January/February, 2021

Dear Friends of Hospice,

Welcome, 2021! I wonder what this year will be like? I cannot predict the difficulties and the joys that will come our way. What do you hope for this year? Perhaps it is relief from the pain of your grief, support from a friend, or healing for someone who is ill. With January comes the notion of a fresh start. Clean out the closets, replace the linens, get organized and get physically fit. That is quite a list of expectations and I always seem to fall short or never get started.

Many grieving people can’t wait until January arrives. Feeling pressured from the holiday season, they long for January 1 and a clean slate; a new year, a new beginning, a belief that “next year will be better.” When times are tough, we learn more about ourselves and our resiliency after difficult circumstances. What are you learning about yourself from your grief experiences? The beginning of a new year is a good time to take an introspective look at who you are. How are you changing? Priorities tend to shift during times of crisis. Are the important things in your life changing or staying the same?

It is hard to imagine facing another year without your loved one. When someone is gone physically, we need to find a way to keep connected. Carry something with you to feel in your pocket or put a favorite picture in your wallet. Consider carving out some space in your home or garden where you can spend some time remembering and reflecting on their life. Wear a piece of their clothing and think of yourself being wrapped in a hug. Scents play an incredible role in our memories. Did they have cologne you can smell when you’re missing them? Think about other challenges you faced in the past. You can lean on the strengths that saw you through other difficult times in your life. Seek support through support groups, counselors, faith and family/friends.

Remember, you don’t have to go through this alone. The bereavement staff is available for extra support. Contact us at 641-428-6208 or 1-800-297-4719.

Thinking of you,
Joyce & Autumn
Bereavement Coordinators
Understanding Grief & Loss

Support Group

Understanding Grief & Loss is an adult support group that will provide grief education and support to individuals who have experienced the death of a family member or friend.

Five Tuesday Evenings
February 16 – March 16
6:00 – 7:30 PM
MercyOne North Iowa Hospice Center
Conference Room
232 2nd Street SE, Mason City

There is no charge for this group, but space is limited. To register, please call

MercyOne North Iowa Hospice
641-428-6208 or 800-297-4719

Other Resources

Touched by Suicide Support Group – touchedbysuicidemasoncity@gmail.com or 641-420-0049

Suicide Support – Hampton area – Jill O’Dell 641-430-8034

"Living With Loss" magazine – www.livingwithloss.com

"Grief Digest" magazine – www.centering.org – 866-218-0101

Grief Share – www.griefshare.org

The Compassionate Friends – supporting family after the death of a child – www.compassionatefriends.org
Most of us have experienced guilt at some point in our lives. Sometime, somewhere, somehow guilt has become a part of our awareness. Guilt, in fact, should be called the Number One Disease in America! We feel guilty about everything; we feel guilty when we feel bad, when we are sick or tired or late. We feel guilty because it’s only meat loaf. We eat because we are guilty and we starve ourselves for the same reasons. We give up ice cream because of guilt and pretend to “love” broccoli as much as cheesecake. We clean house, iron permanent-press shirts and call home because of guilt. We balance the checkbook, stop at traffic lights and watch the speedometer either because we already feel guilty or because we don’t want to be guilty. We send cards, make phone calls, put off doing some things and do other things that we really would like to put off, all because of guilt.

The other side of guilt is responsibility. Who is responsible for this? What things do we know we should have changed? What pieces of the puzzle should we have played differently? “If only” and “should” have become the mile markers on this journey. The more we look for them, the more “if onlys” we find. We revisit the events in our lives a thousand times and then search for anything we could have done differently – some little twist or turn that would have set the scene differently, or that would have turned the ending ever so slightly. We agonize over the smallest detail that we didn’t see or that we forgot to do or that perhaps we ignored. We search the past for keys to the future we grieve for. Our present and our future are because of our guilt. We believe ourselves to be ultimately responsible for the events that have created our NOW.

Even if we can step outside ourselves for a moment and allow rational thinking to return, the secret, private, inner conversations still search for “if only.” It is a desperate search for some reason, some explanation, of why. Surely someone is to blame for then and now! If no one else is available, we will accept the guilt ourselves and begin to know that our loved one died because of something we did or did not do, think, know or believe.

Guilt becomes one of the most difficult parts of the journey. It lingers perhaps far longer than any other emotion. There is always something we can rethink, replay, relive. In hopes of – in hopes of what? “If only” is a sentence we never finish because we know it isn’t possible to recreate the stage, the scene and the play. We can only wish for a different ending. “If only,” becomes the title of every thought we have.

If guilt is the number-one disease in America, then surely we must be on the verge of a cure! We can fix just about
everything else. They have even discovered fat-free fat! We must be close to discovering a pill or potion or thought process that will alleviate the pangs of guilt that cling to the arterial walls and "gum up the works" with the heart and soul.

Until the cure is patented, I have a few tricks of my own that have weathered more than a few guilt trips. Whenever I feel overwhelmed with guilt feelings, I write them down. I make flash cards of my guilts. Each guilt has its own card. I can shuffle these cards to my heart's content, arranging and rearranging them according to my mood. I can list the guilts chronologically, according to the way things really happened (or should have happened). I can arrange them in the order of their importance or in the order of pain still felt. I can manipulate those guilt cards until I begin to feel a sense of control. I can select one or two to carry with me just in case I forget what I am feeling guilty about, and, once in a great while, I can tear up one and throw it away.

I have also perfected the technique of catastrophizing. When I am really into being guilty, I have learned to take my guilt to the farthest limit possible. This works best on current guilts rather than on past guilts, but let me give you an example. Several months ago, I visited my sister for a family celebration. It was my job to put the turkey in the oven before joining the family across town. I spent a great deal of time figuring out how to turn on her fancy oven, complete with timers and remote controls. I then dashed out of the house, hoping not to be late. When we returned much later, we discovered that I had, indeed, set the oven correctly and everything was working properly. I had, however, forgotten to put the turkey in the oven. Therefore, I ruined what was supposed to be a lovely dinner party. Of course, I had ruined everything by then: my nephew's graduation, my sister's dinner party and reputation as a hostess and the joy of being together as a family. It just got worse and worse until I remembered another guilt from a long time ago...Suddenly, a cold, uncooked turkey seemed a bit silly.

Grieving people seem to develop a new sense of what really matters, and cold turkey can hardly match the emptiness of the chair at the table. Guilt should be saved for the really big stuff! When the really big stuff hits, there is only one thing to do. Pay attention! Don't deny the guilt that sweeps over you. Let it come, acknowledge it, experience it and then let it go.

The only "cure" I know for our kind of guilt is to remember this: If you could have, you would have.

Trust yourself! You (and I) did everything possible at the moment. It wasn't enough or right or whatever, but we did what we were able to do, think and believe. If you had known what was going to happen in the future, you would have changed the present so you wouldn't have to live in the past. Trust that. Believe it!

Guilt is a human emotion, and we must learn to forgive ourselves for making mistakes, for not hearing clues that may not have been there, for not seeing what seems so clear now. We cannot go back and rewrite the script. We just have to learn to live with the guilt of being less than magicians, capable of foretelling the future.

There are no crystal balls or magic wands. Work at learning to forgive yourself for living. Only then can the music begin again. Take care of yourself, eat right (put a few chocolate chips in the oat bran), obey the speed limit, open the curtains and claim today. It is ours. In spite of our inability to manage it well, the day is ours. Use it not to find the one thing you could have changed, but to find the things that you can do now to recapture the love you haven’t lost. Our loved ones have surely forgiven us; perhaps we should try that ourselves.

I'm counting on Heaven being guilt-free; at least they better have real ice cream!