



THOSE HARD TO HANDLE THOUGHTS & FEELINGS

"I regret so much that we left so many things unsettled and not talked about."

"If only I had insisted that he get help earlier. He might be alive now if I had been more firm."

"I feel badly that I was sometimes impatient and short with her toward the end. I was so worn out, and I didn't seem to have control over my own words and actions at times. I wish I had done better."

"And now there are times when I'm angry at him and at life, for what has happened. He has left me with a lot of things to do, and I don't even know how to do them. And on top of it all, I feel guilty about being angry."

"I sometimes wonder if God knows and cares about me and what I'm going through. I even find myself getting angry with God, or wondering if there really is a God."

These are some of the thoughts and feelings that come over people when going through a difficult time of bereavement. It is important to know that it is not at all uncommon for us to have these experiences. We are not unusual; it shows we are normal human beings. The thoughts and feelings of loss, uncertainty, and helplessness that often come with the loss of those close to us are often also accompanied by thoughts and feelings like regret, guilt, anger, depression, etc. What a lot to handle! What will help us get beyond the strong negative thoughts and feelings that we sometimes have?

Here are some steps we can take:

First of all, we can "own" our thoughts and feelings-that is, identify and acknowledge them. We can say to ourselves, and perhaps to someone else, "This really is me, and these really are the thoughts and feelings I'm having." After all, we are human, and it seems to be human to have these kinds of thoughts and feelings. If we own the thinking and feeling as really belonging to us, we are less likely to run into trouble than if we "push them down" and deny them.

Second, we can work at being accepting and forgiving of ourselves. Of course we make mistakes, just like our loved ones who died sometimes made mistakes. We're all imperfect! We sometimes do fail! We can all do with some forgiveness!

Third, we can examine our thinking to see if it really makes sense. It helps to realize that our thinking and believing are the source of our feelings. For example, if I believe I have failed someone, I will probably feel guilty. Sometimes our expectations of ourselves are unrealistically high. So, let's stop and take a good look at those expectations -the ideas we are applying to ourselves- and see if we are thinking accurately.

Fourth, if we come to the conclusion that we really have something to feel guilty about, we can talk it over with a trusted friend or counselor. If we have a religious faith that we live by, talk with God about it. Pastors, priests and other religious leaders are willing to help us work through feelings like guilt.

Fifth, (and this may seem at first like a strange idea) we can "talk" with the one who died-the husband, wife, family member or friend. We can imagine them present with us, and say to them what we need to say. And we can try to imagine what they might say back to us. This practice may help to settle old, unfinished business, and to work through hard-to-handle ideas and feelings. (Let's also remember to tell the one who has died how much we love and miss them.)

Sixth, we can give ourselves time to work through our complicated thoughts and emotions. Remember that grief is difficult for all of us. We can show consideration for ourselves by not expecting too much too soon.

Finally, and this last one is very important, we can work at being open with ourselves and a few others about what we are going through. Especially, talking with others who have gone through times of loss may be helpful.

Gerald K. Hill, Chaplain
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