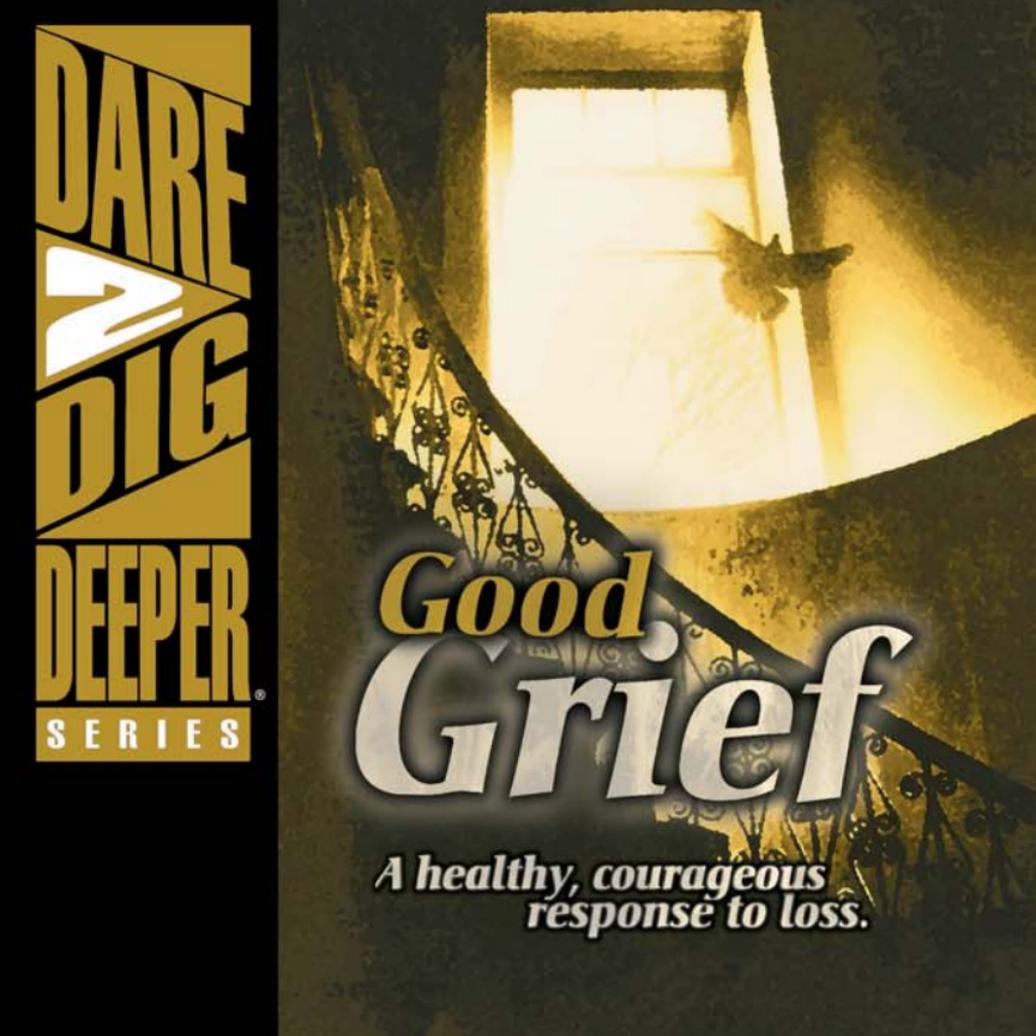


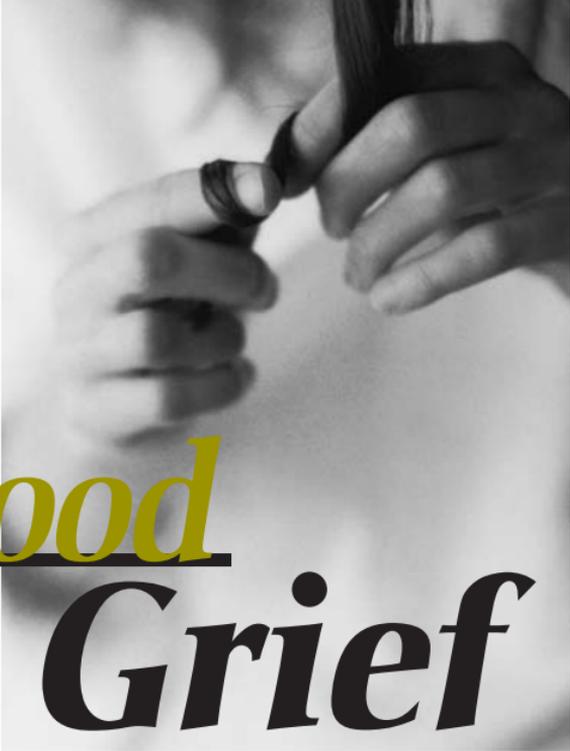
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Good
Grief

*A healthy, courageous
response to loss.*

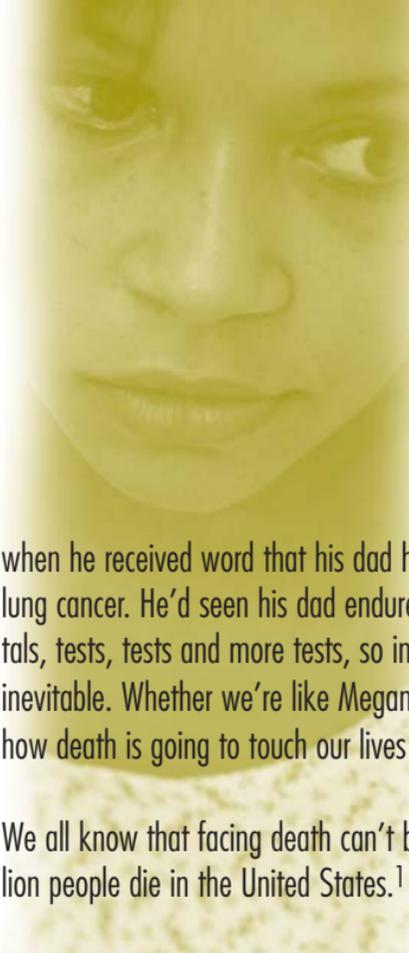
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Good

Grief

*A healthy, courageous
response to loss.*



Megan never thought she would have to deal with death, at least not at this age. Her older sister Linda was a picture of health and vitality. That was until Linda's car collided with a semi on the way back to college, killing her instantly. Extremely popular and intelligent, Linda seemed almost invincible to sixteen-year-old Megan.

On the flip side, Tony wasn't as surprised when he received word that his dad had died after struggling for five years with lung cancer. He'd seen his dad endure chemotherapy, radiation treatment, hospitals, tests, tests and more tests, so in the end, his dad's death seemed almost inevitable. Whether we're like Megan or like Tony, none of us knows *exactly* how death is going to touch our lives until it does.

We all know that facing death can't be avoided. In a single year, over 2.3 million people die in the United States.¹ We see deaths taking place all around us.

Some of them are staged. In fact, by the time the average child leaves elementary school, he will have witnessed 8,000 murders and 100,000 other acts of violence on TV.² On the other hand, some of the scenes are real. The horror on the faces of Columbine High School students caught on camera as they fled their school in April 1999, will be etched in our minds for years to come. Those situations may be rare, but they do happen, and they happen to real teens. Another way teens see death in their world is through suicide. In the 26 years from 1970 to 1996, the number of people taking their own lives in the United States increased by more than 30 percent.³ It's likely that you know of someone who has either attempted or committed suicide.

Grieving: A Painful But Necessary Process

Though people are living longer, society has not (and will not) come up with a way to eliminate death. And where death exists, sadness tugs at our hearts. You probably wouldn't be reading this right now if you had not experienced some type of loss—the death of a loved one or pet, an injury, a dream that seems unattainable now or your parents' divorce. Losses come in all shapes and sizes. You may not be responsible for the loss at all, but it doesn't change the fact that you still hurt.

In Matthew 5:4, Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” Mourning is not limited to funerals, caskets and flowers given in memory of someone who has died. It means facing the hurt or the loss, no matter what it is. Some people *don’t* mourn because it’s too painful. We were initially created for a world without sadness, so we try our best to dodge it whenever possible. But mourning is really a process that helps us to deal with our sadness. It’s healthy, even though it’s difficult. If you’re a guy, you may be feeling pressure from others to be strong and to not let your emotions show. In reality, the hurt is still there whether you face it or not, it just gets emotionally “contaminated” when you choose to avoid it or bury it inside. As painful as they may be, emotional wounds need to be exposed to Jesus Christ so He can heal them. He accepts us with our sadness, wants to comfort us and promises He will.

If we hide the pain, we will pay a price. If we bury the pain, it will often bury us. We might be consumed with anger or resentment that surfaces when we least expect it. We might avoid others so we don’t have to be reminded of our own losses or stand the chance of losing them, too. We might turn to alcohol, drugs or sex as a way to numb our pain. Or we might get angry because it feels

safer than sadness. We can be sure though, that if we don’t face the loss, we won’t experience lasting comfort. There is a better way. It will require learning a skill that can be used throughout your life in many situations: grieving. If you understand how to grieve now, you can avoid a lot of unnecessary heartache down the road.

Tasks of Grief

You may have heard someone say that grief has different stages and that we have to walk through those in order to “get past the pain.” Talking about stages of grief can be helpful for understanding our reactions as long as we don’t view those stages too rigidly. They don’t always follow a specific progression—grieving people don’t say, “I’m in stage one now, and I am just about ready to step into the next stage.” Stages can blend and sometimes you might skip back and forth between them. For that reason it may be more helpful to view them as four “grief tasks” to work through, rather than four concise stages:⁴

Task 1—Accept the reality of the loss.

When you first hear about a loss, you may experience shock or denial. You might think, “No! This couldn’t have happened; it just doesn’t make sense!” It may take a few weeks for your mind to catch up with reality. Difficulty sleeping, a change in appetite or a strong desire to be with others may show up at this point in your life. In extreme cases, people may experience delusions as they wait for their loved one to return. This was how Queen Victoria responded after the death of Prince Albert: at times she spoke to him in the palace and had his clothes laid out and ready to be worn. That may sound bizarre, but people often do similar things in more subtle ways. For instance, you might deny how much the loss hurts, saying, “I can always find another friend,” or, “My parents were fighting a lot with each other; the divorce is probably for the best.” Though these denials may temporarily deaden the pain, having a clear picture of what you’ve lost will help you move to the second task.

Task 2—Work through to the pain of grief.

At the point when you are hit with the truth, you are not going to wake up from a dream and find everything is back to normal. In fact, as time goes on,

you’ll become aware of how this loss is going to change your life forever. Not only are you likely to feel the deep sense of hurt, but there may be strong anger toward another person, yourself or even God. These emotions can be intensified on certain dates such as your brother’s first birthday after his death, your parent’s wedding anniversary date after a divorce, or the anniversary of the loss itself. Recognizing and allowing yourself to feel the pain is an honest reaction that can eventually help you to heal.

Task 3—Accept your world with the loss.

Once you’ve faced the despair, with time and God’s help, you increasingly will be able to accept the loss and realize that life goes on. You may have had your identity wrapped up in the person or relationship that has been lost. Understanding that you still have an identity apart from what has been lost is necessary in order to move ahead. Acceptance is not about trying to block the loss out of your mind. Instead, it has to do with realizing that the loss will change your world, and that you’re still meant to have a whole and healthy life in this new and different world. You’ll have greater concentration to stay focused on future living once you have been able to say good-bye with your heart to the things or people you have lost.

Task 4—Have a place for your memories, but move on with life.

In some ways this is a continuation of Task 3. Here you are able to take specific, concrete steps to go on with your life in this new world. Memories and sadness remain, but there is a new strength to move on. In this stage you may be able to look back at how you have grown from the entire ordeal, and you may even reach out to others who are hurting. In Joshua 1:2, God tells Joshua, “Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River . . .” Joshua already knew Moses was dead—that was obvious! But God was giving Joshua the opportunity to move forward with the plans God had for *him*. If we choose to stay stuck in grief and loss forever, we will never know how God could have used us.

How Can I Grieve?

OK, so you understand that dealing with your grief and pain is sometimes a long road, and that you may have to walk the same section of it several times before healing really starts to happen. But that doesn't sound very encouraging.

Are there some specific things you can be doing while you're walking that road to help in the grieving process? Yes! And while no one action is the key to everyone's walk of grief, some of these suggestions may help you in yours:

1. Identify what you've lost.

It sounds easy enough: “my sister was killed,” or “my horse died,” or “my parents divorced.” But try to go deeper than that. Besides the obvious loss, what are you going to have to live without? Are you losing a friend? Are you losing a source of stability? Are you losing an encourager? Sometimes, writing out your losses can allow you to come back at a later time and see how the relationship impacted you.

2. Touch your pain.

You can identify all your losses in your brain, but true grieving requires you to use your heart. A funeral service might help you to focus on your hurt, but when it's over, you shouldn't bet that the sadness is over. To continue working through your pain, you might write a letter to the person who died. It's obviously not for that person's benefit, but it may help *you* to think about what you appreciated the most about him or her. Or you could

visit a grave site and speak your heart. Often, the closer you were to the person you've lost, the more you'll hurt. Making a scrapbook can help you sift through tangible reminders of the person. You may experience memories that are not enjoyable, but for healing to happen, the hurts and fears connected with a critical parent or hostile peer need to be felt just as much as the positive memories.

3. *Tell your story.*

Other people may be experiencing the same loss, but your story is unique. Feeling the emotions helps, but conveying them to others can bring even deeper healing. Right after the Columbine High School tragedy in 1999, students and school personnel were encouraged to talk to people about their feelings. Through tears, fears and words, they shared their experiences — not so much to aid the police investigation, but to aid in their own recovery. Talking to a parent, counselor, minister, youth worker or friend can validate your emotions.



Sharing your experience with a trusted friend or adult in a letter can give loved ones the freedom to talk with you about your grief. And once you've told your story, you'll probably need to retell it. With each telling, your heart will heal a bit more.

4. *Deal with your regrets.*

"If only I hadn't gone to basketball practice that day, I could have kept my sister from the accident!" "If I hadn't been thinking about myself, I could have stayed up with dad and been with him when he died!" Your mind may race with thoughts like these, trying to figure out how you could have kept death or loss from happening. Most of the time, our regrets come out of unreasonable expectations of ourselves. We review the event in our minds and come to the inaccurate conclusion that we could have made a difference. You need to realize that those feelings will be there. Many times people wish that they had died instead of the other person. This *survivor's guilt* creates a sorrow over having survived when someone else died or was injured.

Besides the 'unrealistic' regrets, there may be times when we really *have* blown it — we may wish we hadn't said what we did, or hadn't acted in

a certain manner. Talking with a parent or pastor can help you get a handle on the degree to which your regret is realistic. Tell God if there is something you wish you could have changed. If you need to confess something, God is available, ready to forgive you when you come to Him with a repentant heart. (1 John 1:9)⁵

5. *Don't bury your resentments.*

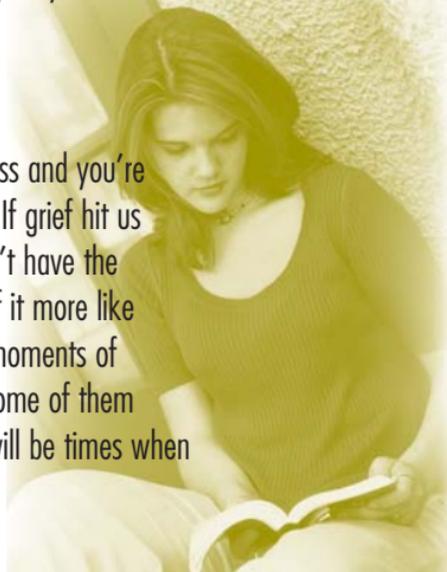
People haven't always treated you in the best way. No one is perfect—at some time or other, parents, friends, siblings and teachers have all let you down. When a person who has hurt you dies, the feelings you've built up toward him or her can make the grieving process even harder. Dealing with your hurt or anger is important so that the feelings can heal and not fester. The alternative is the resentment that develops when anger freezes inside us. Hebrews 12:15 tells us, "See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no **bitter root** grows up to cause trouble and defile many."

You hurt yourself and others when you let bitterness grow. You may be

afraid of your anger and not know what to do with it. You may use the anger as a shield to keep you from further hurt. When you bottle up resentment, you probably don't realize how it will spill into other areas of your life, including other relationships. We often let resentment build up because we think it shows a lack of respect to feel anger towards someone who has died. So we leave the other person on a pedestal and try to bury our emotions. But bitterness doesn't help anyone, and sometimes the only way to let go of your anger is to give yourself permission to feel it and then let it out in a healthy way.

6. *Take a break.*

It takes time to work through loss and you're not likely to do it in a moment. If grief hit us continually, we probably wouldn't have the strength to deal with it. Think of it more like waves in the ocean. There are moments of calm between the swells, and some of them are smaller than others. There will be times when



it feels like a wave has just smacked you down. The grief is going to be intense. But then there will be calm times when you can regain your strength and footing for the next experience of grief that moves in. Setting aside specific times to write out your feelings can help you put your grief in a “package.” For instance, when your mind wanders from the math assignment, you can tell yourself that you need to be thinking about algebra at the moment and that there will be time later to journal. That way, you don’t have to deal with grief all the time, but you can consistently find healthy blocks of time when you can face it.

7. *Look forward.*

In some ways, you may never get over the pain. The intense times of grief will get further and further apart, but you’ll have reoccurring memories that still bring sadness. Although mourning is healthy, at some point, you must choose to move ahead. How long should you grieve? That’s a tough question and one that has no definite answer. It really depends on your experience and personality.



In Lamentations, Jeremiah does just what the title of his writings says—he *laments*:

*“I have been deprived of peace;
I have forgotten what prosperity is.
So I say, ‘My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped
from the Lord.’
I remember my affliction and my wandering,
the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them,
and my soul is downcast within me”
(Lamentations 3:17-20).*

A paraphrased and condensed version might read like this, “Life stinks, and God, you made it that way!”

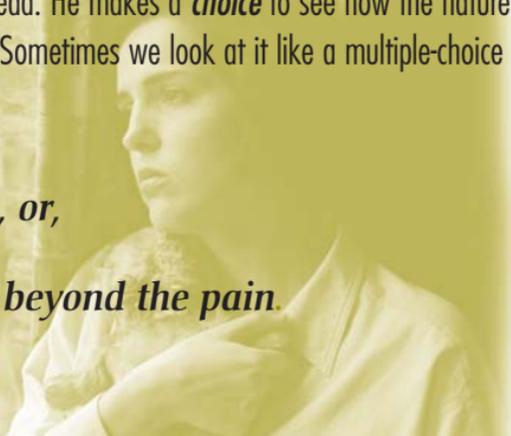
Boy, does Jeremiah get into his pain! But later on, there is a shift in his attitude:

*“Yet this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:
because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed,
for His compassions never fail”
(Lamentations 3:21-22).*

Jeremiah has just opened his heart in a gut-wrenching fashion, but in this verse, he makes a decision to look for the truth beyond his struggle. And it doesn’t just float into his head. He makes a *choice* to see how the nature of God affects his concern. Sometimes we look at it like a multiple-choice test:

a) I face the pain, or,

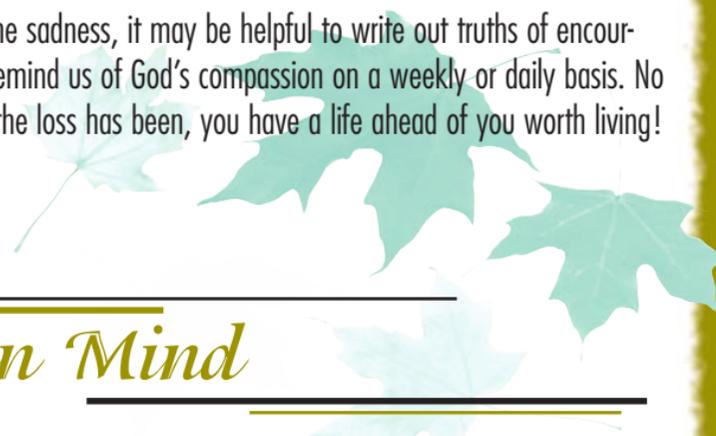
b) I look at truth beyond the pain.



But it’s not one or the other; we need to do *both*. Two more verses in the third chapter of Lamentations point to both parts of grieving:

*“For men are not cast off by the Lord forever.
Though He brings grief, He will show compassion,
so great is His unfailing love”
(Lamentations 3:31-32).*

After facing the sadness, it may be helpful to write out truths of encouragement to remind us of God’s compassion on a weekly or daily basis. No matter what the loss has been, you have a life ahead of you worth living!



Keep in Mind

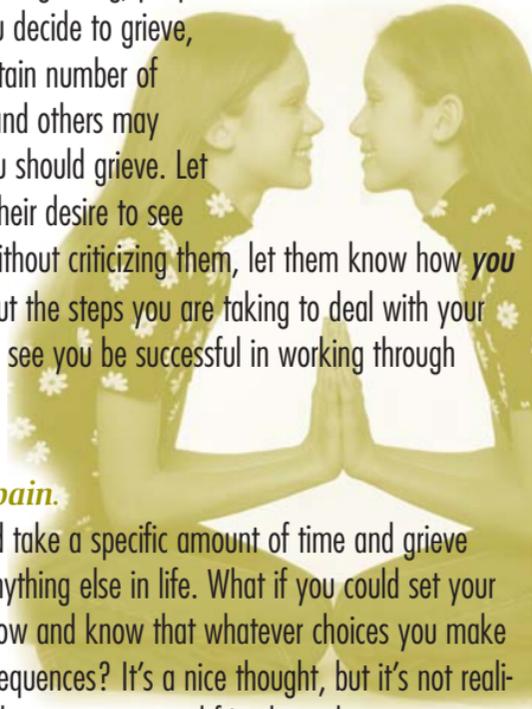
Along the road of grief, many fall into potholes because they can’t see clearly what’s up ahead. Remembering these few things will help you to avoid getting stuck on your journey:

No two people grieve the same way.

We are not looking for cookie-cutter grieving; people will deal with loss differently. It's important that you decide to grieve, but you don't have to shed a certain number of tears. Parents, teachers, friends and others may have certain ideas about how you should grieve. Let them know that you appreciate their desire to see you work out the sadness, but without criticizing them, let them know how *you* need to grieve. Talk to them about the steps you are taking to deal with your loss. In most cases, they want to see you be successful in working through your emotions.

Life doesn't stop for your pain.

How nice it would be if you could take a specific amount of time and grieve without having to worry about anything else in life. What if you could set your alarm clock for two years from now and know that whatever choices you make in that time won't bear any consequences? It's a nice thought, but it's not reality. You still have to get along with your parents and friends, and yes, you even have homework, volleyball and maybe even a part-time job that need your attention. Choices you make during your time of grief will affect you — either



positively or negatively, just like they do when life is “normal” — so make them wisely!

Watch out for unhealthy affection.

When it comes to grief, words sometimes don't help a whole lot. Job's friends sat with him in *silence* for seven days because they saw how much he hurt (Job 2:13). Sometimes we just need to be close to someone else in silence with a hug or an arm around a shoulder. Ask family or friends for the closeness you need, but set your boundaries. You could end up in a sexually compromising situation when all you really needed was someone to show you they care.

Old losses may still need to be mourned.

“That was a long time ago. It doesn't affect me anymore. How could it? I barely remember it.” When you're tempted to make these excuses, remember that it doesn't matter how much time has passed since the loss. You still need to face it. Some people go to their graves with old hurts that they have never touched. Don't make that mistake.



Understanding Death

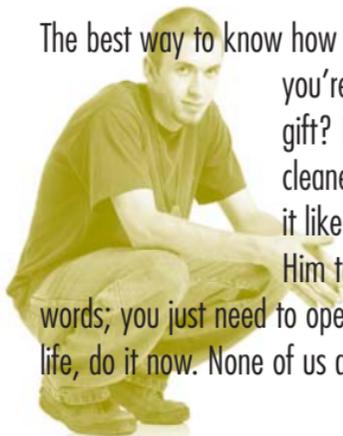
When we're young, we can hardly imagine death will touch us. Cartoon characters get flattened on the road, but in the next frame they jump up ready for more. Unless we've had someone close to us die, it's easy to think death only happens to older people. Until Christ comes back, though, death is here to stay. Without getting morbid, what does the Bible say about death?

The Bible Says . . .

- **Death came after sin entered the world** (Genesis 2:17, Romans 5:15). It's hard to imagine that there was a time when death didn't exist on this earth, but there was!
- **Death doesn't respect anyone's status.** "For all can see that wise men die; the foolish and the senseless alike perish and leave their wealth to others" (Psalm 49:10). No matter how much money you earn, you can't take it with you! And there is going to be a day when each one of us dies.

- **Jesus has demolished the power of death.** ". . . our Savior, Christ Jesus, . . . has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10). If we ask Christ to forgive our sins and receive Him into our hearts we don't have to fear death. We will live with Him forever!
- **You can receive the free gift of forgiveness and live with God when you die.** "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

The best way to know how to grieve someone else's death is to make sure you're ready for your own. Have you accepted God's free gift? It's not about being perfect or getting yourself cleaned up for God. It's about knowing that you've blown it like we all have, asking God to forgive you and asking Him to be your Savior and Lord. There aren't any magic words; you just need to open your heart. If you've never asked Christ into your life, do it now. None of us are guaranteed another day!



If you have any questions about what it means to become a Christian, talk to someone who has already given his or her heart to Jesus, or call us here at Focus on the Family (719) 531-3400, ext. 2700. We would love to speak with you about this most important decision you'll ever make.

The Bottom Line

No one can make you grieve; you have to decide if you will. The questions included here can help if you don't want to bury your emotions. Think about them with your heart. God can give you the courage to face the pain. Talk with your parents, youth leader or pastor about your grief. If you feel stuck, it may be helpful to speak with a counselor as well.

Questions to Think About

- What have I lost in my life?
- How will that loss affect me now? In the future?
- What will I miss the most?
- What anger do I have, if any?
- Are there any other losses that I've buried in the past?
- What regrets do I have, if any? Are they realistic?
- Do I need to forgive anyone for hurts I've experienced?



- What specific actions can I take to grieve the loss in a constructive manner?
- Have I been able to talk to people about my loss?
- Are others willing to talk to me about my hurt?
- When am I least willing to touch my sadness?
- Have there been times I have thought of ending my life? (If you have, talk to your parents, a teacher or pastor about those feelings right away.)
- Are there choices I need to put on hold until I work through my grief?
- What do I need from other people? Have I asked them without demanding that they respond?
- Does God care about my pain?
- What have I learned from my grief?
- What is God's future for me?

Remember, grieving is never an easy process, but God is available to give you His comfort and peace, and in time, you will be able to move forward in His power.

Glenn Lutjens holds a Master of Arts degree in Clinical Psychology from Rosemead School of Psychology. He is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in Colorado Springs where he has a private practice and works as one of Focus on the Family's licensed counselors. Glenn and his wife, Elizabeth, are the parents of three children.

1 US Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1996.

2 Huston. *Big World, Small Screen*, p. 54.

3 US Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1996.

4 Woerden, J. William. *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*.

5 Huston. *Big World, Small Screen*, p. 54.

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Notes

The Youth Culture department at Focus on the Family equips parents, youth leaders/ministers and youth (ages 12 to 18) with the essential tools that will enable them to understand, navigate and impact the culture in which they live. We provide a variety of resources and information on popular cultural issues. We desire to see young people growing in integrity, character development, holiness, discernment, boldness in sharing their faith and in their understanding of how to interact with their culture from a Christian perspective. Please feel free to contact us at Focus on the Family by calling (800)A-FAMILY or by writing Focus on the Family, Colorado Springs, CO 80995. In Canada, call (800)661-9800 or write Focus on the Family, PO Box 9800, Stn Terminal, Vancouver, BC V6B 4G3.

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