

GOOD GRIEF

Sadness and grief are natural reactions to changes in familiar habits due to death, divorce, moving, graduation, retirement, illness, and even vacations. All of these involve loss that can be painful for two reasons:

- They bring up core beliefs about the nature of existence—"I'm alone." "I'm responsible." "I'm lost." "I have no purpose." "I'm incomplete." "I'm vulnerable."
- They make us face "unfinished business" from a situation or relationship: resentments, regrets, unspoken appreciation, and unmet expectations.

It is not time or keeping busy that heals the painful wounds of loss, but creating a new definition of yourself and completing what was not finished in the relationship.

COMPLETE UNFINISHED BUSINESS¹

No matter how good a relationship or a situation is, it is a work in progress and therefore incomplete. As soon as you experience a loss, your mind reviews and searches for what was never communicated. This review continues intermittently until it is completed. The following show how you can help the process by communicating your regrets, resentments, unspoken appreciation, and unmet dreams to a mental image of the person who is gone, in a letter that you may never send, or to the eyes of a friend in role play.

Make Amends

- Pinpoint your mistakes: Take responsibility for your contribution to any problems in the relationship, but only for your part! There are usually some positive consequences from even the worst blunders.
- Express your regret: "I am sorry for . . ."
- Express the (unrealistic) wish behind regrets: "I wish I had (could have) . . ." Identify a specific action that could have made the situation different.
- Change your pattern: In future situations, act out any realistic wishes you identified. Even if you are unable to do this with the person who is gone, you still make amends by being different with others.
- Do not ask for forgiveness: Forgiveness is entirely the choice of the "injured" party. If the other person is deceased, you can imagine how they would respond to you.

Let Go of Resentments

- Identify any power you gave up or lost: Resentment comes from a loss of power.
- Identify the power or choices you now have: As you grow, you gain options. It may be difficult to let go of resentment until you know you can fulfill past unmet needs.
- Express your past resentment and newfound power as a statement: "I resented you for . . . but now I can (plan to) . . ."
- Do not tell people you forgive them. Often, this is perceived as an attack. Instead, let them know when you are doing OK. This releases both you and them. It is your responsibility to recover from any of your past hurts.

Express Unspoken Gratitude, Dreams, and Future Plans

- "I want you to know. . ."

¹ From *The Grief Recovery Handbook* by Joan James and Russell Friedman (Harper Perennial, 1998).

AFFIRM BELIEFS THAT REDEFINE YOURSELF

All relationships and situations develop their own set patterns and routines. When you become disconnected from these, it is natural to feel as though you are in free fall. Unless you are an expert “sky diver,” such experiences will trigger your most painful beliefs. To discover them, take a mental snapshot of the worst part of the ending of the relationship. As you look at that memory or mental image of the person who is gone, ask yourself:

- “What does this mean about me?”
- “How does this make me feel about myself?”
- “When did I first have this disturbing thought about myself?”

Directions: Mark any hurtful thoughts that are linked to your current or past losses. Then mark any healing beliefs that you would like to have to help you negotiate this difficult time in your life.	
Change Hurtful Thoughts into	Healing Beliefs
___ I’m alone or abandoned. I don’t belong.	___ I can find others to love and care for (me).
___ I’ll never love (be loved) again.	___ If I’ve loved (been loved) once, I will be again.
___ There is only one right person for me.	___ I can love more than one person in a lifetime.
___ I cannot trust again.	___ As I grow, I can become more discerning.
___ I should have been there when he died.	___ The sun rises and people die without my help.
___ I’m responsible. I didn’t do enough.	___ I did my best or enough.
___ I’m unlovable or defective.	___ I’m lovable or good enough.
___ I’m lost. I have no purpose.	___ I can find new joy and meaning in life.
___ I’m empty or incomplete.	___ I am complete and can go on.
___ I’m vulnerable. I can’t handle this	___ I can learn or find strength from this.
___ I can’t take care of myself or go on.	___ I can (learn to) take care of myself and go on.

POINTERS FOR TURNING LOSSES INTO GAINS

Identifying new ideas, affirming them regularly, and using some of the following pointers will give you the compass you need to land on your feet on solid ground:

- Do not bury your feelings in food, alcohol, anger, TV, or work.
- Do not be strong for others. It may help them to see your pain.
- Be with your sadness when it comes. Accept it, but don’t invite it.
- Use emotional moments to mentally communicate unspoken words to your loved one or affirm beliefs that heal. This may intensify feelings and help release them.
- Stay with the pain of a negative memory but purposely follow it with a good one.
- Find a support group or person with whom you can share feelings.²
- Dispose of belongings gradually. Periodically review items you can release.
- Plan activities for anniversaries that are enjoyable and comforting or use “special days” to mentally communicate how your “heart” plans to go on.
- Do not force yourself to feel pain that’s not there. It is okay to enjoy life after loss.

² Contact your local hospice or GriefNet at <http://rivendell.org> or <http://divorce.internetworld.net>.