

Finding Your Courage

by Judy Tatelbaum



Courage is one quality we feel we need most in facing the death of a loved one—both the courage to tolerate our loss and the courage to go on with our lives. Dealing with loss is so difficult that we may fear we haven't got this necessary ability within us. My experience is that courage is something we develop as we go along. We discover we have more fortitude as we deal with the very ill, dying loved one. We somehow face each day, hold a hand, give encouragement, manage the details of our lives, and keep going. Sometimes we find strength in supporting others who are facing the same loss, perhaps our children or our parents.

Whether we notice or not, these are acts of courage. When our loss is sudden and unexpected, we are often knocked off our feet in surprise. We must suddenly find within ourselves the courage to face something we are totally unprepared for. The shock of the event may slow us down, but we will need all the courage we can muster. What is courage? It is the ability to conquer fear or despair in the face of difficult circumstances, danger, or pain. Courage in the face of grief does not mean being unafraid or unemotional. Rather, it means moving through our sorrow and other intense emotions instead of taking a detour.

Sometimes, crying instead of suppressing our feelings is a courageous act. Sometimes, stopping and quieting down for a moment instead of barreling through is courageous; sometimes, it's the opposite—that getting up and facing the day is the most courageous act of all. We are apt to think courage is found in everyone but us. We see it as a hard earned talent that some people, other people, seem to have. We may believe there must be a unique gene, or a particular kind of upbringing, or the influence of special people that enables others their courage. We may think it's something we missed.

Too often we cannot see courage in ourselves. You probably are courageous—if only you noticed. But unless you performed some oblivious heroic act like saving another person's life, you probably didn't call yourself courageous. This is a blind spot in most of us. Working with people with life threatening illnesses like AIDS and cancer, I've seen how one patient admires how another is coping, not noticing himself and his own amazing ability to face adversity. Courage usually develops from experience, from trial and error. We exercise courage muscles when we choose to take on life, to face the difficulties that lie in front of us instead of courage you have already shown. That same courage is available to you now.

Following is a quotation from my book *You Don't Have To Suffer*: "Being fully alive is truly a heroic act....Many of us think heroism means rescuing people from burning buildings or being daring in wartime. Instead, heroism is an everyday affair. For some of us, getting up in the morning and facing another day is a heroic act. For others changing jobs or staying in a relationship or managing on limited funds or facing the loss of a loved one is a heroic act. We have many opportunities to be heroes in our daily lives. The heroism of which I speak is the courage to be fully alive to life regardless of our circumstances." I wish you courage!

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