

Dealing With Our Sense Of Longing

by *Judy Tatelbaum*



The death of a loved one produces so many mixed emotions. Sadness is the feeling with which we most identify, yet other feelings abound. One of the most uncomfortable is the longing we feel for the one who has died.

We ache for our loved one, wish he or she were with us now, long for their touch or their words, and long for happier days past. Our sense of longing can occur days, weeks, even months after a loss. It's a feeling that may be provoked unexpectedly by small, seemingly insignificant events.

One woman found herself painfully longing for her husband while reading an article in the newspaper that she wanted to discuss with him. Another saw a couple walking a puppy in the park and remembered with great longing when she and her husband had been raising their dog.

Any large or small event can cause us to feel a powerful and disturbing sense of longing for the one who is gone. One client described how one day as she was dragging her garbage cans out to the street, she was suddenly consumed with great longing for her dead husband who had always done this job. She stood at her curb and sobbed uncontrollably.

We naturally long for the comfort of the other's touch or words when life is scary or frustrating. After her dentist told her that she needed root canal surgery, another widow burst into tears. All she could feel was her yearning for her husband to go through this difficult surgery by her side as he would have done were he still alive.

Clients, disconcerted by this feeling, often ask me, "How do I handle longings when they occur?" So often we feel bowled over by these feelings as if they had a grip on us that we cannot loosen.

How do we smooth the road ahead in our grieving process so that we are not tripped up by longings? As with any emotional reaction, longings occur out of the blue and can persist well after a loved one dies. When we simply notice and acknowledge what we feel, the feeling dissipates.

We might also become aware of what kinds of things provoke our sense of longing. If we recognize what incidents generate these feelings, we might break the pattern. For instance with the woman seeing the puppy, she might from then on simply look at puppies as adorable and not need to associate them with her husband.

Recognizing triggers can also help us be better prepared to cope with our feelings as they occur in the future. The most important thing about facing our longings is that we not dwell in those feelings. When we keep reminding ourselves of our reaction, we keep ourselves miserable.

We may have to learn to notice what we feel, acknowledge it, and then consciously distract ourselves if necessary so that we don't perpetuate whatever is troubling us. I always remind my clients that their main job in facing the loss of a loved one is to take care of themselves. One of the primary ways we can do that is to learn to allow our feelings and then let them go.

Again I remind us all that feelings expressed disappear—if we let them.