

A Year is a Relative Thing

by Ellen Zinner, PsyD



A year is the period of a planet's revolution around the sun; three hundred and sixty five days for the earth, longer for some planets, shorter for others. In the life of a bereaved individual, the time period of a year is a relative thing.

On the one hand, survivors often are amazed that so much time has passed since the death. Four seasons weathered; the holiday periods endured. It seems impossible that they have borne the pain for a full twelve months.

On the other hand, it may seem that time has not moved at all. Emotions and memories seem fresh. The news of the death and the ensuing days of confusion and painful decision making seem like only yesterday. And with this perspective, comes a fear that little recovery has taken place at all.

Are you caught in a similar time warp? Has the passage of time been too quick and too slow? And what is to be done with this first anniversary of the death? If you are approaching this marker in your bereavement, it is time to take stock of where you have been and where you are heading.

The first death anniversary is a special day for recognizing the loss. I have no doubt that you have been thinking daily about the loss and the change in your life. But this day looms larger than most. It

brings back the sadness of the death itself with renewed force sustained by a year of experiencing the full import of the loss.

But the day can also be used a special day for celebrating the life of the deceased. Grieving stems not from the death itself but from the loss of the person. It is the loss of the laughter, the love, and connections past, present, and future which we mourn. How can you celebrate the life of your loved one? This is the challenge of the death anniversary.

One family I know takes gold balloons to the high school track where their son had competed and lets float the personal message that each had written to him on the balloons. One widow picnics by the lake where she sprinkled her husband's ashes. Another family "celebrates" annually by having dinner together in a new restaurant that the daughter would have enjoyed. Creating a positive ritual that can be either fulfilled alone or shared adds powerful and supportive meaning to the death anniversary.

The death anniversary is also a day for acknowledging the living. This certainly includes you! The last twelve months have been demanding. You have handled your loss in the way you have needed to survive. You deserve to recognize yourself as one who has endured great hardship and to take care of yourself in a way that will ensure your ability to make a new life for yourself.

