Printed September 2, 2014 from http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/managing-emotions/grief-and-loss/coping-change-after-loss

Coping With Change After a Loss [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [2], 06/2013

Key Messages:

- It is normal to feel lost when someone close to you dies, and it takes time adapt to new life situations.
- You may notice changes in your relationships, routines, priorities, and goals, as well as other aspects of your life.
- Adjusting to these changes is often challenging, but there are ways to help you cope.

The death of a loved one creates many changes for surviving family members. These range from changes in household routines to changes in priorities or plans for the future. The process of adapting and reacting to new life situations may take months or years.

Common changes

After the death of a family member or close friend, you may notice the following changes:

Relationships. It is common to notice differences in how you and your family and friends relate to each other after the death of a loved one. Some friends or family members may not know what to say or how to act around you, and they may distance themselves from you. Others may surprise you with the level of support they give you, and those relationships may become closer than ever. Because your interests, priorities, or goals may shift after the death of a loved one, you may also lose a connection to the friends and family members that once shared those same things. Meanwhile, changes in your interests and activities may lead to new relationships and new friendships.

Routines. Most people have a daily routine that brings structure to their days and offers a sense of consistency. If you have been taking care of a loved one with cancer, much of this daily routine may have centered on hospital visits or caregiving tasks. When a person you care about dies, this familiar routine abruptly ends, and it is normal for you to feel lost. Over time, many people are able to gradually develop a new routine that feels familiar and comfortable.

Responsibilities. When a partner or family member dies, you may suddenly find yourself responsible for the tasks that he or she used to handle. Some tasks, such as doing the taxes,

may be completely unfamiliar to you. Learning a new skill can be stressful, especially during such a sensitive time. If you were caring for your loved one for a long time, you may suddenly feel empty, like you have too much free time, which can release many emotions that you were previously able to keep hidden throughout the many tasks of caregiving.

Employment and finances. If your partner or family member was a main wage earner, you may need to work more hours, go back to work, or go to work for the first time. If you are a parent with young children, this may mean arranging for daycare and having less time to spend at home. The death of a family member can also bring changes to your family?s finances, such as fewer paychecks, a difference in social security benefits, or payments from a life insurance policy.

Faith and spirituality. It is normal to question your religious or spiritual beliefs or your understanding of the meaning of life after the death of someone you love. This is particularly true if the loss seemed especially untimely or unfair, such as when a child or a young spouse dies. In these instances, the assumptions about life you previously held may not fit with your current experience of death. You may question your faith or religious beliefs, or you may find that your faith becomes stronger and a source of comfort.

Priorities and goals. You may find that your priorities change to reflect what matters most to you now. Previous priorities such as work may be replaced by new priorities such as spending more time with family and friends or focusing on your own health. It is important to remember that you may need to change priorities for practical reasons as well. For instance, if you have just become the family's main wage earner, finding a good job and focusing on your career might need to become a high priority. Your goals and hopes for the future may also change. Plans for retirement, traveling, or additional children may need to be altered or put on hold as you and your family adjust to a new lifestyle.

Activities and interests. You may find that you are no longer interested in some activities you previously enjoyed, including activities you shared with your loved one. You may also develop new interests, such as becoming involved in activities that were important to your loved one or volunteering at a local hospital or a cancer advocacy organization. Learn more about what it means to be a cancer advocate [3].

Coping with change

Adjusting to any change can be stressful. The following strategies may help you better cope with the changes that follow a loved one's death:

Take time making major decisions. The year after the death of a loved one is a period of emotional turmoil. A decision that seems right during this time may not seem right a few months later. Mental health experts suggest waiting at least a year before making any major decisions, such as moving or changing jobs. Consider making a list of decisions and tasks, and figure out which ones must be completed immediately. Try to hold off on the important decisions that can wait.

Share new responsibilities. It takes time for you and your family to adjust to new responsibilities and settle into a new routine. As a family, talk about what household jobs need to be done and who will be responsible for which tasks. Also, talk about changes in the family

routine. This is especially important for younger children who may be particularly upset by disruptions in their routine.

Ask for and accept help. Friends and family will want to help you but might not know what you need or how to ask if you need help. Be specific about your needs and have a list of tasks that other people can do. If you are learning how to perform unfamiliar tasks, such as car maintenance or cooking, ask someone to show you what to do, or consider taking a class.

Get help handling financial and legal matters. The many financial and legal tasks that follow a death often seem overwhelming, especially if you are not used to handling your own financial and legal affairs. If your family member was ill for a long time, you may also have health insurance claims and medical bills to manage. If possible, talk with a legal or financial expert, such as a lawyer, accountant, or financial adviser. These services usually cost money, but they can help you plan your legal and financial future and may help you save money in the long run.

Get advice before returning to work. If you are returning to work after a long absence or going to work for the first time, consider talking with a career counselor. A career counselor can help you write a resume and search for a job, as well as help you decide which career choices might suit you best. Many state and county governments offer free job training and career counseling services.

Consider keeping a journal. Keeping a journal [4] or a diary can help you make sense of the changes you are experiencing. In addition to writing about your feelings and thoughts, you can use your journal to help organize your tasks, priorities, and plans. Looking back through your journal can help you see how your priorities and goals have changed, as well as how your ability to cope has improved.

Consider joining a support group. Support groups [5] offer you the chance to talk with others who share your feelings and experiences. Other people who have lost a loved one to cancer have likely experienced many of the same changes and can offer you both emotional support and practical advice as you adjust.

Remember the positive. Shifting your priorities, developing new interests, and learning new skills can bring positive changes to your life. Allow yourself to feel proud of new accomplishments, and remember that it is not disloyal to your loved one to enjoy new activities or set new goals for the future.

More Information

Understanding Grief and Loss [6]

Coping with Grief [7]

Managing Stress [8]

How to Cope With Losing a Sibling to Cancer [9]

Links:

[1] http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/managing-emotions/grief-and-loss/coping-change-after-loss
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/all-about-cancer/cancernet-feature-articles/quality-life/being-cancer-advocate
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