

People Handle Grief in Their Own Way
By
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My husband Ed and I lost our two children, our girls, from two different kinds of cancer: Valerie at nine from bone cancer and Stacy at thirty-seven from breast cancer. When people discover that, a disturbed look clouds their eyes and pity thickens their voices. They look at me and wonder aloud, "How does one overcome such tragedy?" I don't reply since I don't know. I haven't overcome anything.

What often follows conversations such as that are unsolicited proposals on how to get on with my life. To 'overcome'. For instance, I'm told to:

- * Keep busy
- * Relax
- * Join a bereavement group
- * Go to a shrink
- * Visit Italy
- * Go back to school
- * Go back to work
- * Play golf
- * Take an antidepressant

I don't know how to react to those proposals. As a result, I work hard to remain quiet; my face is a mask. I want to look as if nothing's changed for me, to appear as I once was, and to smile though my pain festers inside.

And I don't know what to say to the questions strangers ask: "Are all your children married?" or, "How many children do you have?" I turn away or abruptly change the subject. And those poor folks don't know what went wrong! I appear rude and I know it and I'm sorry.

Besides not knowing how to handle well meaning and friendly small talk, I sometimes feel unique, although I know I'm not. Many families have lost two or more children. Do the numbers matter? Certainly not. One is too many.

Several months after the September 11 catastrophe, a photo of a retired fireman appeared on the front page of The New York Times. The caption told about his two sons, both firemen, lost in the World Trade Center attack. I thought of writing to him.

Then there was an article about the University of Oregon's former President, Dave Frohnmayer; he lost two young daughters to the deadly Fanconi anemia, and his third daughter is now showing symptoms of the disease. I wanted to write to him, too.

From time to time, I'd brood over that fireman father, or the university president. The soul-

twisting pain that my husband and I are familiar with belongs to them as well. We're a sad group, we are.

Many years later, my head finally said, "time-out," and I listened to a bit of the advice not asked for but given anyway. I joined a bereavement group. Ed and I differ on how we handle our losses; no less pain, just different, and I went to the first meeting alone.

There were about ten of us including one mother who had lost a son that past week, another who lost a son twelve years ago, the rest with their losses in-between, sons and daughters of varying ages. We told our stories. Most cried. And nobody told me how to overcome.

That night, among those mothers and fathers, I recognized, once more, that numbers really don't count. But we have lost our children, whether one or twenty, and in that process, we have lost a piece of our inner self. We have been changed, irrevocably, in ways that more fortunate parents haven't, whether that change is noticeable or not.

And I recognized something else that night: the need to remember that human beings are individuals. Those of us in the bereavement group have suffered through a horrific happening, or happenings, as the case may be, something that we never expected and that nature hadn't intended: the death of children before their parents.

Though we have our losses in common, we handle our pain in distinct ways. Some of us can't stop crying. Some of us keep it all inside. Well, well, we're individuals! We're separate spirits! No news there: we're similar in some ways, different in others. And every one of us needs to be reminded of that from time to time.

So I put on my mask, or leave it off, because that's who I am. I smile. I'm feisty. I'm in control – most of the time. Furthermore, I accept that I don't handle certain situations well, but I do my best. I've lost my children and suffer my pain my way because that's – well, that's who I am.

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There is a plethora of support groups available for anyone at all interested. This is not to suggest that support groups offer answers for everyone or even partial resolutions for some. But for those who are interested, the Internet affords many examples of bereavement websites including the following:

www.compassionatefriends.org<<http://www.compassionatefriends.org/>> *Grief support after the death of a child.*

www.alivealone.org<<http://www.alivealone.org/>> *A support group for the education of bereaved parents whose only child or all children are deceased.*

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Suzann Goldstein has her M.A. in medical sociology from Rutgers University, has written a not-yet published memoir titled *UNEXPECTED LIVES*, and is co-founder along with her husband Ed of The Valerie Fund, and most recently, the Goldsteins, in collaboration with The Cancer Institute of New Jersey, renamed the breast cancer center at CINJ the *STACY GOLDSTEIN BREAST CANCER CENTER* in memory of their older daughter, Stacy.