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Pathways

A Newsletter to Help in Bereavement

A Cold Winter's Grief

The bereaved often find winter to be strangely satisfying.

The cold, the dark, the lifelessness of winter seem to fit. These signs of icy winter reflect the inner emotional reality. The bleakness echoes the deep darkness which often characterizes grief.

A grieving mother once told me she dreaded the return of spring. She did not want plants to grow again or warmth to return to the earth. She would have been relieved if the snow and ice stayed indefinitely. Winter perfectly suited her inner sense of the darkness of death and the despair of grief.

Emily Dickinson captured this mood when she wrote:

*There's a certain slant of light
On winter afternoons
That oppresses, like the
weight
Of cathedral tunes.*

*Heavenly hurt it gives us;
We can find no scar,
But eternal difference
Where the meanings are.*

While each grief experience is unique, deep "winter-like" emotions are common, understandable, and probably necessary for grief to be fully experienced and expressed.

What can you do to help yourself when you are in deep grief?

In his book *Attachment and Loss*, John Bowlby noted that the sadness and depression of loss includes four phases:

- 1) numbing
- 2) yearning and searching for the lost figure
- 3) disorganization and despair
- 4) reorganization.

Before reorganization can occur following a loss, it is typical for the griever to go through intense feelings of bleakness and despair. This includes experiencing the numbness which shock creates, the deep feelings of longing for the lost loved one, and the difficulty of re-ordering a life that has been turned upside down by a death.

What can you do to help yourself when you are in deep grief? It is often a combination of times of solitude and times of communication with others which helps. The combination makes it possible to enter **into** but also to pass **through** such "numbing" feelings.

You will need the private time of solitude to think your thoughts and feel your feelings. But you also need the time of talking with others to express the feelings and ideas. Grief is less likely to be resolved if the emotions are totally avoided or only partially experienced or expressed. You may find that shared grief is grief relieved.

The "winter-like" emotions might stay beyond their season. Then it may be time to seek consultation with a grief counselor or other professional to help yourself toward healthful healing.

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