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# Pathways

A Newsletter to Help in Bereavement

## Unfinished Business

by Ellen Zinner

**A**lmost everyone suffers from regrets and sadness over unfinished business with a deceased loved one. Many times during the bereavement process we are haunted by the feeling that somehow we could have made the situation better for ourselves or for the deceased. One thing that I have learned from my students and my clients is that this can be a minefield during bereavement, serving as a hook into our hearts that holds us back from recovery.

What is your unfinished business with someone you know who has since died? You can often hear the unfinished business in our description of our losses. These are the missed opportunities to learn and share as one teenager cried, "Grandma said she would teach me to crochet but I was too busy to learn."

Or the promises not kept. One mother is brought to tears each time she thinks about breaking her word to take her then-sick child to Disney World. Unfinished business often includes apologies not given and grudges not forgiven. One daughter I know bitterly regrets never apologizing for an argument just prior to her dad's

death, while another still yearns for her deceased father to have made amends for having abandoned her as a child. There is unfinished business in words of love and gratitude not expressed, as shown in the sadness of one mother who wonders whether her son knew "how much we loved him."

How can you finish your unfinished business? One effective way that many people use is simply to talk out their regrets and guilt to the deceased at the graveside or other locations where they feel a special closeness to the deceased.

For some survivors, writing letters to the deceased to be put in the casket or buried at the graveside helps tie up loose ends.

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### What unfinished business is hanging over your head right now?

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Another method is to accept that it exists and to make charitable contributions of time and effort in the name of the deceased. Making a difference for others is a positive way of "paying off one's debt."

But you can also anticipate tomorrow. What unfinished business is hanging over your relationships right now? What is the unfinished business that would grab your insides and twist if your loved one or friend or acquaintance was suddenly lost to you? Can you take care of it now? Can you phone or write now and say your hellos, give your apologies, make amends, send your gratitude, and complete the things now that you meant to get around to sometime?

It is only human to want to think we can do it all, but being human there is no way that we can give 100% all of the time. And, to live as if what you love can be taken away from you is to live a life of unfinished business.

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