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TIPS FOR GOOD GRIEVING

No one half awake escaped the shocking effects of the events of 9/11. My own experience was one of fear and uncertainty for the safety of my family who were on an airliner that day bound for home from a family vacation to Italy. I stayed behind for a professional meeting and saw the debacle unfold on CNN in my hotel room. There were many tense hours spent attempting to make contact until I was able to confirm that they had landed safely (along with 32 other planes) in Gander, New Foundland.

Fearing the worst, needless to say, it was a huge relief to know they were safe. With this backdrop, the plight of the lost rescue workers seemed to affect me the most. As we all felt so helpless watching the carnage unfold, those rescue workers suited up and plunged in for all of us watching helplessly on the sidelines. For the hundreds who never came back, I personally felt I owed them something. In my hours of uncertainty, it occurred to me they could have been rescuing my family. Having worked with grieving individuals as a psychiatrist, I wanted to try to impart some useful and practical advice to help their survivors to cope. I had a lot of time to think on my own long plane ride home and that's when I crafted these 20 tips for good grieving.

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Talk about your loss with friends, family or a professional. Grief is a process, not an event.

Grief is work, requiring time and energy. The memories, meanings and fulfilled needs provided by the lost loved one take time to work through.

Let yourself enter the emotions of grief. Grievers tend naturally to avoid the painful emotions. Losing someone close to you means you deserve to allow yourself to feel all your emotions - sadness, anger, intense longing, guilt and others.

Consider writing your loved one a letter. Say what you would tell them as if it were your last chance. Even if you never share the letter with anyone, writing it may help you work through your grief.

Resume your life but leave time and space for grieving. Life marches on for the living. But try to resist the temptation to "throw yourself" into work or other diversions. This leaves too little time for the grief work you need to do for yourself.

Take care of yourself. You have been wounded. Something very valuable and dear has been taken away from you. Give yourself time and space to begin healing. Get enough rest. Eat nourishing food. Give yourself a break.

Resist the temptation to use alcohol or drugs to numb your pain. These can interfere with the grieving process by delaying it or covering it up.

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If you have any religious inclination, consider contacting your place of worship. All religions recognize that grievers need special help. Consider taking advantage of these services even if you have not been attending regularly. You will not be turned away.

Consider seeking out other grievers. Someone who has also been through grief can empathize with you, and vice versa. Organizations like Compassionate Friends or THEOS recognize the value of sharing in a group setting.

Don't feel obligated to join groups if they are not for you. The grief process is highly individual. Some people prefer solitude or reflection rather than group work. Do what feels right for you.

Don't neglect your own health. Grieving puts a heavy burden of stress on your body. It can disturb sleep patterns, lead to depression, weaken your immune system, and worsen medical problems that had been stable, such as high blood pressure. Take prescribed medications and get regular check-ups. If you suffer from disabling insomnia or anxiety, see your doctor. Sometimes short-term medication can be very helpful.

Get help for severe or persistent depression. Someone once said: "grief is not a disease but it can become one." Grief can lead to serious depression. Consider getting professional help if you feel overwhelmed, hopeless, or helpless. Other signs of depression can include sleep impairment (too little or too much), appetite or weight change, low energy, difficulty concentrating, and feeling listless or agitated. By all means, seek professional help if you have suicidal thoughts.

Grief work can become complicated. Mixed emotions (positive and negative feelings), unresolved emotional turmoil and losing someone after an argument can complicate the grieving process. Sharing these feelings with a professional therapist can help. Grief therapy need not be a long-term commitment. Even if you don't see yourself as the kind of person who seeks therapy, this may be beneficial.

Anger is common in normal grieving and certainly justified when a loved one dies due to the malevolence of others. Try venting your anger in a letter. Consider channeling your anger into constructive action. Volunteer to work for causes that seek justice and prevention. Spending your energy helping someone else can help you in the process.

Allow time to grieve. One to two years is not a long time to allow yourself to work through grief. We need to remind ourselves that the healing process cannot be rushed; it will proceed at its own rate.

Be patient. The grieving process often includes setbacks. Don't expect to set an "I'll be over it" deadline and succeed. Often, grieving resumes after a time, sometimes even months or years. Reminders can trigger a flood of emotions. Don't be surprised if this happens, and don't consider it a sign of weakness. Instead, your psyche is telling you more grief work needs to be done.

At some point those who have lost a partner or love companion will face the decision of whether to be open to a new relationship. Consider

imagining the situation reversed. That is, if you died and your lover or spouse survived, what would you want them to do? It may help you to see your situation from this angle.

If you feel stuck in your grief, try a new approach. We are creatures of habit who learn very quickly how to avoid painful situations. However, this may hinder working through the entirety of your grief. To "jump start" the process, consider reviewing memorabilia, photos, home movies, or videos. Talk about your loved one at holidays when his or her absence is most obvious. Don't avoid it so as not to spoil the festivities. This is the perfect time to check in with other family members about how they're doing with grief work, and share mutual support.

Create your own memorial service. Celebrate their lifetime accomplishments, values, and principles. Consider carrying the torch of a cause they believed in as a memorial. Start a scholarship, plant a garden, or make a donation in their name.

The grieving process has run its course when you feel weary of rehashing events and memories and finally accept the fact the your loved one can remain with you only in spirit. For some, the process never really ends; it just gets easier over time. You will know you are ready to move forward when you feel you can reinvest the energy once invested in your loved one in a new place. This takes time. Good grief means being good to yourself during the process.