



July/August 2008

# Pathways

A Newsletter to Help in Bereavement

## The Shock of Loss

by Judy Tatelbaum

**O**ur first thought when we hear bad news is often, “This can’t be true.” The loss of a loved one can feel as unreal as a nightmare. We wish we could wake up and be free of this unwanted reality. Almost everyone I have ever counseled in grief has described a sense of disbelief after a loss. We may know that a loved one is very ill or in the process of dying, yet the finality of death always feels sudden, shocking and unbelievable. Death is such a harsh reality to grasp.

In fact, our first reaction to any traumatic event is likely to be shock and disbelief. When faced with any kind of loss – death, a disturbing diagnosis, illness, or accident – we may feel shocked. When shocked, we walk through the first moments, hours or even weeks like sleep walkers. Experiences and conversations can be blurred or hazy. Still, people in shock often appear to be behaving normally without a lot of emotion because the news hasn’t fully sunk in yet.

Numbness is our natural protection when facing any kind of trauma. Detached from the actuality of our loss, we may be able to function pretty well at first. This can be confusing to us and to the people around us

when we expect full blown grief and suffering that we don’t yet feel. In the days or weeks to come, we usually break through this numbness to feel the full extent of our grief. Once fully immersed in the grieving process, we are apt to feel intense sadness, anger, longing, loneliness, guilt, resentment, or regret.

Bad news hits us again especially in vulnerable times, as when we are about to fall asleep or when we first wake up. We may keep ourselves awake at night obsessing about our loss. Or some of us may awaken in the morning and then remember our loss as if for the first time; we wake up remembering the shocking news all over again. And then we grieve

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anew. This process of rediscovering our loss makes most of us feel a little “crazy.” Yet, this is how we all process grief. We may be uncomfortable, but we are not “crazy.”

During the day, we may get involved in tasks or conversations and temporarily forget our loss. Once reminded, we are jolted

again with a sense of disbelief and distress. It may just take someone simply saying, “How are you?” that catapults us again into remembering that something terrible has occurred. Even months later, the realization that someone we love is gone forever can come as an unwanted surprise.

It helps to recognize that shock is a natural part of grief that may occur many times before our loss sinks in. Even though it makes us feel off-balance, it is part of how all of us process painful experiences – part of how we heal. In time, as we accept the truth of our loss, we will feel less and less shocked by it. And yet even after we survive many years without a loved one, we may have a moment of disbelief and again wonder how this could have happened. It is so hard for all of us to accept death.

Most of all, we need to remember that even though the grieving process is uncomfortable and that loss itself is shocking, we can eventually accept our loss and recover. We will remember our lost loved ones forever, but we do not need to grieve their absence forever.

*Pathways* is published bi-monthly by the Upstate New York Hospice Alliance