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Responding to Change
By Beth Brittain, M. Div., LPC

When a loved one dies, almost everything changes. Without a doubt, the physical absence of the person is a profound change. The daily routines of talking, doing things and just being with your loved one are irreversibly changed. It’s as if the roles your loved one held in your life now need “understudies” to fill in. With the loss of your loved one perhaps there is a need for someone to help with yard work or home repairs, another person to eat out with or someone to occasionally cook a meal for you. Although “understudies” are welcomed and well meaning, it’s just not the same. No one knows your preferences the way your loved one did.

A loss also brings a change that isn’t so obvious. You may find yourself asking, ‘Who am I now that my loved one has died?’ ‘What does the future look like now?’ ‘How do I move through the rest of my life without my loved one?’ These three questions are considered ultimate identity questions. As adults, the assumption is that we have already explored and hopefully determined our identity. Now, since our world has dramatically changed, these ultimate questions resurface. The difference in how we respond has to do with maturity, life experience and relationships we have had, particularly when a loved one has died. Let’s explore these questions further in light of the recent death:

“Who am I now that my loved one has died?”

More often than not, we are heartbroken and somewhat lost. The experience of a loved one’s death and the surfacing of grief dislocates us. We often struggle to follow through with tasks, we may not think as clearly, and we may even feel that we are losing our minds. But we are, in fact, the same person we were prior to the death but with a major difference; we now have to apply who we were before the death to our evolving identity since the death. One way to walk this path is to intentionally consider some additional ideas: Before the death I was __________, and now I feel __________. In my life I have learned __________, that can help me through this grief. My loved one taught me __________ and I can now apply those lessons to how I live my life. For some people, journaling these types of thoughts can help reveal responses to the base question of ‘who am I’. Keep in mind that only you can fill in the blanks and apply the lessons to your life. Remember, everyone is unique in how they grieve. While others in the family and your close circle of friends may have input, only you really know what is right for you.

“What does the future look like?”

Truthfully, no one fully knows the answer to this

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Settling Down with Loss

By Larry Dawalt, M.Div., Sr. Director, Spiritual & Grief Care Services

I have not kept a running total of how many times I have heard “I’m sorry, but your call cannot be completed as dialed” in the last month as I have tried from my office to access an outside line. It reached the point of frustration very quickly. Why can’t I make myself dial ‘8’ instead of ‘9’ to reach an outside line and make a phone call? I got the memo. I read the memo. I smiled and told myself how easy it would be. But why can’t I make myself do it?

You know the answer as well as I do; it’s because I’ve been dialing ‘9’ for years and years. It’s a habit. I am conditioned to dial ‘9’ for an outside line and I’ve never done it any other way. I have done it thousands of times. It’s a natural reaction. I don’t think; I just do it. Having come to that realization, I have decided to take it easy on myself and not be frustrated or upset when I automatically hit ‘9’ instead of ‘8’ immediately after I pick up the phone to make a call outside the office.

I want those of you who have lost a loved one to take it easy on yourself, too. Just like my little phone habit, you have habits of your own that are hard to break because you’ve been doing them for years and years; habits like looking across the breakfast table and expecting them to be there, picking up the phone to share good news, seeing something in a store that you know they would love, and the list goes on and on.

Why do we do these things? Habit is the first answer, but even greater is the fact that it has been many years since we’ve known a world without our loved one. And in the case of parent loss, most of us have never known a world without them. There hasn’t been a time when we weren’t able to see them when expected, or not been able to talk to them or shop for them or do the things that became such a natural part of our lives. It is sad and frustrating, and the natural reaction is to be hard on ourselves for starting to do things when we know they are gone.

So what’s the solution? Keep dialing ‘9’ and smile. Remember the good times. Treasure sacred moments. Laugh when you can and cry when you have to cry. You may make it to ‘a new normal’ and you may not, but the point is to let yourself be where you are in your grief process and not be hard on yourself. It’s the world you knew for many years, and even if it changes on the outside, that world will always be in your heart.

Did you know? Emotions and food are often intertwined. Grief, anger and stress can trigger emotional eating. Take care of yourself. Be prepared for the challenges and plan ahead. Focus on eating healthy meals, exercising, getting enough sleep, and avoid smoking or drinking alcohol that can put your health at risk.

Adapted from The Mayo Clinic online Healthy Living Index, and the National Institutes of Health, News in Health, November, 2009
question. While you and your loved one may have had dreams and goals, they may not have been achieved despite the death. As we walk through our grief, we begin to realize that living in the present while hoping for the future is about all we can manage. Making plans and dreams and setting goals is very important in the process of grief. However, these need to remain somewhat flexible. The future will take care of itself as we work on intentionally processing our grief. In terms of the question about the future, with some time and space we begin to relocate our loved one from physical presence to memory/spiritual presence. This can be accomplished in phases. At times we hold onto the memory of our loved one, and at other times we feel as if they are still physically with us. One way to frame the future may be to think of what our loved one might have wished for us and move in that direction as we are able. That also can be a way of honoring their memory. Remember, this is not about forgetting your loved one, but letting go of past attachments so new ones can be formed.

“How do I move through the rest of my life without my loved one?”

Only you alone can answer this powerful question. One way is to move through one step at a time, as you are able. Allowing time to fully respond and manage the many sides of grief helps to expand and clarify your identity in light of the loss. It also allows you to test new or different aspects of life that may not have been experienced when your loved one was present. Know that there may be some less than pleasant experiences, but there will also be some very fulfilling and exciting ones as well.

Experiencing life fully after the death of a loved one is not being disloyal. The best way to memorialize their life may be by living yours more fully. As you work through grief, you will regain some equilibrium and realize you are still ‘you’ at the core, but may be overshadowed by the myriad of changes that losing a loved one to death brings. Change is inevitable. How it all turns out is based on how you work through your grief, the support you have and utilize, and your coping skills as you develop your response to the loss of your loved one and evolve into your new identity.
Registration has begun for the HPCCR support groups entitled “Grief: The Reluctant Journey”. The meetings start in June 2013 at our various HPCCR locations, however, a pre-group interview with one of our grief counselors is required before registration. To find out more, and to schedule an interview, please email cummingsg@hpccr.org, or call 704.335.4334. For our Lincolnton support groups, email Journigan-Douglask@hpccr.org, or call 704.887.6437.

Please join us for our annual

Spring Memorial Service
as we celebrate and remember those we have loved and lost.

Saturday, May 18
5pm
Levine & Dickson Hospice House - Huntersville
11900 Vantistry Drive
Huntersville, NC

For additional information, please call 704.335.4334
You are welcome to bring a photo or other memento of your loved one.