



Taking A Break from Grief

By Dr. Kenneth J. Doka

We can probably remember the joy we experienced as a child when we approached summer vacation. Even as adults, whether we worked away from home or not, we appreciated opportunities to travel elsewhere. We know that we often function better after times of respite, times when we put our work aside.

Although we do not normally think about taking a break, the same holds true in grief as well. Grieving is hard work, perhaps the hardest work we will ever do. Like any hard work, there are times that we need to put it aside to return to it later. We need respite.

But, we may wonder if such an idea is even possible. How can we get respite from our pain, and even if we could, should we? It may seem cruel, selfish, or uncaring not to hurt. There may be times when we feel a momentary sense of relief and then feel guilty that we have those thoughts.

Taking a break is, of course, difficult to do when grieving. We cannot control our feelings nor can we regulate our pain. The very nature of grief is that it sneaks up on us, sometimes at the most inopportune times. We might be sitting at a

concert or listening to the radio when a song unleashes memories.

But even so, we do need to recognize the importance of respite. In the roller coaster of grief, we can appreciate the times that the feelings of pain are less intense. We need not feel ashamed of those times. They are as natural to grief as are the pain and longing.

We may even try to structure opportunities for respite. For some, physical exercise can offer such an opportunity. Others may

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find moments of pleasure in pursuing hobbies and activities that brought joy before. Emily, for example, finds painting to be calming. When her grief becomes overwhelming, she sits down with her brushes. For Jackie, it is baking. And baking has an added benefit for Jackie: it gets her out with others. "When I bake, I always drop off the cookies, cakes or breads to family or friends. Since John died, I bake a lot. It gives me relief to

bake. But I'd better not eat all of this myself!"

Sometimes we can find respite with others. When I work with bereaved people I ask them to make a list of their support system. Once they do that I ask them to tell me who are the good listeners, who are the doers. But I also have them identify their respite people. These are the people who are friends even though they are uncomfortable with pain and grief. I remind bereaved people that these persons can help too. They are often good people to go with to get away from grief. They are unlikely to ask about the loss. But they have a valued role in providing diversion. Other friends can listen or help in times when our grief is too intense.

So difficult as it is, we need to find moments to nurture ourselves. This helps us face the intensity of our grief. And we know that there are moments, despite our loss, where we can find joy in life once again.

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