear her voice and remember her gentle touch. Sometimes, while looking at

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Being held in my mother's loving arms at the age of 9 months (1952).

~ Hila Spear

my face in the mirror, I find myself gazing at my reflection and thinking about how much I resemble my mother. I especially see her in my eyes. This generates initial feelings of sorrow, while at the same time, a state of peace, as I know that my mother was ready to die both physically and spiritually. In many ways, Mother experienced not only a good life, but also a good death. Looking at old photos and seeing the clear blue sky can elicit feelings of sadness and longing. The death of my mother left an empty space in my life that no other human being can fill.

Intermittent waves of melancholy and remnants of grief emerge on the anniversary of Mother's death and sometimes during the

few weeks leading up to it. Trigger events such as holidays, birthdays, weddings, and family gatherings can evoke introspection and moments of sorrow. The absence of my mother was frequently brought to mind when my first grandchild was born almost 11 years after my mother died. I experienced joy tinged with sadness—joy at the birth of a healthy firstborn grandchild, and sadness about the death of my mother, as she was not here to welcome the next generation and share in this joyous event.

The birth of my granddaughter was a poignant reminder of my mother's death. My daughters and I sat in the living room together as I cradled and rocked my tiny granddaughter. One of my daughters

commented on how touching it was to see me with this new baby, as it made her envision me holding her and her sister when they were infants. This, in turn, reminded me of my own mother holding and nurturing me as an infant. We were all moved to tears. I found myself reliving the last few days of my mother's life and yearning for her presence during this special time and transition in my life and family.

COPING WITH THE LOSS

With the support of family and internal coping that focused largely on prayer and my faith in God, I was able to adjust to the loss of my mother and negotiate feelings of subsequent grief and sorrow, while remaining physically, emotionally,

My Side

and spiritually intact. Journaling, writing down meaningful memories and feelings, and rereading notes and letters I had received from my mother over the years are examples of coping measures I found to be therapeutic. During the first few years after my mother's death, I often dreamed about her. In these vivid dreams, Mother and I acknowledged her death, yet we engaged in normal conversation. We would go shopping together and talk. It was like having a real visit with her. Self-comfort was also achieved by focusing on the positive aspects of my personal and family life, and then making connections between those positive aspects and my mother.

Others have also provided me with consolation and emotional support. The initial years after Mother died, my sister frequently contacted me to provide encouragement. Our conversations were times of positive reflection about Mother and acknowledgement of our feelings of loss. We found strength in our bond as sisters and our intimate relationships with our mother. From my Christian faith perspective, I have peace about my mother's death. However, as a daughter who lost her mother, I will never cease to reexperience grief-related feelings of sadness related to her death. The ongoing sense of loss will never be completely resolved because of the profound nature of the loss. With prayer, healthy coping skills, family support, and acknowledgement of cyclical feelings of sorrow as a normal response, particularly related to significant life events, I have continued on with my life in a positive and productive way.

THE NATURE OF GRIEF AND SORROW

Though debate continues regarding the time-bound resolution of grief versus the more open, cyclical, and sometimes pervasively chronic elements of grief (Lowes & Lyne, 2000), the theory of chronic sorrow has been established as a recognized entity in nursing and related literature (Burke, Eakes, & Hainsworth, 1999; Eakes, Burke, & Hainsworth, 1998). Even so, there is a lack of current research on chronic sorrow theory pertaining to the grief experiences of individuals and families related to bereavement. From my perspective, I believe my personal experience fits well with the experiences of bereaved individuals described by Eakes, Burke, and Hainsworth (1999). Regardless of one's theoretical point of view, I believe it is important to recognize the fact that everyone experiences significant loss in different ways.

People who experience feelings of recurrent grief do not make conscious efforts to do so. According to Eakes:

Chronic sorrow is not pathological; it is a normal response. Individuals do not get over significant loss, they get through it. I believe our failure to recognize and normalize this lifelong experience can create adjustment problems for individuals. (G.G. Eakes, personal communication, March 26, 2004)

Although death is, indeed, a part of life—children lose parents and parents lose children—we need to be careful not to marginalize or judge individuals' experiences of sadness as an abnormal response to significant loss.

SUMMARY

The death of my mother taught me valuable lessons about life and death (Spear, 2002), and the years since have provided me with a first-hand understanding of the grieving process. These personal experiences have allowed me to develop insight about and sensitivity to the experiences of others who are faced with death and dying, and the resultant psychoemotional feelings associated with permanent loss. It is important for nurses and others to be responsive to the complex and individualized grieving process of those who live through the death of a loved one.

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