

Meaning-Making



As human beings we long to understand our world. Often we seek security through definitive answers. However, life is not so easily organized into black and white. Some questions have many different answers, and some questions do not have any answers at all. Questions related to meaning-making, or trying to make sense of a death, can fall into both categories. Attempting to understand why a death occurred may not result in simple answers; however, it can open a door to discussions about life, identity, values, and relationships. After the death of a loved one, meaning-making can be both a family and individual activity.

The grief that follows the death of a loved one never entirely goes away. It will continue to be a part of your life, and in time, will become integrated into your life as you reach your new normal. You can take an active role in your grief journey by making sense of the death you have experienced and looking for meaning that might result from the experience. The best way to begin meaning-making is to take it one small step at a time. Here are some suggestions that may help you and your family members make meaning of the death of your loved one:

- **Practice mindfulness.** An effective way to achieve self-awareness is through mindfulness activities. Be aware of your vulnerabilities. Scan your body for any feelings—physical or emotional—and take inventory. Knowing where you stand emotionally at the start of each day can help prepare you for any reactions you might have. For further information on mindfulness please refer to the Mindfulness and Grief handout.
- **Rebuild your identity.** An effective way to achieve self-awareness is through mindfulness activities. Be aware of your vulnerabilities. Scan your body for any feelings—physical or emotional—and take inventory. Knowing where you stand emotionally at the start of each day can help prepare you for any reactions you might have. For further information on mindfulness please refer to the Mindfulness and Grief handout. Reconstructing your identity may feel very uncomfortable so take it one step at a time and go at your own pace. Consider giving yourself permission to ask questions about your identity. Asking questions like “Who am I now?” and “Who will I become?” may be helpful in reconstructing your sense of self. Journaling, writing a story about your life without the deceased, or looking through photos of yourself may be good starting points for reflection. If you need further guidance, try seeking counsel from your cultural, religious or spiritual beliefs and/or leaders, or even a therapist or counselor.
- **Build mastery.** To regain your sense of control, it might be helpful to seek out activities or tasks that you can confidently complete. Start by finding out what matters most in your life and seek more of it. Examine past events that had a special meaning for you and ask yourself what about that event made it important. From there, push yourself to try new projects, make new friends, or try new activities, which can help you learn more about yourself. Keep in mind that building mastery is a process that will take time, whether you are pushing yourself mentally, physically or socially. Your goal is to remain committed to these new activities despite any discomfort/anxiety, knowing that those uncomfortable feelings will decrease over time.
- **Be patient.** Be patient with yourself and others. There is no correct timeline for grief. Know your emotional limits and only do tasks that you are comfortable doing. Remember to take care of yourself; whether it means getting a massage or taking a walk, just be gentle with yourself. Also, try to keep in mind that other family members may be grieving at a different pace, and may not yet be ready to begin meaning-making.
- **Talk with your family.** It may be a good idea to initiate a family dialogue about the role changes that will occur. If you have children, try to remember to follow through with your new rules and commitments in order to give your children a dependable structure, which will foster security. Too much change too fast might be





overwhelming to children, so consider changing your family's routine in small, gradual steps. For example, having some routines that are consistent with their lives before the death may help them feel some sense of control. Keep an open discussion with your kids in order to respect their place in the grieving process.

Answering the painful questions that arise when you are attempting to make meaning of a loved one's death can be an excruciating challenge. How do you answer how many family members you have while acknowledging your loved one's life? What does your life mean now that your loved one is dead? Who are you without the deceased in your life; will your identity change? These questions can overwhelm you, particularly with all the other responsibilities you have now. Try taking a deep breath and pausing. Keep in mind that there is no need to have these answers immediately. Feel free to go at your own pace and remember that some questions may not have answers, and those that do may change with time.

Further Reading:

- *The Orphaned Adult: Understanding And Coping With Grief And Change After The Death Of Our Parents* by Alexander Levy
- *Never the Same: Coming to Terms with the Death of a Parent* by Donna Schuurman
- *Love Never Dies: A Mother's Journey from Loss to Love* by Sandy Goodman
- *The Gifts of Grief: Finding Light in the Darkness of Loss* by Therèse Tappouni
- *Mindfulness for Prolonged Grief: A Guide to Healing after Loss When Depression, Anxiety, and Anger Won't Go Away* by Sameet M. Kumar

References:

- Clark, E. (2013, May 16). Identity Crisis. Retrieved July 7, 2015, from <http://www.hellogrief.org/identity-crisis/>
- Coleman, P. (2012, August 6). The search for meaning during loss and adversity. Retrieved July 7, 2015, from <http://www.opentohope.com/the-search-for-meaning-during-loss-and-adversity/>
- Currier, J. M., Holland, J. M., & Neimeyer, R. A. (2006). Meaning reconstruction in the first two years of bereavement: The role of sense-making and benefit-finding. *Omega: The Journal of Death and Dying*, 53(3), 175-191. doi: 10.2190/FKM2-YJTY-F9VV-9XWY
- Worden, J. W. (2009). *Grief counseling and grief therapy: A handbook for the mental health practitioner*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- Zemitis, M. (2009, December 2). Who burned my roles? How our identity changes after a loss. Retrieved July 7, 2015, from <http://www.opentohope.com/who-burned-my-roles-how-our-identity-changes-after-a-loss/>

