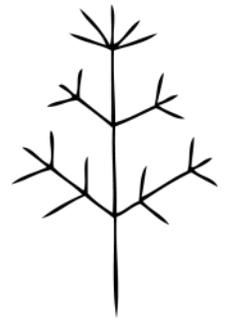


Rebuilding Our Lives After Loss

by Judy Tatelbaum

Two Pages



It takes enormous courage to rebuild our lives after the death of a loved one. Even though we know we must go on, we may find ourselves completely at a loss, without the energy or motivation to even think about how to begin anew. Yet, eventually rebuilding or reinvesting in our lives is a necessary part of healing.

Loss leaves a hole in our lives. Every aspect of our lives can be impacted. Our loss doesn't just affect us emotionally, which is hard enough to bear. Our daily lives, routine, finances, living arrangements, or our relationships with others can all be altered. After a key person in our life dies, we may need to build a new life from scratch. We never build a physical structure without the help of an architect, contractor, carpenters and many other workers.



The same is true in rebuilding after a loss. It is too hard to do it alone. We need help with the design, the plans, the structure, choices, and the work itself. It is not unusual then to need a counselor, therapist, support group, self-help book or spiritual counsel to help us rebuild our lives. In building anew, we always need a plan.

But the tasks of figuring out what we want, where to go, and how to accomplish it all may seem overwhelming. We will probably need to enlist help from family and friends, from support groups for widows and parents who've lost children, or from spiritual or psychological professionals.

Alice, whose husband of forty years died a year ago, is at a loss to rebuild her life. Her spouse was the center of her world. He took charge of many aspects of their lives, like their finances. She gave that task to her daughter, but, at some point, she will need to learn to handle money. Because Alice felt compelled to keep her husband's garden in full bloom, now all she does is tend to the plants. She hasn't found anything else to occupy her time. She has been staying in bed, watching television, unable to concentrate on reading.

Once a great cook, she is unwilling to cook, even for herself. Alice is desperate to fill her mind with thoughts other than those of her husband. And, at the same time, all she wants to think about is the husband she has lost. She has shut so many doors to people that she used to enjoy and activities that once were satisfying. She feels stuck. Alice is at a crucial turning point in the grief process—the point at which she must begin to rebuild her life.

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We must find some kind of satisfactions in order to have any motivation to go on. In therapy, we agreed that what Alice needs most is to talk about loss, facing feelings and reactions that she has tried for a year to stuff down. Secondly, she needs help with sleep, a common problem in grief. She has a hard time falling asleep and then staying asleep. She needs a physical exam to make sure there is no organic basis for her lack of energy, which is probably a grief reaction.

Like others facing a major loss, Alice needs to build structure and new activities into her days. Just as we don't build a building in a day, we don't rebuild our lives overnight. Each piece of wood, each nail we use, is a step toward creating a structure. Likewise, each step we take in healing ourselves after a loss helps us build a new life.



These steps may involve looking for possible help with emotions; taking care of our physical body; learning new tasks like handling a check book, driving a car, or cooking a meal; discovering possible social or volunteer activities to cut through loneliness; reading books that support or teach us something new; or, setting up a weekly lunch date with a friend.

Any of these can be the beginning of a new life. To heal ourselves after a loss, the important thing is to begin. Make one phone call. Go to one social event. Cook one meal. Answer one piece of mail. We can begin by hammering one nail at a time.

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