

When The Familiar Becomes Unfamiliar

“When our spouse or child or someone deeply involved in the everyday rhythms of our life dies, every aspect of our life feels different.”

By Kenneth J. Doka

*I expected the sadness,
not the strangeness.*

That was Maggie’s comment to me as she assessed her reaction to the death of her husband. She anticipated that she would experience difficult days and times that were more tolerable. What surprised her was the strangeness of grief.

Everything seemed different to her—from waking up in the morning to the flow of the day, eating meals, watching television, and even going to sleep. All were done now without her husband. Grief does that to you.

When our spouse or child or someone deeply involved in the everyday rhythms of our life dies, every aspect of our life feels different. We may have talked to that person as we dressed or prepared for the day. Our routine may have involved being with the person, dropping him off or picking him up from somewhere.

Even as we shop for groceries, we may have in mind what that person likes and what we should purchase for the individual. We may have been used to commenting on what we saw or did at various times of the day. One parent shared that when he picked his son up from football practice, he and his son would talk about school—reviewing his day.

When someone dies then, all that is lost as well. Everything seems different. Even when the person is not so intimately involved in our day, there still may be that disconnecting feeling of strangeness.

For example, when a parent or an adult sibling dies, we may no longer have interacted with them in our daily routine.

Yet, even there, the patterns of life are altered. Holidays, anniversaries, birthdays and other occasions may now seem so different. One client, for example, indicated how strange it was, the first birthday after his older sister died not to receive a call.

“We are both early risers so I knew the first call would always be from her.”

There may be times when we shop, dine, or even watch TV where we think that we would like to share this moment with someone we love. We reach for the phone only to have that awful realization that the other individual is no longer there.

A colleague, Thomas Attig, once said that in the midst of grief we have to “relearn our world”. While Tom packs much meaning into that phrase, one aspect is that we have to learn how to function again without that person’s presence.

This does not mean that we now have to be taught how to eat or watch television again. It does mean that we now have to get used to doing it alone.

And, in fact, we actually may need to learn new skills as we live without that person. For example, if we never balanced a checkbook or did the laundry, those are now new skills we will have to master—adding to that sense of the unfamiliar. That strangeness goes deeper than the day, though. We have to live a new life now feeling the deep absence of the presence that meant so much to us.

Kenneth J. Doka, PhD, MDiv, is Senior Consultant to HFA and a Professor of Gerontology at the College of New Rochelle in New York.