

Death and Grieving

Grief is the normal—but difficult—response to a loss. Grieving occurs as one comprehends and accepts the finality of death and adapts to the consequences of the loss.

Why are loved ones taken from us? Why does God give suffering and pain? Each person deals with grief and loss differently, yet those who grieve experience many things in common. How can we help to share one another's burdens? Why is it important to be near the suffering one? How does sorrow change its shape with time? God's Word says that all things work together for good to those that love Him and His Word.

On these Home and Family pages, writers who mourn the death of a loved one share thoughts on this important topic.

My Grief Journey

Nearly 22 years ago, on a beautiful, sunny Memorial Day Sunday, our daughter Annette was in a car accident. On our way to the hospital my husband Elmer and I talked little, numb with worry. Images of a funeral with us seated in the front row flashed through my mind, clashing with thoughts that we should be planning for her high school graduation. Quiet by nature, we didn't even know if we should call others to the hospital to sit with us. Though the doctors didn't give false hope, I prayed this could be one of those miracles we read about in the Reader's Digest. But it was not to be. God called Annette home a few hours after the accident.

A New Identity

So much happened right after she died. Looking back, I wonder how we coped. One son broke his foot and some days later went to emergency with a high fever. My coworkers saw me and asked why I was there. Through visiting, they learned I had also just suffered a miscarriage. Our cat was delivering her first kittens and we found one dead, undelivered. It seemed that every morning I would ask: what will happen today? And then, we had to endure the graduation ceremony.

This graduation was special for the community, since the school had only opened for classes five months prior. Local news coverage of this notable day said, "The ceremony started on a somber note when the principal presented a diploma to the parents of Annette Hillukka, who died in a car accident 12 days ago." This resulted in Annette's death becoming public and for a long time whenever I was in town, it felt like I had a huge sign above my head: *This is the mother whose daughter died*. I felt like that was my identity; her death was with me all the time.

Peaks and Valleys

I was a busy mother of 11, now left with ten children. Our youngest was four, and I was employed part-time. I made new friends with others who had lost a child, both within God's kingdom and in our community. These friends were invaluable, with their immediate understanding and comfort. I thought I was doing quite well with my grief, picking up the pieces and continuing on. But there was always another anniversary, a wedding of a special friend of Annette's or something else that triggered grief. Why did seeing a 15-month-old walking around remind me of Annette and reduce me to tears?

Perhaps I didn't grieve enough those early years. I was busy, and we did have happy moments: our children started getting married, our 12th child arrived and brought joy to our entire family, precious grandchildren came into our lives. Leading up to these joyous events I experienced a roller-coaster of emotions, many times in the same day. But the emotional peaks and valleys grew farther apart, and the height and depth of them lessened.

At the 10-year anniversary mark, things seemed to change. I didn't dread as much the coming anniversary of her death, her birthday or other special events when her presence was so missed. My birthday, three days before her death anniversary, could again be a happy birthday.

It was when our nephew died 17 years later, however, that I finally really grieved for Annette. Once again a tragic car accident took from us a young person—our relative. The similarities to our own loss were too much to bear. Finally I had the time, or I took the time, or maybe God just allowed it to happen; I shed so many tears, and it was emotionally exhausting.

Grief Is Individual

Grief has no timetable. It is not a neat step-by-step process where you complete one phase and move on to the next. Everyone's grief experience is different. Personalities and natures are different, circumstances are different, but everyone who experiences a loss needs to grieve. I am a different person, forever changed by my experience. I have often thought that grief is like a huge mountain. You can walk around it and you will always be walking around it. But when you finally do the difficult work of plowing through it, then you start to get relief.

I reached a day not long ago when I realized only that morning it was the anniversary of Annette's death. I was amazed, and I was so happy! I wasn't dreading the arrival of this day, finally! I have reached a new place in this grief journey. Yet, as I write this, tears flow easily as I recall those dark days. I am a person who cries easily now.

Time for Sorrow, Time for Joy

With grief so raw in the beginning, it was difficult to think of the good part of Annette's death, even though I knew in my heart that she had gained the victory. As the years have passed, it has become easier to understand and even be glad for her. Knowing I have one child awaiting me in heaven has brought me peace and comfort when I've faced times of great trial.

“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die...A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn” (Eccl. 3:1–4). This Scripture portion was used at the time of Annette’s death, and I have always remembered it. We need to grieve the death of our loved one; sorrow and grief are natural, healthy emotions.

Her Last Happy Week

As I recall it, Annette’s last week was filled with sunshine. She was a girl who showed her feelings. Earlier in the month I had been worried about her, and with a trip to my sister’s wedding coming, I decided I needed to talk to her. It seemed I had a long list of complaints, and so did she. As I was talking, she countered with her own concerns. Suddenly it was clear to me: as the adult I needed to show her an example of how believers address their grievances with one another. I asked her for forgiveness for my own part, and she was immediately ready to do the same. The sun of grace shone, and Annette’s disposition shone along with it.

I left the next day for Evie’s wedding. Elmer told me how happy Annette was throughout the week. She openly shared her plans for the future, career options and dreams. She was a sunshiny girl. In my sorrow I can still see joy: the joy Annette shared with her father that week and the joy and peace I feel knowing she left a good testimony.

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice; and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy” (John 16:19).

Helen Hillukka

I Miss His Footsteps on the Porch

“They just came in and gave me the results of the biopsy. I have stage 4 cancer with no cure!” His words took my breath away. They started a new chapter in my life. My husband Paul and the father of my children was never the same after that phone call. I lost the husband I knew on Dec. 9, 2016. He lost his life to leptomeningeal carcinomatosis, a rare form of brain cancer, on May 18, 2017.

A year and a half later I still find myself asking: forever? The feeling of temporary is starting to fade and the new reality of my life alone with ten children is sinking in. Losing someone as significant as a spouse is not something you can comprehend in an instant. It’s like peeling an onion. You discover layer upon new layer.

I never knew he went on the shed roof and cleaned pine needles on a regular basis. I never knew when and where all the light bulbs and copy paper got replenished. I never realized how much I anticipated those footsteps on the porch until they weren’t heard anymore. I never thought I would miss any of his mess in the bedroom. The discoveries are endless.

Lonely is not a strong enough word. I have my children and an amazing support network of friends who are part of my daily life, but by the end of the day I'm alone. Everyone returns to their own families and my children get tucked into bed. The longing for my husband is a constant ache.

I'm not the only one who is grieving. My children are grieving their father. A daughter who has moved out calls me in the middle of the night, "Mom, I can't sleep. I've been crying for hours, I miss dad so much!" I find my pre-teen son heaped in a lump on the stairs, shoulders shaking with sobs, "I will never go to father-son camp with dad again!" My little boy who barely remembers his dad: "Mom, when I get big I'll fly a helicopter and pick up dad from heaven when he's feeling all better!" All I can offer for comfort is a hug and validation: "I miss daddy too!"

Sometimes I get angry at God. Why? What could possibly be the reason you took him away and left me to raise these kids alone? I don't know if I will ever find an answer. But one thing I do know is that God has taken care of us. He has sent His angels to carry me when I am at my weakest—often someone I hadn't expected. His kingdom is a secure and safe place for us to dwell. His children are my family. We have been remembered and carried.

I trust God has a plan for me and He will continue to provide. He will give strength one day at a time until we meet our beloved one again in heaven.

Hanna Haataja

We Prayed for a Miracle

On June 20, 2018, our life took a sharp turn that was frightening and joyful at the same time. Our daughter Ellie was born two months early, with Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome. With this syndrome, the left ventricle of the heart doesn't form at all, or as in Ellie's case, is extremely small. The right ventricle in return is abnormally large to try cover for the left side not being functional.

Immediately after birth Ellie was moved to the NICU and put on almost everything they could put her on, as so much was still unknown. Slowly one form of support after another was removed or lowered as she became more stable.

Days of ups and downs began. In the back of our minds was always the worry of tomorrow. If one day was not promising, we hoped the next day would be better. Some days things got better and better, and then they went backwards the next.

How Can We Say Goodbye?

After a few weeks, Ellie's condition worsened dramatically. She was put on life support as a last attempt to save her. We hoped and prayed for a miracle, but within hours our daughter showed little to no sign of life. She was nearly three weeks old, and we were faced with a tough decision. They told us we could keep her on life support as long as we wanted, but her chance for survival was close to zero.

How could we let go of this little child we had so many hopes and dreams for? How could we say goodbye to someone who already seems gone? What is the right decision? There were so many questions, so many unknowns. The heartache and tears felt endless. We were given comfort knowing if she was meant to live, she would do so when life support was shut off.

It felt natural to turn to doctors and nurses for guidance, answers and solutions. But we knew that ultimately we had to turn to our Heavenly Father and pray that His will would be fulfilled.

With heavy hearts we let the doctors know our decision. Nonetheless, how could we possibly prepare for that moment when her ever-busy, noisy room became silent and still? It felt so wrong that the only sound was the clock ticking on the wall, marking every second we were now without our baby.

We Have an Anchor in Heaven

It has now been many months since Ellie's passing on July 10. It's difficult to deal with the unknowns: the what-could-have-been, the empty arms, the aching heart and longing tears. Yet it's easier when we know Ellie will never have to deal with the world and temporal worries, cares and sorrows. Her life would have contained countless trips to the hospitals and clinics, at least three surgeries and likely other temporal trials. We feel blessed that Ellie is in heaven waiting to meet us. We have an anchor there to help us on our journey of faith, an angel to show us the way.

Tears and Thanks

It has been helpful to feel every emotion and let it out, so we don't bottle it up and make our situation worse. When tears come, just let them come. It was so hard to see other families at church with their little babies, but as time goes on that pain lessens. Even though we're only getting to the eight-month mark since we lost our baby, it is so much easier to deal with than the days right after it happened. Time does heal.

We are extremely thankful for the support from our families and extended families, our friends and our local congregation. We gained strength from those who have experienced loss, from others who might not be able to relate but let us know they're there for us, and from those who gave gifts of money to help pay medical expenses. We would not have been able to do it alone. God knows our needs. We are so fortunate to be believers; we can't imagine how we would find such peace and comfort outside of God's kingdom.

Remember Our Ellie

We hope people will remember our little girl, even if they did not get to meet her. We want others to bring her up in conversation, so it doesn't feel she is forgotten by everyone but us. We were blessed to have our little Ellie for the short time that we did. We can hold on to her in our hearts, even though our arms are achingly empty.

Donovan and Alyssa Kinnunen

Learning to Live with Grief

It is difficult to describe what it's like when the hand of death reaches out and changes your world forever. You aren't sure if you can make anything workable out of the ashes of your existence. You put one weary foot in front of another. You carry on because you must. Sometimes you even have the energy to wonder.

When we were young, we didn't imagine it possible to lose our siblings—our closest companions—to death. They traveled with us through daily life. They were there, and so we assumed they always would be. How could we know then that the path for two of our brothers was to be so much shorter than ours? Twenty-two years ago, on a winter night in January, their life's journey ended in a car accident. Tim was twenty-one and Peter sixteen. Their death changed our lives forever.

You Never Get Over It

After our brothers died, our grandma said that when you lose someone you love, you never get over it. But, she said, you do learn to live with it. Grandma would have known, because she had suffered loss of nearly every kind imaginable. For us, her words at once acknowledged the depth of grief and the seeming impossibility of our loss of Tim and Peter, while yet offering a glimmer of hope for our future. Twenty-two years later, we still see how right Grandma was.

At the time of the boys' death, in spite of the raw, deep pain and agony of the loss, somewhere inside we also felt a measure of peace, knowing they were ready to go. In the midst of these kinds of trials, it can be tempting to question why. Life seems to hold more questions than answers. In our better moments, we realize that we don't always need the answers. It is enough to know that one has the gift of faith.

We have always been grateful to the many people who remembered us in many ways after our losses. In some way, it was comforting and amazing to see the large number of people whose lives our boys had touched closely. Of course we knew what they meant to us, but it brought comfort to know that they had been loved by so many others as well.

Loss is personal. We learned this when our brothers died. We all lost the same two boys. We all loved them dearly. Yet we each had our own personal relationships with Tim and with Peter. Because of that, and because we are all different people, we experience grief and loss in our own way. This is important to know. It also means that for every one of us, the journey of grief can at times feel very, very lonely.

A Personal Roadmap

Somewhere along the journey of grief, we realized that Grandma knew. Grief had indeed become a travel companion. There have been moments when we wish we could leave it behind at any stop. Grief is not an easy companion. It is there constantly... tripping you up, skinning your knees, hiding your roadmap, jabbing painfully at that open hole in your heart. And then at some point, there come more and

more moments when you bump along together, you and grief, companionably if not comfortably. You find that you can't really remember what it was like to travel without grief as a companion. Sometimes grief even steps forward to carry the suitcase. In those moments, you see the silver lining in sorrow. It is there if you look for it. It often shows itself in opportunities to understand and help others, in moments when others need compassion and caring, in moments when grief has slashed apart their travel plans.

Nowadays, we recognize that we probably even owe gratitude to our travel companion, grief. It can open your eyes wider to so many powerful lessons. The beauty in life. The love of those close to you. The value of a true friend. The story that is in each person you meet. Contentment in a life of purpose. The simple truths of faith. The gift in forgiveness. The goal of heaven.

Blessing and Healing

Healing and rebuilding come. In large part, rebuilding is a choice. God provides blessings in everyone's life. If we are open to seeing them, we can find a way through and make something of the pieces. There are blessings and healing in involving yourself in the work of God's kingdom, in investing in healthy and supportive relationships with others, in tapping into your creative side, in remembering your sense of humor, in purposeful work, in seeing the beauty in life and in giving yourself permission to grieve. It turns out, the ashes of sorrow and grief are workable into something beautiful. Grandma knew. When you lose someone you love, you never get over it. But you do learn to live with it.

Mandy Frantti and Tricia Tervo

God Helped Me Step by Step

On March 3, 2014, my husband of 39 years passed away. Three of our children, ages 16, 15 and 12, were still at home.

For the first year, normal chores like cooking, cleaning and laundry were not possible; I couldn't function or focus enough to follow through. While I was visiting believers in Africa later that year, they helped me start living again by taking me shopping, visiting and sightseeing. They had me do a little sewing, food preparation and light housekeeping. They were patient with me and my inability to focus. That was the beginning of my healing.

Anger and Grief

For a period of time it was difficult to see elders at services with their spouses. I fought anger so much I wondered if I was even believing anymore. A counselor suggested I go to a different church for a while. I knew that wasn't the answer. God showed me to turn to the believers.

At church, however, I still sensed when some people would go out of the bench a different way to avoid me or move aside for me to pass. Greeting me or putting a hand on my shoulder would have helped me feel I belong. Some avoided saying his name or sharing memories of him, thinking it would

make me cry. I wanted him to be remembered and wanted to hear their stories and memories, even if it made me cry.

When my children lost their dad, they also lost their mom for the first year. I knew Kevin would be so disappointed if I “stayed in the waiting room, waiting to die” or was among the “living dead.” He wanted me to pick up and go on.

Things that helped were when family or friends encouraged me to go with them to the grocery store, shopping, hiking, etc. Sometimes I didn’t want to go but they stopped by to pick me up. It felt good to get away from home for a bit. When they invited me to go to their place, or told me they were coming over, it was comforting. Sometimes someone picked me up to go to events, since going by myself was difficult. Many times, though, I drove myself because I wanted to leave if it was too hard to stay. At times I turned around on the way there.

One Step at a Time

I needed to try change my negative thoughts to positive ones: I will never be happy again to I will be happy again, etc. Listing a few good things that happened that day helped. At first it was that I got out of bed or got dressed or the coffee tasted good. This gradually turned to other things. I planned one thing I was going to do the next day and one thing on the weekend. Making short-term and long-term goals and lists of what needed to be done to do them was beneficial, from getting a haircut or getting a massage to taking classes. Volunteering, including visiting elders from church, helped me too.

When I lost my husband, I also lost my future, my hopes and dreams. We think we are weaving our own lives, but I learned God is the one that is weaving from above. As I look back in my life I find this has been so all along. God blessed me with my husband before taking my sister that I was close to. After moving to Arizona in 2004, our youngest child became close friends with two boys from families who had lost their fathers. Both of their mothers had remarried. A year after my husband died two of my daughters moved to Washington to help a sister when she had twins. During that time, they became close friends with a girl who had also lost her father. God gave escorts, someone who understands.

I Can Trust in God

When God blessed me with another wonderful husband in September, 2017, my youngest son confided with his friends who lost their dads. They encouraged him, “It’s awkward at first, but it gets easier.” God has a plan, a perfect plan. He does not make mistakes. I must remember to trust Him.

Janet Stonelake

How to Help Yourself in Grief; How to Speak to and Help Those Who Are Grieving

How to help yourself in grief and recovery from grief:

- Be patient with yourself. Take a break to rest and get energy to continue. It takes courage to grieve and is exhausting work, but DON'T QUIT!
- Pray. You will go on when you are ready. Your way of grieving is the right way for you. There is no wrong way to grieve.
- In the evening think of 3 to 5 good things that happened that day, even if it's as small as "The coffee tasted good" Think of them again in the morning before you start your day. This can also be done as a family.
- Set short term goals for yourself, things you can do in 1-2 weeks and long-term goals, things to do in a month, again in a year, e.g. haircut, massage, taking a trip, taking a class.
- Volunteer somewhere of interest to you. E.g. elders from church love to be remembered. If you can't do that, hold a door open for someone behind you or let a person merge into traffic.
- Make a plan what you are going to do the next day, even if only one thing.
- Learn something new: piano, painting, yoga, gardening, golf, whittling, etc.
- Attend events. Bring someone with you if you do not wish to arrive or leave alone.
- Try changing negative thoughts into positive ones. E.g. "I will never be happy again" to "I will be happy again". Don't let your mind get stuck in those negative thoughts. Over time, how you feel can become who you are.

How to help one who is grieving:

- Be a good listener. In the beginning, the grieving one is not looking for answers. They are processing what happened. Telling their story allows grief to come out. Suppressed grief can become depression.
- Pity is necessary in the beginning. Later, compassion is needed. Everyone benefits from one person's compassion. Compassion can help motivate or activate one who is suffering. Prepare meals together, shop, visit, hike, walk, coffee or golf. Do things you know they enjoyed before or think they may enjoy now.
- Encourage the grieving one to get outside of the home. Provide a babysitter, if needed.
- Help write a list of things that need to be done. Post the list so visitors and helpers become aware and can do what they are able to do or have time to do.

How to Speak to One Who Grieves

We may inadvertently make comments that are meant to be helpful but which can actually be hurtful, especially during a period of fresh grief. Later in the process, the grieving one may understand that others mean well but cannot fully understand something they haven't lived through.

In general there are about 150 comments one tends to hear in the first two weeks after a loss. Only about ten of these are comforting. The brain comprehends things, but the heart does not. Until grief is processed and the brain and heart come together, many comments can hurt.

Comments that may hurt:

- He's in a better place. (My heart feels a better place for him is right here by me)
- At least he's not suffering anymore. (At least he was still here)
- You are a strong person. (No, I'm not)
- Keep busy (Put off grieving)
- You can remarry, or you can have more children or, at least you have your/other children. (They don't take his place)
- Time will heal (Time alone does not make anything heal. It's what you do during that time that can help heal)
- Be strong for your children, parents, etc. (Push your grief down to help others)
- You need to start smiling again.

Comforting things to say or do:

- My thoughts are with you
- Praying for you, remembering you, thinking of you
- I can only imagine what you're going through
- May God give you strength
- Give a hug
- If you have a special memory of someone's loved one, tell it to them, even if it makes them cry.
A grieving one wants their loved one's memory to live on and wants to hear stories that other people have about them.

Janet Stonelake

Discussion Points:

1. What has been especially helpful to you in a time of grief? What has been most challenging?
2. Grief never goes away, but rather it changes shape and color as time passes. Discuss how your grief has shifted over time.
3. Do you remember first experiencing joy after a long time of grieving? How did this feel?
4. How can we recognize and help children who are grieving?
5. Sing song of Zion 391. What important message do these words convey?