



THE AGONY OF GRIEF

“Sophia* and I had been married for more than 39 years when a prolonged illness took her life. I had plenty of support from friends, and I kept myself busy. But for a full year, I felt as if I were torn in half. My emotions would rise and fall, twist and turn. Even now, almost three years since her death, deep emotional pain occasionally strikes, and often without warning.”—Kostas.

Have you lost a loved one in death? If so, you may relate to Kostas’ expressions. Few things cause more stress or heartache than the death of a mate, relative, or dear friend. Experts who study the agony caused by grief agree with that. An article published in *The American Journal of Psychiatry* states

that “death is the most obviously permanent and extreme form of loss.” Faced with the unbearable pain such a loss brings, one who grieves may wonder: ‘How long will these feelings last? Will I ever be happy again? How can I find relief?’

Answers to those questions are considered in this issue of *Awake!* The next article will discuss what you might anticipate if you have recently been bereaved. The subsequent articles will explore ways that may help you to lower the intensity of your grief.

We sincerely hope that what follows will be of comfort and practical help to anyone experiencing the agony of grief.

* Some names in this series of articles have been changed.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Although some experts talk about grief occurring in set stages, each individual grieves in his or her own unique way. Do the differences in reactions to grief mean that some people are less saddened by their loss or are “suppressing” their feelings? Not necessarily. While acknowledging and expressing grief can have a healing effect, there is not one “right way” to grieve. Much may depend on an individual’s culture, personality, and life experiences, as well as the nature of the loss.

HOW BAD WILL IT GET?

Bereaved ones may not know what to expect following the death of a loved one. However, certain emotions and challenges are common and can often be anticipated. Consider the following:

Feeling emotionally overwhelmed. Crying spells, yearning for the deceased, and abrupt mood changes may be experienced. Emotions may be further charged by vivid memories and dreams. Initially, though, the primary reaction may be shock and disbelief. Tiina recalls her response when her husband, Timo, passed away unexpectedly. She says: “Initially I was numb. I couldn’t even cry at first. I was so overwhelmed that at times I found it difficult to breathe. I just couldn’t believe what had happened.”

Bouts of anxiety, anger, and guilt are also common. “For some time after the death of our 24-year-old son, Eric,” says Ivan, “my wife, Yolanda, and I were so angry! This surprised us, since we had never before thought of ourselves as angry people. We felt guilty too, as we questioned whether we could have done more to help our son.” Alejandro, whose wife died after a prolonged illness, also experienced feelings of guilt: “At first I felt that

if God was allowing me to suffer this much, I must be a bad person. Then I felt guilty, as if I were blaming God for what happened.” And Kostas, quoted in the preceding article, says: “A few times I even felt angry at Sophia for dying. Then I felt guilty for feeling that way. After all, it was not her fault.”

Troublesome thinking patterns. There may be periods during which one’s thoughts become erratic or illogical. For instance, a bereaved person may imagine that the deceased one can be heard, felt, or seen. Or the bereaved one may find it difficult to concentrate or to remember things. Tiina says: “Sometimes I’d be having a conversation, but I’d find that my mind wasn’t there! It was racing, going over the events surrounding Timo’s death. The inability to focus was of itself distressing.”

A desire to withdraw. A grieving person may feel irritable or awkward in the presence of others. Says Kostas: “In the company of couples, I felt like a fifth wheel. But I also felt out of place with single people.” Ivan’s wife, Yolanda, remembers: “It was so difficult to be around people who complained about problems that seemed trivial compared to ours! Then, too, there were those who would tell us how well their children were doing. I was happy for them, yet at the same time, I found it hard to listen to them. My husband and I understood that life goes on, but we simply didn’t have the desire or patience to deal with it.”

Health problems. Changes in appetite, weight, and sleep patterns are common. Aaron recalls the year following the death of his father: “I definitely had trouble sleeping. I would wake up at the same time every night thinking about my father’s death.”

Alejandro recalls having mysterious health problems: "Several times I was examined by a doctor and was assured that I was healthy. I suspected that grief was causing my physical symptoms." Those symptoms eventually disappeared. Even so, Alejandro's decision to see a doctor was wise. Grieving can lower the immune system, aggravate an existing health problem, or even cause a new one.

Difficulty handling essential tasks. Recalls Ivan: "After Eric's death we had to notify not only relatives and friends but also several others, such as his employer and his landlord. There were also numerous legal documents to fill out. Then we had to go through Eric's personal items. All of this required focus at a time when we were fatigued mentally, physically, and emotionally."

For some, however, the real challenge comes later, when they need to handle matters that were previously handled by their loved one. That was Tiina's experience. She explains: "Timo had always cared for our banking and other business matters. Now this became my responsibility, which only added to my already heightened levels of stress. Could I really handle all of this without making a mess?"

The above-mentioned challenges—emotional, mental, and physical—may paint a daunting picture of grief. The reality is that the pain following the loss of a loved one can be intense, but knowing this in advance may help recently bereaved ones to cope. Remember, too, not *everyone* experiences *all* of grief's potential effects. Furthermore, there may be some comfort for bereaved ones in knowing that the intense feelings associated with grief are *normal*.

WILL I EVER BE HAPPY AGAIN?

What to expect: The intensity of grief does not last forever; it eventually subsides. This is not to say that one fully "recovers" or forgets his or her loved one. However, little by little, sharp pangs of grief soften. They may resurface when certain memories arise unexpectedly or at certain times such as anniversaries. But eventually, most people come to a point of emotional balance and can focus once again on life's daily activities. This is especially so when the bereaved person has the support of family members or friends and takes reasonable steps to cope.

How long will it take? For some, the worst may be over in a matter of months. For many, a year or two may pass before they notice themselves feeling better. And some need even more time.* "For me," recalls Alejandro, "deep grieving continued for about three years."

Be patient with yourself. Take one day at a time, move at your own pace, and know that the pangs of grief do not last forever. That said, are there things you can do to ease your grief now and even prevent your grief from being unnecessarily prolonged?

* A small minority may experience grief so severe and prolonged that it leads to what has been termed "complicated" or "chronic" grief. Such ones may need and benefit from professional mental-health assistance.

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COPING WITH GRIEF

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY

If you look for advice on dealing with grief, you will likely find a myriad of ideas—some more helpful than others. Perhaps that is because, as mentioned earlier, **everyone grieves differently**. What works for one person may not work for someone else.

Even so, there are some basic guidelines that have proved practical for many. They are frequently cited by grief counselors, and they echo timeless principles found in an ancient book of wisdom, the Bible.

1

ACCEPT SUPPORT FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS

- Some experts consider this to be the most important factor in getting through grief. Yet, at times, you may want to be alone. You may even feel irritated at those who are trying to help you. This is normal.
- Do not feel that you must always be around others, but do not completely push them away either. After all, you may need their support in the future. Kindly let others know what you need at the moment and what you do not.
- According to your needs, find a balance between time with other people and time alone.

PRINCIPLE: “Two are better than one . . . For if one of them falls, the other can help his partner up.”—Ecclesiastes 4:9, 10.



2

WATCH YOUR DIET, AND MAKE TIME FOR EXERCISE

- A balanced diet will help with the stress that comes from dealing with grief. Try to eat a variety of fruits, vegetables, and lean proteins.
- Drink plenty of water and other healthful liquids.
- If your appetite is low, eat small portions more frequently. You may also ask your doctor about nutrition supplements.*
- Brisk walks and other forms of exercise can lessen negative emotions. Exercise can provide time to reflect on your loss or to take a break from thinking about it.

* *Awake!* does not endorse any particular health treatment.

PRINCIPLE: “No one has ever hated his own body but he feeds it and takes care of it.”—Ephesians 5:29, *NET Bible*.

3

GET PLENTY OF SLEEP

- Sleep is always important, but this is especially so for those who are grieving, as grief can bring extra fatigue.
- Be careful with the amount of caffeine and alcohol you consume, as both can interfere with your sleep.

PRINCIPLE: “Better is a handful of rest than two handfuls of hard work and chasing after the wind.”—Ecclesiastes 4:6.



4

BE FLEXIBLE

- Recognize that everyone grieves differently. Ultimately, you will need to determine the strategy that works best for you.
- Many find that expressing their grief to others helps them deal with it, while others prefer not to express their grief. Experts have various opinions as to whether expressing one's feelings is vital to success in coping with grief. If you need to confide in someone but are hesitant to do so, you might find it easier to start small by expressing some of your feelings to a close friend.
- Some people find that crying helps them deal with their grief, while others seem to cope even though they cry less.

PRINCIPLE: "Each heart knows its own bitterness."
—Proverbs 14:10, *New International Version*.

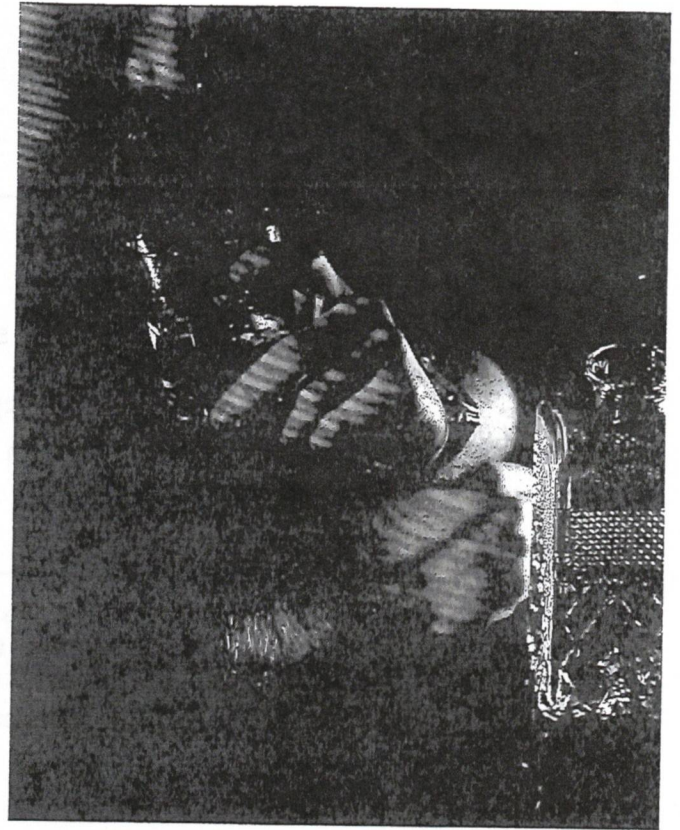


5

AVOID SELF-DESTRUCTIVE HABITS

- Some bereaved ones try to ease their emotional pain through the misuse of alcohol or drugs. Such “escape” is self-destructive. Any relief a person may feel is short-lived, only to be followed by major negative consequences. Try harmless ways to calm your anxieties.

PRINCIPLE: “Let us cleanse ourselves of every defilement.”—2 Corinthians 7:1.



6

BALANCE YOUR TIME

- Many find it helpful to alternate periods of grieving (experiencing and dealing with their emotions) with temporary breaks (activities that temporarily distance them from their pain).
- You may find temporary relief by forming or strengthening friendships, learning new skills, or engaging in recreation.
- As time passes, the balance will likely change. You may notice that your breaks from grieving become longer and more frequent—a natural part of the healing process.

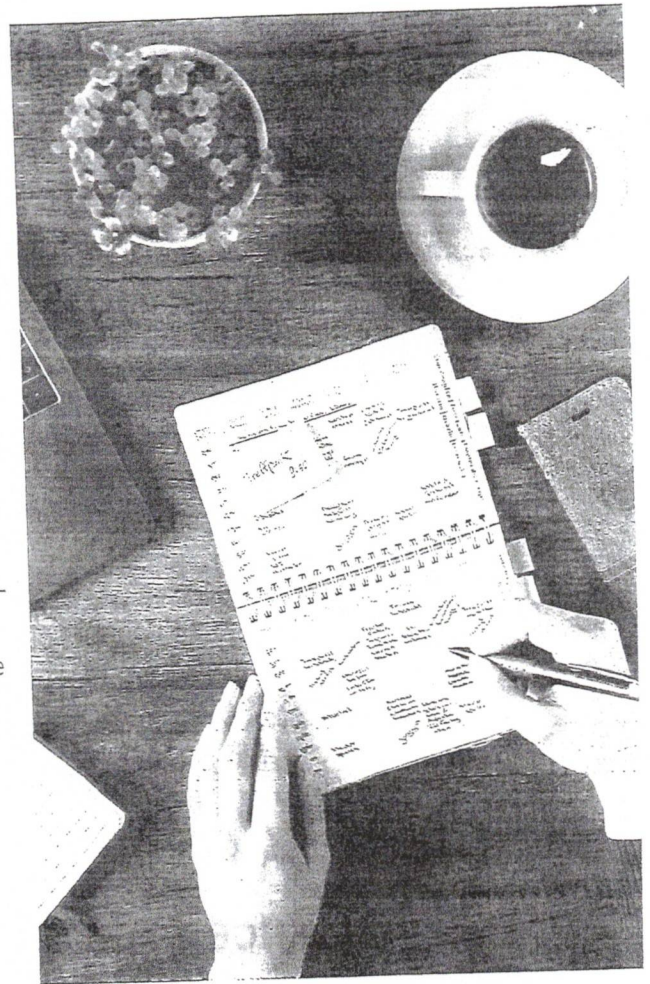
PRINCIPLE: “There is an appointed time for everything, . . . a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to wail and a time to dance.”
—Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4.

7

KEEP A ROUTINE

- As soon as possible, resume a normal routine.
- When you hold to a routine for sleep, work, and other activities, you will likely regain a sense of normalcy.
- Keeping yourself occupied with positive activities can help to mitigate painful emotions.

PRINCIPLE: "He will hardly notice the passing days of his life, because the true God keeps him preoccupied with the rejoicing of his heart."—Ecclesiastes 5:20.



8

AVOID MAKING BIG DECISIONS TOO SOON

- Many who make big decisions soon after losing a loved one later regret those decisions.
- If possible, wait for a reasonable length of time before moving, changing jobs, or discarding your loved one's belongings.

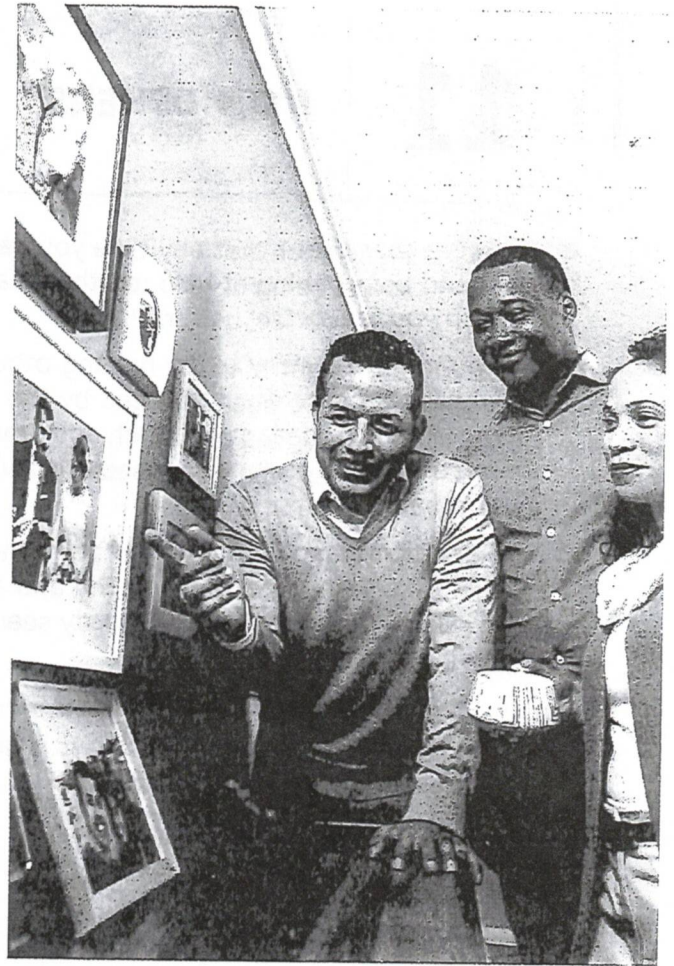
PRINCIPLE: "The plans of the diligent surely lead to success, but all who are hasty surely head for poverty."—Proverbs 21:5.

9

REMEMBER YOUR LOVED ONE

- Many bereaved ones feel it is beneficial to do things that help keep alive their memory of the person who has died.
- You might find it therapeutic to collect pictures or mementos or to create a journal of events and stories you wish to recall.
- Store items that trigger pleasant memories and look through them later, when you feel ready.

PRINCIPLE: "Remember the days of old."
—Deuteronomy 32:7.



10

GET AWAY

- You might consider taking a vacation.
- If a lengthy vacation is not practical, perhaps you can do something enjoyable for just a day or two, such as hiking, visiting a museum, or taking a drive.
- Even a brief change of pace can help you cope with your grief.

PRINCIPLE: "Come, you yourselves, privately into an isolated place and rest up a little."
—Mark 6:31.

11

HELP OTHERS

- Remember that any time you can spend being of help to others can help *you* feel better.
- You might start by helping others who have been affected by the loss of your loved one, such as friends or relatives who may need a grieving companion.
- Supporting and comforting others can give you renewed joy and a sense of purpose that may seem to be lacking.

PRINCIPLE: “There is more happiness in giving than there is in receiving.”—Acts 20:35.



12

REEVALUATE YOUR PRIORITIES

- Grief can provide new insights into what truly matters.
- Take advantage of the opportunity to evaluate how you are using your life.
- As needed, make adjustments in your priorities.

PRINCIPLE: “Better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting, for that is the end of every man, and the living should take it to heart.”—Ecclesiastes 7:2.