

When Death Enters Your Life:

A Grief Pamphlet

Once there was a bamboo tree that lived next to a papaya tree. One day the papaya tree, who stood very straight and tall, asked the bamboo if it was tired of always bending. The bamboo said no, it was built to bend in the wind. At this the papaya stood even straighter and looked down at the bamboo.

One day a hurricane blew in very, very high winds. When the wind and rain ended the papaya tree lay uprooted on the ground and the bamboo stood straight. It explained to the papaya that it is necessary to bend sometimes in order to stand tall and straight at other times.



**For People in Prisons
or Jails**

Phyllis B. Taylor
and
Ginette G. Ferszt

Acknowledgements

We want to thank the women and men in prisons and jails who have shared their stories with us. We also want to thank the administration of the prisons and jails where we have worked for supporting this effort. We extend our gratitude to Promoting Excellence in End-of-Life Care, a National Program Office of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for their support; Kathy Thorsen for her editorial, computer and artistic contributions; and Lt. Michael Cruz for his assistance with translation of this pamphlet into Spanish.

Authors

Phyllis B. Taylor, RN, BA, CGF is currently Auxiliary Chaplain Specializing in Grief and Bereavement, and the Hospice Consultant in the Philadelphia Prison System.

Ginette G. Ferszt, PhD, RN, CS is currently on the Faculty at the College of Nursing, University of Rhode Island. She is involved with a variety of grief programs in the woman's prison, State of Rhode Island.

To contact the authors or for more information: The GRACE Project, The Volunteers of American National Office, 1660 Duke St., Alexandria, VA, 22314-3427

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Death has entered your life. You might have just learned of the death of someone close to you. Or the death might have happened years ago. Sometimes hearing about the death of someone you know brings up memories of other losses in your life.

Many people have never really been able to grieve the deaths that happened in the past because when they started to share their grief, someone told them not to cry. Or perhaps they used drugs, alcohol, sex or violence as a way not to feel the pain.

Now you are in prison or jail. You may have just been told of a death or those feelings that were buried have come up again. We hope this pamphlet will help you understand what grief is and give you some ideas of things you can do.

Grief is a process that is often described as a deep wound. Like other wounds, it takes time to heal. Often, people associate grief with the death of a family member, friend, lover, spouse, child or other person who is important to them. But grief can happen with other losses that also have deep meaning for some people. Some examples of other losses include: the loss of health; the loss of a child through miscarriage, stillbirth, separation, or

placement with the state; even the loss of a job, of freedom, or hopes and dreams.

Grief is a very personal, unique experience much like a snowflake or fingerprint--it only belongs to that person. That is why grief often feels so lonely. No one else can ever completely understand your experience. However, there are ways that you can take care of yourself and there are people who can support you and comfort you in your grieving process.

Some people describe grief like a roller coaster with its ups and downs, or loops that we keep going through over time. However we describe grief, we know one thing--grief is not a smooth path. It is more like a journey that takes time.

Although grief is a very personal experience, it is also universal. Every human being experiences loss. Even though we grieve in our own way and in our own time, there are some common feelings and behaviors that have been described by many people over the years.

Often there is a sense of **shock** or **numbness**, which is more intense with sudden or unexpected loss. It takes a long time for us to believe what's

truly happened. We may be taken by surprise months or even years later when once again it's hard to believe or accept that a major loss has occurred. This numbness can be a way of protecting ourselves for a while--like a kind of Novocain.

Some people have physical changes--problems with **sleep** and **appetite** are common. People may complain of being **tired**, having **difficulty concentrating**, **zoning out** or feeling **anxious**. It's not unusual to feel **anger** or even **rage**--anger at God, at others, even at ourselves. Often the question 'why me', 'why now', or 'why did this happen to me' strikes the core of our being. We may feel a sense of **regret** or **guilt** about the past and can find ourselves dwelling on the past. We may have regrets for what wasn't as well as what we lost--wishing the relationship had been different or regrets at the choices we've made. People may **blame** themselves, others, or the situation. Sometimes people describe '**feeling stuck**' in their **sadness** or **anger**.

Many people find themselves **impatient** with others, **irritable** or **restless**. They may feel **off balance**, **hopeless** and **overwhelmed** at times with their thoughts and feelings. Some people '**shut off**'

their feelings because it's too painful to deal with the loss. Sometimes people describe that everything they've ever believed in is now challenged, even their faith.

Changeable moods are common in grief. It can be quite unnerving, disturbing when we feel like a yo-yo or actually can't put our feelings into words. Some people find that tears come often, or unexpectedly, when they're alone or when something or someone reminds them of their loss. Others find themselves going back and forth, laughing at one moment and then crying, or getting along with people and then wanting to fight. All of these reactions are normal when you are grieving.

What You Can Do

Some of the following things may help you in your healing.

Choose those things that are right for you.

Remember that there is no one right path to healing.

If you have just learned about a death:

- Find someone you can talk to. This might be your cellie or roommate, another person on the block, or a staff person like the chaplain, social worker, or correctional officer.

- Feel free to cry in the privacy of your own cell or the office of a staff person. It is always hard to find a place where you feel safe to show your feelings but this is a time to go to the best place possible. Crying does not mean that you are a weak person.
- Viewing - If you can go to the viewing, think about how you want to use that time knowing that you will be with security staff and not family. You will probably go in handcuffs and shackles. Some people have found that just being present with their loved one is enough. Others want to pray or place something in the coffin. That might be a card, a letter, a drawing or photo. You might be able to request that the chaplain or a counselor go with you.
- If you cannot or don't want to go to the viewing, see if someone else can represent you. That person can put something meaningful in the coffin from you, say something you want to say and let others know the thought, letter, card or photo is coming from you. This can be done at the viewing or during the funeral. The chaplain, social worker or staff person can help you be in touch with your family.
- At the actual time of the funeral plan to be with someone who knows what you are going through

if possible. If you are a spiritual or religious person, ask the chaplain if he or she can say special prayers or do a specific ritual with you.

- Ask your family for a program of the service. Even if you do not want to look at it right away you can put it with your papers for the time you might want to see it.
- Some people have wanted to have a video to look at either when they get out, or in the near future. You can ask the chaplain or social worker to help you get permission for the video to be brought in for you to view.

Things you can do whether the death has just happened or it happened months ago.

- If writing is something that you like to do, write about the person who has died or about your feelings. The words can help you know what you are feeling and can help focus the fear, pain, anger or guilt that often go with grief. Handwriting, spelling and grammar don't matter. You can write and then tear up what you've written or keep it as part of your healing. If writing is hard, you can draw some of your feelings.
- There are rituals or other healing things you can do even when in prison or jail. You can think

about the person at a special time of day. Some people find it helpful to do that when they first get out of bed, at night or just before a meal. You can tear off a piece of bread or pour out a little of your drink thinking about that person because your life has changed since the person died. If the death happened a while ago and you didn't get to go to the viewing or funeral or you used drugs or alcohol so you wouldn't feel the pain, you can ask the chaplain to plan a Memorial Service for you. This mini funeral can be healing even years after the death.

- Tell stories about the person who died. They can be funny stories, sad stories or just memories.
- When the person died from violence or drugs many people have found meaning in the death by talking about the life and death of that person as a way to prevent more deaths of others in the future.
- Saying phrases over and over can help. "I will make it through this." The Serenity Prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept things I cannot change. The courage to change the things I can. And the wisdom to know the difference." "Give me courage for each day's journey."

- Some people find meditation or learning how to use deep breathing and relaxation helpful. The chaplain, social worker, counselor or nurse might be able to help you learn these ways of helping yourself.
- If you feel very anxious or are having a great deal of trouble sleeping, ask to speak with the nurse or doctor. Getting proper rest is extremely important when you are grieving.
- Sometimes just using your yard or gym time for exercise helps.
- Sometimes hearing about how other inmates experienced grief helps you to understand what is normal and what has helped them deal with their grief. Some inmates have shared the following with us:

"My family didn't tell me he was so sick. They were trying to protect me. It's harder not knowing and then finding out."

"I was with my counselor when I was told of his death. The officers knew that I would have a very hard time since we were very close. I'm trying to accept it but it's a lot easier said than done."

"I went to the funeral home in shackles and handcuffs. It's the most humiliating experience. It's tough without your family there. You're not part of the preparations and that's really hard. When I came back from the funeral home I was a mess. I kept going over it and over it in my mind. I

just didn't want it to be true. It took me weeks to get back to my routine."

"It's been almost a year since she died, and it's really tough to accept it. If I wasn't in prison, I would have been with my family. It's tough grieving in prison. You have to hide your feelings and you have to be tough. You put on a façade so no one will know what you're really feeling inside. You've got to function in here. And that's hard to."

"She died suddenly. No one was there with her. I was in jail and I couldn't help her. I don't know if I'll ever be able to forgive myself."

"I'm striving for this inner peace and I'm gonna get it. I don't know how long it's going to take but I'm gonna get there."

"I know he's at peace. He's not in pain anymore and I have to keep reminding myself of that. Sometimes I talk to him and that's comforting."

"It's a day by day process. It's up and down. Sometimes it just hits me, like when I hear a song or see a sunset. I just start missing her all over again. But it gets easier as time goes on."

"Sometimes it takes a while to find someone to talk to that you can trust."

"In time you'll forgive yourself but you'll never forget."

"You've got to make the best of what you've got in here. I'm taking classes, going to groups. I've gotta make it work for me so that I can make it when I get out. By the time I get out I want to be stronger."

Some Words Others Have Used to Describe Their Experience

- Angry
- Anxious
- Confused
- Depressed
- Disappointed
- Discouraged
- Fearful
- Frightened
- Guilty
- Helpless
- Hopeless
- Lonely
- Miserable
- Numb
- Pained
- Regretful
- Relieved
- Sad
- Shocked
- Sorry
- Withdrawn

Printed by
PhilaCor



The Correctional Industries Program
of the
Philadelphia Prison System