

There Is Always Hope
By Sue Waldman, MA,LPC,CEC

At some point in our lives, we all suffer loss, some more than others. Yet few of us are prepared for the anguish, sadness, aloneness, and overwhelming devastation that follows.

Loss of any kind can be a life-transforming experience in every person's life that changes us, reclaiming who and what we are. Loss can take place in many forms: death, divorce, loss of positive childhood experiences, an office or home, a career, a sense of safety, and loss of one's experience of being happy.

Any loss may awaken the divine self within. However difficult it seems, the journey through grief is neither endless nor impossible. It can be an opportunity for self-discovery. As the grief process unfolds, there lies a loving, unexpected peace.

Every day we experience some level of loss. Nothing remains constant. When we lose something of material value, we may be alarmed and briefly beside ourselves. When our health suffers, the loss is amplified tremendously. Our sense of who we are could be shattered. Depending on the severity of the illness, our lives may be changed forever. It seems as if you have been stripped of your dreams, your life plans lie in ruins. Somehow you have to start all over again. Without your health and strength, you feel confused, helpless and depressed. At this time, it is critical to remember, there is a reason and purpose to your loss.

When we lose *someone* close to us, our whole life is turned upside down. We are never truly prepared for the heartbreak and overwhelming feeling of devastation that follows. When this occurs, it is a defining moment in a person's life, changing how he or

she relates to the world. One soon realizes what is really important in life: how critical it is to love one another, to forgive ourselves and each other, and to enjoy the simple things in life.

As I managed my own health challenge several years ago, I endured excruciating physical and psychic pain first hand. The hardest part of this experience was that I did not recognize who I was – I fell into a darkness that I had never known before. The one thing that truly made me feel better was to step outside of myself and give to others. I would send cards, write letters or make presents to surprise my loved ones. I would listen attentively to my clients, and became fully aware in the moment. I stopped focusing on what was missing and began to appreciate what was present. I became grateful for what I could accomplish. I realized I had the freedom to choose joy or to suffer. For 12 months, I reduced my work schedule to focus on my healing. Some days I did nothing. Other days, I read, meditated, traveled, danced, walked, laughed with friends and prayed. My physical pain dissipated and I felt an aliveness that I had never experienced before. After surviving this crisis, I learned I could do anything. I, first, had to make a decision to build a new life and start over again.

Not my car, my home, my status, or what I looked like in the mirror provided me the same feeling. From this, I discovered I was more than just my body... my essential nature - my loving spirit.

In all my years working as a psychotherapist, I passionately speak of the importance of "self-love". The experience of loss enables us to realize how much we truly love ourselves and our life. Self-love often happens when we cease to think about ourselves and simply become ourselves. It can happen when we stop thinking about whether or

not we are good enough, whether we are loved and accepted by others or how we have been wronged. It is not just about appreciating our positive qualities or liking ourselves- though, these things can grow out of self-love. Rather it is a state of being. To love oneself is the inner experience of peace, acceptance, calmness, and faith. It is a certainty that all is in order and unfolding the way it is suppose to. It is a feeling of enjoying a summer breeze while basking in the warm, golden sunlight at the beach. The experience of the present moment supersedes all thought. When we have self-love, we become less self-absorbed. We have confidence and a radiance that sparkles to the world around us.

Imagine forgetting your own needs, pain and imperfections long enough to truly see another person through the eyes of acceptance and compassion. Self-love happens in moments of peace when we remember to put aside our own personal struggle and invite a higher power to intervene. We soon discover we have come to like who we are.

The personal crises we may experience are potentially some of the most tragic forms of "loss": betrayal, addictions, child abuse, infidelity, family secrets, separation, romantic break-ups, divorce, neglect, moving, unemployment, violent crimes, natural disasters and war. The most challenging aspect in these situations is a disconnection with self and others. Everything we assumed or thought we knew was certain no longer applies.

The most challenging aspect with the estrangement of our self is how we keep ourselves from truly knowing who we are - that our essential nature is divine love. We soon realize how we have prevented ourselves from living our truth; how we have compromised, given up, lied to ourselves and others. In addition, tragic, inexplicable loss tests our faith in a higher power. We feel so vulnerable, powerless and helpless. We regret missed opportunities, failed dreams and the absence of interaction. We can no

longer touch, talk or hear that loved one again; no one can make us smile and laugh in the same manner. We ask ourselves, "Who will ever make me feel special again?" Whether the loss is a death, divorce or a painful estrangement from another person, ask yourself, "What do I wish had been different?" "What opportunities were taken away from me?" "What dreams were lost?" "What areas of my life are now lacking?" The answers will help you discover what is incomplete and what needs to be healed.

Unresolved grief tends to separate us from ourselves. We think way too often, and holding on to "incomplete" emotions consumes enormous amounts of energy, resulting in fatigue and somatic ailments. This can lead to a loss of aliveness and spontaneity, and a quiet desperation results; sometimes feeling good, sometimes feeling bad, but never being able to return to a state of full happiness and joy.

Healing from loss is a slow process. The first step is to make a decision to do so. A 30 year old client whose mother died states, "My mother dying is the most terrible loss I had ever felt. Counseling helped me stay true to myself throughout the grieving process. I feel I was able to find my inner strength and my inner little girl when she needed me the most. It still hurts unbelievably, but I know I am okay and will live a wonderful life."

When managing the uncontrollable feelings of despair and grief, you must have a strong sense of self, and a well established sense of self esteem. To feel worthy and to have a healthy self esteem, you must feel lovable. It is critical to surround yourself with a strong support system. There needs to be an atmosphere of safety, trust and openness. Try to be very gentle with yourself. Eliminate all the "shoulds" and replace them on your "To Do" list with "wants". Spend meaningful time with yourself everyday. Talk with good friends, exercise as often as possible, and eat nutritious meals. Meditation, yoga,

prayer, or simply taking a walk in nature will nourish your soul. Do the things that come from your heart. When you do, you won't be dissatisfied.

By taking care of yourself, you will reconnect with the inherent love, peace and joy that lives at the core of each of our beings. Always remember there is an infinite amount of love within us. One of my colleagues mentioned to me recently, "Even after five years, I just miss my Dad. He could always make everything better. He was the one person whose eyes lit up when I walked into a room. He loved me. He was an example of a true man. I expect all men to be like him subconsciously, but the feelings come from within me. I don't need to keep looking outside of myself to heal; that only creates disappointment. I learned to heal and find joy again by remembering that my Dad brought out in me what was already inside me. It is just there; the only thing keeping me from feeling that joy again is myself."

There may be times when you feel unhappy. Let yourself cry and release your pain. You may feel angry for no reason. Give yourself permission to connect with your rage. Experience it. It is important to acknowledge your anger so that you may move through it. Sometimes it is helpful to take it out by hitting a tennis ball against a wall or simply immersing yourself in art. Yet anger needs not only to be recognized; like your grief, it eventually needs to be transformed into an energy that serves compassion. Many of us avoid our anger believing there are only two responses to it: to deny it or to strike out thoughtlessly. Remember, other responses are possible. Anger can jumpstart our ability to challenge, to defy injustice, and to inspire creativity. In such ways, anger transcends into love. In order to be fully human, we need to allow the experience of feeling not only our joy but also our sadness and anger.

Grieving is a natural part of the healing process. A client who managed a painful divorce asserts, "I allowed myself to grieve when I felt sad and I patted myself on the back when I felt good. Slowly but surely, the grieving lessened and the patting became more frequent." Fully experiencing your emotions will help you complete the grieving process. There may be times when you have difficulty getting in touch with your feelings. This is natural. Don't judge yourself. Try to be compassionate and accept the healing process. It may be helpful to write in a journal or express your feelings through art, music, or dance.

If you are at the beginning process of the healing journey, you may feel terrible now and want to feel better. You may feel desperate and want the pain to go away. Soon the anguish will pass. Be gentle with yourself. Be patient. Set reasonable, attainable goals for yourself and slowly master the skills you need to live a full life again.

It is extremely important to talk about your loss to someone who "gets it." Emotions will often overwhelm spiritual beliefs in the times immediately following loss, so it is imperative to talk with a professional as soon as possible to complete the relationship with the person who died. "Through it all I relied heavily on my support system," said one of my coaching students, "I talked to friends and family everyday, went to counseling sessions on a regular basis, but in the end it was I who got me through it all." Another client stated "Losing my job was the heartbreak of my life. But in the months that followed I underwent a remarkable transformation. It forced me to examine who I was after something that I felt defined my identity had been taken away. There's something invaluable that is felt after your worst fears come true. After the shock and the pain and the heartache subsided, I felt invincible and realized I could survive anything. It

was as if the whole experience validated my strength, my purpose and my vocation in life. It also affirmed my belief that everything happens for a reason and in every moment we are given opportunities to grow and fall in love with who we are. Happiness is impossible without self-love and feeling comfortable in your own skin. I learned to find comfort in the transience of life and the fact that once you cross thresholds and get stronger and stronger, you can't go back".

Someone who will listen and give you a hug may be all you need. There is always hope. You'll move on and feel like yourself again and find happiness you never thought you'd know again in this world.

Grief will change your relationship with yourself and your life. You will emerge with a new understanding of who you really are. Your memories will enrich you and help you forge a new pathway to the world that lies beyond your grief. Ultimately, you will feel more connected to a higher power and the world around you. You will feel like anything is possible.

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