

BY YOUR SIDE

SUPPORT IN BEREAVEMENT

SUMMARY

Suzanne Pinard

The beginning of mourning

We still think about Eric, our first baby

Regaining your physical balance



SHOCK, DENIAL AND DISORGANIZATION

After 22 years of life together, Laurence lost her husband Simon in a car accident.

When she heard the news, she stood transfixed for a few minutes, shattered by the brutality of the shock.

Everything that happened next seems like a dream. Like an automaton, Laurence settled the funeral arrangements, as well as the estate details. At the funeral parlour, people came up to her to offer their condolences. "Are they really talking to me?" she wondered. In fact Laurence had not yet realized the magnitude of her tragedy.

She was in what is called the denial stage. Three weeks passed since Simon's departure. Laurence got up one morning and made a devastating discovery: the side of the bed usually occupied by her husband was empty. Of course she had noticed this absence before, but today was different. Instead of just "noticing" the void left by her absent husband, she felt it in the deepest part of her being.

Little by little, Laurence realized that Simon would never be coming back. Then she felt overcome by despair. Faced with spells of weeping, mood swings, and out-

bursts of guilt, anger and nostalgia, Laurence even wondered if she was not in danger of going mad.

Yet these reactions are normal, and part of what bereavement specialists call the disorganization stage.

This first instalment in a series of four is intended to support bereaved persons who are dealing with the trials of the shock and disorganization that accompany the first months of a bereavement.

Produced by the funeral cooperatives movement, this publication is designed to offer support to persons in mourning. The participating funeral cooperatives provide this publication free of charge to persons in mourning who have ordered funeral services from them for a family member.

Presented in four instalments, the By Your Side series gives you a better understanding of the emotions associated with bereavement. Offering clear, accessible information, the instalments present some thoughts, personal accounts, concrete methods and resources that can help people through their mourning process.

Part 1: Shock, denial and disorganization

Part 2: Reorganization

Part 3: Reclaiming your life

Part 4: Transformation and healing

Attentive to the suffering of persons in mourning, your funeral cooperative understands how important it is to face this trial in an atmosphere of respect. May you find the strength and comfort to move forward on your path to peace and serenity.

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Suzanne Pinard

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Suzanne Pinard The beginning of

Holding diplomas in education, social assistance, facilitation, gerontology, adult education and death studies, Suzanne Pinard has no less than 40 years of experience in the fields of education, training and facilitation. Giving generously of her time and advice, the author of the guide *De l'autre côté des larmes* here outlines for us the stages of mourning, a subject which she has studied at length. Serenity, human warmth and compassion are the hallmarks of this lady, who has herself experienced this difficult life trial many times. An interview which lifts the veil of mystery surrounding bereavement, while proposing different ways of dealing with it.

In concrete terms, what happens to a person in the first stage of the mourning process?

The first reaction when one learns of the death is shock. Next comes denial, as a way of managing the shock. We try to go on living as though the death hadn't happened. This defence mechanism, which for a short while blocks

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the emotions, is necessary to pull ourselves together and remain functional for the time required to see to the organization of everything surrounding the death. This is a very healthy period, provided we do not stay walled up in it. For sooner or later we have to begin the mourning process.

When the defence mechanisms fail, the emotions are given free rein. What happens when a person moves from the denial stage to the disorganization stage?

In the end, daily life offers up constant reminders of the absence of the deceased. He or she no longer calls, no longer comes home. When it is the spouse or a child, the bed is always empty. At this point, I myself use the phrase “never again”. This marks an extremely painful realization, for it is now that we see that the situation is irreversible. Then we lose control of our emotions and enter into the disorganization

mourning

stage, when anything at all can provoke outbursts of tears: hearing the name of the deceased, seeing a fruit he liked at

It is essential to find our “great listener”. What I mean by that is someone who is able to hear us out without interrupting or making judgments.

the grocery store, etc. We also have conflicting emotions. We move from tedium to anger and from anger to guilt. We can also be in a great deal of distress. This stage and all of its reactions in fact constitute the beginning of mourning.

The main purpose of the mourning process is to allow for the expression of emotion.

What can we do to ease our suffering and get through this period in a healthy way?

First, it is essential to find our “great listener”. What I mean by that is someone who is able to hear us out without interrupting or making judgments. It is important to tell our story and to experience the emotions that the words summon forth. I also suggest writing, which for me is the best “self-therapy” there is. You can either write to the deceased person or tell your own story, holding nothing back, censoring nothing, and as you write or tell your story, you allow what wells up to emerge. The main purpose of the mourning process is to allow for the expression of emotion. Knowing the stages of the process and the reactions it provokes also helps us to experience our bereavement in a conscious way.

Why do some people totally repress their emotions after a loss?

The people around us who say things like: “Look, you’re young, you can build your life again!” or “Stop crying, you are going to destroy yourself... Be strong!”, those people push the bereaved person into the “reclaiming your life” stage when he or she has barely begun to mourn. The bereaved in fact do not have to be strong at all ... for bereavement is the opposite of strength: it is a situation of extreme vulnerability. If they deny their pain and their emotions, the bereaved are not admitting to their own reality, and I would even say, their own humanity.

Generally speaking, how long can a mourning period last?

If each bereavement is unique, so is its resolution. Each person has his or her own pace of mourning. On the other hand, it is usual for mourning to begin to fade after one year. By that time we have gone through all the anniversaries, all the major holidays of the year, and each of the four seasons.

Why do people say that every bereavement is unique?


First, because every person is unique and has his or her own history. Many factors can influence the unfolding of a mourning process: one’s openness, maturity, 



PHOTO: CLAUDE CROSETIERE

I also suggest writing, which for me is the best “self-therapy” there is.

economic situation, the circumstances of the death, the type of relationship the person had with the deceased, the degree of attachment, past bereavements, the quality of the support received, etc.

In your opinion, why is death taboo in our society?

Because we are a society of winners, and dying means losing. Furthermore, there is no longer a reference point for understanding death, as there used to be with the religious rites. I don't mean to say that religion used to explain everything! Far from it. All the same, it offered a certain concept of death and the beyond.

In closing, what would you say to a person who is presently in mourning?

I am with you.
I mean that literally. I say it from my heart, and I know what such a person is feeling...

Tips and advice



REGAINING YOUR PHYSICAL BALANCE

When one goes through a difficult time like a bereavement, all the aspects of our life are affected, including of course our physical well-being. The messages that our body sends us have to be taken very seriously. This is a necessity if we want to avoid more serious illnesses which could follow from the great upheaval brought by the loss of a family member

Common physical symptoms are:

- Change of appetite
- Digestive problems
- Sleep disorders
- Changes in blood pressure
- Numbness and tension
- Loss of memory and concentration
- Reduced energy to the point of intense fatigue

How does one relieve the physical symptoms of mourning?

- Allow yourself to cry. When they manifest, tears release a calming and beneficial substance (endorphin). Tears also diminish the sensation of oppression in the throat or thorax
- Maintain an adequate, healthy and balanced diet
- Get enough sleep and physical exercise
- Avoid stressful situations
- Refrain from alcohol, drugs or medications
- Allow time in your schedule for rest, exercise and recreation, but also specific times for dealing with your pain.

Mourning is not in itself an illness. So it is important not to resort excessively to medication to mitigate the physical symptoms. On the other hand, it is essential to see a specialist if the symptoms persist over time or if your health deteriorates.

SOURCES: • JACQUES, Josée. *Les saisons du deuil: la mort tisserande de la vie*. Outremont: Les Éditions Quebecor, 2002. 223 p.
• PINARD, Suzanne. *De l'autre côté des larmes*. Boucherville: Éditions de Mortagne. 198 p.
• La Gentiane site: Deuil-Entraide, www.lagentiane.org.

We still think about Eric, our first baby

When our first child was born on March 22, 1968, everything was ready for his arrival. In the evening I went to the hospital after work to see my wife. I walked up to the floor where her room was, when suddenly, as I was on the last steps of the stairs, I saw an incubator holding a baby. Immediately afterward, a panicked person gave me some terrible news...

“Mr. Kelly, Mr. Kelly, we tried to reach you! Your son almost died a few minutes ago! He is being sent to Laval hospital right away for an operation!”

Then I learned what my son was suffering from. One of the valves of his heart was not properly formed. At the time, this was a serious anomaly. At that very moment, I saw what would probably be a most painful period before me. You see the mountain rising up in front of you.

Fortunately, during this experience we made the acquaintance of the cardiologist Mr. Guay, a most humane man who took the time to fully explain my son’s ailment to us. That enabled me to accept the possible death of Eric, without of course desiring it, for then I knew all the complications that he would be facing later, if he survived...

My son finally died on July 1, 1968.

Three months after his birth, we were informed of Eric’s death by telephone. The loss of a child goes so much against the natural order of things that I don’t think there is a comparable grief. I was 26 years old at the time, and had yet to be faced

“Let me tell you what I am feeling. Don’t tell me what you are feeling... The baby’s room still ready and decorated, the crib still there... Tell me about that! Tell me that maybe it’s time to take it all down!”

with death.

People with good intentions

“Come on, it’s not so bad for you! You’re young, you’ll recover!” That is what two persons out of three would say to us. That is the sort of comment we found most difficult to bear during this ordeal.

Let me speak!

What would I have wanted? The chance to talk about my son’s illness. The people who really helped me during this ordeal were the ones who went straight to the heart of my personal tragedy. It gave me some relief to tell them my story. “Let me tell you what I am feeling. Don’t tell me what you are feeling... The baby’s room still ready and decorated, the crib still there... Tell me about that! Tell me that maybe it’s time to take it all down!”

Gilles Kelly is an administrator at the Coopérative funéraire la Falaise in Quebec City, and secretary on the board of directors of the Fédération des coopératives funéraires du Québec.

That is the real problem, but people prefer to avoid it, because they are scared.

In spite of everything, in the end we got over it, my wife and I. I must say that the religious context at the time was an enormous help to us.

Also, later we had two other children, who – thank God – are today in excellent health.

36 years later

Even after all this time, we still think of Eric, our first baby. I just want one thing now: I want helping sick kids to no longer be just the business of charity, but a priority.

That is what this ordeal taught me.

Gilles Kelly



Does time really heal?

Certain people in mourning will say yes; others will say that time solves nothing, and this old adage does not apply to them. The answer to this question varies according to the magnitude of the bereavement. But generally, a person suffering a normal bereavement will say that the more time goes by, the less acute the pain. Little by little, activities resume their normal course, even without the other person. For people whose mourning is complicated, on the other hand (who have suffered the death of a family member in tragic circumstances, for example), time on the contrary makes the loss more and more palpable. So these people will say that time is not a friend, as they had been promised, but rather a foe that makes their burden heavier. As a result their process will be lengthier, but not necessarily more harmful.

*Johanne de Montigny, psychologist
Palliative Care Department, Montreal
General Hospital*



PHOTO: FRANÇOIS LARANCE



Coming together to change things

“Cooperatism is necessary to bring people together who have decided to change a world where compassion is lacking into a society of fairness”: Michel Marengo, ex-president of the *Fédération des coopératives funéraires du Québec*.

A funeral cooperative is an association of persons who organize to meet their needs through a funeral enterprise, of which each member is a part owner. Hence power in the cooperative is exercised democratically, and all the members are able to take an active role in making decisions.

Advocating values such as humanism, democracy, solidarity, education, mutual assistance and many others, funeral cooperatives exist first and foremost to meet the needs of Quebecers and direct their efforts for the benefit of the communities. And our mission?

- To provide our members and the community with purchasing power;

- To offer high-quality funeral services to the members and the population;
- To facilitate mutual support and solidarity for families in mourning;
- To promote reflection on the rites surrounding death;
- To educate the population about consumer issues in this particular field.

Distinctive approaches

The cooperative network encourages approaches that are humane, responsible and professional, characteristics which typify all of the activities and services that it offers. Whether through the advisers' active listening to families or the quality of the products and services offered, all efforts converge toward a single objective: to provide support and comfort to bereaved families.

The loss of a child When the natural order is broken

Stupefaction, anger, anguish, immense grief, guilt, fear: such is the lot of parents who learn that their child has died. Without question, this is an infinite hardship, an excessively deep and painful wound, which calls forth a whole range of emotions ...

The loss of a child usually brings terrible shock in its wake. Many people feel like they are living a nightmare, and have no idea of the meaning of such a tragedy.

When a child dies after a long illness, it is common and normal to feel a kind of relief, because at last the suffering is over. At one extreme, death, though always unacceptable, becomes almost comforting, for it is perceived as a deliverance. Nonetheless, the departure leaves an immense void, as the child's condition will have required constant care. When the death is accidental, the shock is much greater. The parents enter a state of profound numbness, feeling that all of this is unreal, needing to accuse someone or something, needing to understand what has just happened, feeling denial, rage, fear and powerlessness...

Up until the parents' painful realization that the child will not be coming back.

"When they lose a child, many people feel like they are living a nightmare, and have no idea of the meaning of such a tragedy... up until the parents' painful realization that the child will not be coming back."



The parallel bereavements of the couple

Every bereavement is unique, and each parent mourns differently. As a result, the reactions and expression of emotions of the two spouses will not necessarily be similar. Hence a heightened risk of tension and misunderstanding becomes a factor in the marital relationship, with the result that throughout the mourning process each spouse will have to learn to recognize and accept the other's differences, to show the other respect and to provide support.

Restoring balance

As the months and years go by, the family members or the couple will ultimately reorganize their lives. They will gradually manage to reinvest themselves in new activities and new bonds. Within a family that has a number of children, the roles of each will be redefined. The second child, for example, will play the role of the eldest. In this way balance is restored, little by little.

Surviving the absence

Although the situation often seems at first to offer no resolution, we must maintain hope that healing waits at the end of the line. Whether by telling one's story to family members, a psychologist or participants in a self-help group who have experienced a similar bereavement, the important thing is to be heard and to be understood. Writing, drawing, painting or any other form of art can also help us to express our emotions.

Attentive to the suffering of grieving parents, the funeral cooperatives have created the Solidarité program, which covers funeral services for a member's child up to a maximum of \$2,500. This program was created in a spirit of solidarity to offer support to members affected by this particular hardship.

Sources: DE MONTIGNY, Francine and Line BEAUDET. *Lorsque la vie éclate*. Saint-Laurent, Éditions du Renouveau Pédagogique Inc., 1997. 472 p.

Fédération des coopératives funéraires du Québec. "Quand le berceau reste vide". *Profil*, vol. 12, no. 1, April 2000.

What is a “natural helper”?

“In times of mourning, we should give preference to relations with those persons who will listen to us without judging our reactions or our emotions. ‘Natural helpers’ can also do things for us. For example, they may offer to babysit the children or prepare a meal. They are persons of integrity who will not dwell on grand theories of bereavement or try to offer easy solutions to the person in mourning. They are available for and receptive to that person, considering that he or she has the right to experience this trial in his or her own way and at his or her own pace.”

Josée Jacques, psychologist and author of *Les saisons du deuil*.

PHOTO: FRANÇOIS LAFRANCE



Josée Jacques, psychologist and author

EXERCISE

Distinguishing false helpers from true helpers

1. Who are the persons who try to help you but whose words or attitudes leave you ambivalent?
2. What are the actions, words or attitudes you find hurtful?
3. How do you react when you are in the presence of false helpers?
4. What could you do to protect yourself?
5. Who are the persons who comfort you and whom you feel good to be around?
6. What are the actions, words or attitudes that do you good?
7. How do you react when you are in the presence of these helpers?
8. What could you do to benefit more from the good things these helpers do for you?

JACQUES, Josée. *Les saisons du deuil: la mort tisserande de la vie*. Outremont: Les Éditions Quebecor, 2002. 223 p.

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