EXPECTATIONS

There is very little written about expectations in the life of the grieving person. Many times the unrealistic expectations of ourselves and of others can greatly hinder the eventual readjustment for the bereaved. In wishing to “handle it better,” we often keep expecting more from ourselves than is possible at this time. When we don’t feel better, or act better, and yet think that we should, we become disappointed in ourselves. We have just expected too much of ourselves.

A timetable for grief may be part of the expectation. If I read that one stage took a certain length of time and I wasn’t there yet, I would panic that I wasn’t where I should be.

Often family and friends unwittingly place expectations on us. “It has been 3 weeks,” “3 months” or “8 months” and “you must be better now”, “you must be back to normal.” These expressed or even implied unrealistic expectations by or of others become a pressure on the bereaved.

After the shock and denial, the very pain-filled reality hits. This grief is unbearable heartache and sorrow. Unbearable, yet we have no choice. We must go through it. Complicating this stage is the fact that most people expect that by now you’re recovering, when in reality you are not. Many find talking about their feelings helps. Generally, thinking them out is not enough, since usually grief feelings can’t be intellectualized away or thought away. A common experience of many grieving people is that the people we expect to be most supportive often move away from us just when we need them most. This bewildering phenomenon can be attributed in part to a general lack of knowledge of what grief is, leading to unrealistic expectations being placed on the bereaved person. Sometimes it is helpful to communicate about our loss with someone new since some old friends often want us to return to our old selves again, which is unrealistic on their part.

After the holidays or anniversary of the death, grieving people may expect that everything will be much better. The New Year is often a time of resolutions – of intending to change some habit or attitude. It is not helpful to expect to be much better. When things do not get better, we become discouraged. It may be more helpful to consider January 1 as the day after December 31. Without such unrealistic expectations of the New Year, or of the time after the anniversary, it may gradually become a time of healing and growth; not because we expected it, but because we did not have unrealistic expectations. It is important not to have a timetable for grief.