

## **Our Grief Coping Mechanisms**

We all grieve differently. Our spouse, children, extended family and friends involved in the loss will not deal with it alike. Gretchan and I have had different strengths and weaknesses in this process. However, we did find some mechanisms of coping in common. They are presented here as what we have found, though not always equally useable or as effective for us both. I hope this is of help to some, but if something doesn't click with you, just skip and search for your path.

## **The Torment Cycle**

Three and one half years after losing Olivia, I still have disturbing nightmares. Last night, I had one so disturbing that I could feel my mind unraveling (yet again). This is a state that I have come to know too well. I know this will likely continue throughout the rest of my life, as I've been told. The images and emotions of the nightmare were so painfully real, so soul tearing, that it seemed to tear my mind away from me and imprison it in a tormenting cycle going over and over it, wallowing in the pain.

So why do we do this to ourselves? I wonder if out of desperation for some connection to our loved one that we cling onto any image, thought or emotion, even if it is a torturous one for us. We want to feel that connection so desperately that we will stay in the cycle of reviewing it, regenerating the anguish over and over. As painful as that is, letting go is more painful. Losing our connection to that person is so scary, we will endure the torment with these recurrent cycles of horrific thoughts and images.

Getting back to the nightmare, I felt myself being drawn into the downward spiral of pain, being desperate to cling to any connection. I realized part of what I was doing was trying in vain to change the events of the accident, as if redoing it again and again in my mind could change it. But the nightmare was done, just as Olivia's accident is done and can't be controlled or changed as much as I try. Persistence and perseverance had always served me well to make things happen in my life. But now that trait may be causing me to stay in this Torment Cycle in an attempt to change it. There are also times when one may simply want to think of that person they lost regardless of the associated pain. But clinging to a hope of being able to change something in the past will keep putting us back in the Torment Cycle.

Before I was lost in the cycle again, I realized I needed to quickly change something to regain some control of my mind. After three plus years, I have come to accept that I cannot change Olivia's accident or her passing. The one thing I can control is how I think of her. I can choose to think of the beautiful girl, the happy events, images and emotions that came with her four years of life. This is where the work comes in – the work is in keeping the mind focused on the good and not letting it return to the bad. After the nightmare, my mind was trying to focus on the painful memories. I kept trying to force it back to a good memory. I needed to do that over and over until the Torment Cycle's grip was weak enough.

Feeling the power of this cycle reminded me just how dangerous it is. This is a dark and dangerous emotional power. But because we are in such a need for our loved one, those painful memories do provide a powerful connection. Using that type of connection has a high price – it

pulls you further into despair. These forces are so powerfully destructive that they must be resisted. It is the wrong connection to maintain with your loved one. It will overwhelm your mind and soul.

Following a tragedy, it will be difficult for a long time to tear your mind from the painful thoughts, but with time and effort, it can be done. With Olivia's passing, we have come to feel it was her choice to leave when she did. We will accept the pain of losing her as long as we get those four precious years of her life to remember. We would not trade those years to get rid of the pain. So, we must accept what happened and how she passed and keep the tragic parts "put away" as much as possible and try to live in her love. This is not to say that the weak moments don't happen. We are all human, but with practice and time, regaining control of our thoughts does become a bit more possible. Every life has a purpose (more on this later) no matter how short, and we do not give honor to their legacy or their purpose by losing our minds in this Torment Cycle.

Friends and family can help us with this refocusing of the mind. Many will not want to deal with your pain and suffering because it is just too frightening to them, especially when it involves a child. But, to be a good friend or family member, you must allow the grieving person to work through their process and this involves talking about it. Denial and distraction can be helpful, especially in the beginning by keeping your thoughts away from the pain and directed on other matters. Eventually, though, the grief must be dealt with.

When someone who is grieving wants to talk of their loss, don't freeze up or worse, walk away. I've seen this many times when I've even just mentioned Olivia. Like a deer caught in the headlights, they freeze up and their faces go blank. If you want to help, all you need to do is let the person talk but (very important) gently steer the conversation to the good memories, the happy times, and try to supplant good images and emotions in place of the painful ones.

If you are a strong person, there will come a time and a place to deal with the pain. I've found that not many people can handle this. Also, we shouldn't stay in the pain too long or often. Gretchan and I have rescued each other from the Torment Cycle by using this distraction method. Both of us have had good friends and family to do this for us also, and we regularly do this with our boys.

We now talk of Olivia often through the day, at dinner or out doing things. We've all learned to help each other by bringing up the happy times, her silly antics, her dancing and sayings. We can often be heard quoting her. One common quote used at dinner or restaurant is, "Umm, I love parmesan cheese." She would say this as she'd dump a pile of it onto her plate.

Earl Nightengale put it very simply. To paraphrase, he said, "Our lives become what we think about most of the time." So I think it follows with the Torment Cycle. We must be careful where our minds focus. I think the Torment Cycle is hell, and our lives would also become hell if we stay there too much or too long. Eventually, even the strongest would become overwhelmed. Out of desperation to end the pain or even to be with the loved one again, ending our own lives could become a strong attraction. Even though we'd be leaving others in a world of more pain, it may seem like a way out. For me, as much as I couldn't stand the thought of Olivia being alone in her

journey, I also knew it would hurt her to see this hurt me so much. Further, I felt I would not or could not exist on the same plane or place as an innocent child, if that were done. I had to let her take the journey by herself and that, as her daddy, I could not be with her, help her along, as much as I wanted to. Compounding the pain and loss others would have to endure is not an answer.

I would like to caution those who are friends or extended family that unless you've experienced this type of loss, you have no idea. Be careful not to get into a preaching mode and be careful of saying hurtful things. I had one person tell me, on the one-year anniversary of Olivia's passing, that I must have been a "real bastard" in a past life to deserve this. I don't believe in this, but I was so devastated by this statement that one could have knocked me down with a feather. This accusation of me being responsible, for being so horrible a person, that God would hurt my child to punish me, is excruciating beyond words. This person then offered a weekend at their camp so we could meditate. This, of course, was declined. I wish I'd had the strength to do more than just decline.

Another attempt at consoling, I've heard too many times has been, "I know how you feel." Unless one has gone through this kind of loss, one doesn't know. Many people already know to acknowledge this but not all. One person went so far as to qualify their statement with saying they knew how I felt because they had just lost their pet. I've lost pets and can simply say no way, but I'm sure most people know this.

"Oh, you're still going through it" is another comment we've heard referring to our loss of Olivia. Implying, I felt, that I should have been over it by then. It had been almost three years after our loss and maybe some would think that should be sufficient time, but there is no time limit. A broken heart does not heal like a broken bone. This person's attitude was what doesn't kill you, will make you stronger. To this type of attitude, I'd like to say, "I dare you to try this, I double dare you." I saw a T.V. clip with Paul Newman being questioned by reporters. One younger reporter interrupted, asking him how he had gotten over the loss of his son. Mr. Newman looked at him like he was dumber than a rock, stopped, stared into his eyes and got quite serious. Mr. Newman replied, as I remember, you never get over something like that. You just learn to continue on.

I've also heard, "Gods teaching you something through Olivia's passing." This has usually come from someone who means well but doesn't understand the implications to the one who has lost the child. In my opinion this implies again we are somehow responsible. If you were to accept this responsibility, the guilt would be intolerable. I refuse to believe God would hurt my child to teach me a lesson. This assertion is assigning guilt and is heartbreaking to say the least. A better way of saying it may be that God's purpose is a mystery to us and we may not understand until we pass ourselves. Even if someone does feel somehow responsible for the loss we can encourage them to accept that God does have a purpose for the event that He allowed to take place.

Gretchan and I have come to believe that we were blessed by God for Olivia's four wonderful years. And for that, we are not being punished or taught lessons with her passing but in fact, have

been blessed and honored to be her parents. We always say we will take the pain as long as we can keep the memories of those four wonderful years.

The world, we found, will continue on even when you think everything should stop or even end. Life will carry you along with it, and that's ok for a while, although eventually we do need to walk along our own path again.

### **Distraction**

In the early weeks, months and at times, even years after that tragedy, we found distraction to be a useful defense. As I touched on earlier, it is very difficult, if not impossible at times to control your thoughts. Distraction can help by giving your conscious mind something to focus on. For us gardening, creating a memorial garden to Olivia, helped to save us. We worked very hard all day to the point of exhaustion and then we would collapse at night (we were still sleepless despite all this). This was severe as it was a very hot summer, but we needed something to do for her. Anything that requires your thought and attention will do. Some other things that could help with this are; writing, painting, a memorial Web site, reading, carpentry, jewelry making, etc. Just about any hobby or activity would do as long as it can absorb your thoughts. The distraction does need to be a strong enough attraction to you in order to hold your attention. If and when you are unable to get your mind off the painful things, then distraction can be a useful tool, although it is only a temporary one. It still works for me.

### **Release**

After the hard work with the garden was done Gretchan and I needed to continue to have a physical release of all the emotions and anger that would, and still does, build up. For us, we weight lift. We had both always worked out but the workouts became long and intense to put it mildly. One counselor I was seeing early on, after hearing of my physical release sessions at the gym, told me that it was a great mechanism for me to release all the anger and pain. I told her even when I reached the point of physical failure with an exercise, if my mind was on the pain and anger of losing Lulu, my mind (I think) would send out explosive energy and I could keep going and going with the repetitions. Many times I would have to decide to stop an exercise before I damaged something. This, she said, was good but that I should focus on releasing the pain and anger with those explosive bursts. Three and one half years later it still works – it has never failed.

Even today, after writing the first part of this, I was feeling the anger building up. As a result, I took my lunch break and worked out for an hour and a half. The endorphine (a feel good chemical in the body) release from lifting like a madman does helps to make things feel less desperate. People do look at me funny and I am tired and sore all the time, but it works for me. At one gym (I belong to four right now) about four months after Olivia's accident, a guy I saw there all the time asked me if I was trying to kill myself. In a flip reply I said, "If I am, it's not working." At the time, all I knew was that I looked forward to and felt better after those physical releases. In the early days after the accident, I would count down the time to when I could get to my workout. I didn't realize until six months ago that I wasn't trying to kill myself but was actually trying to survive this. There is so much pain and anger with this type of loss that it has to

come out somewhere, it has to be released. When I'm asked why I work out so hard, I often reply that it's better than drowning in a bottle of vodka.

This works for Gretchan, and me, but it is not for everyone, especially if you don't have a good history of weight lifting. I would imagine you could tap into this physical release with most types of sports or exercise. If you do choose a physical mechanism of release, check with your doctor and start off with a certified personal trainer (CPT) and build up slowly.

## **Purpose**

Finding purpose in Olivia's passing at four years old was difficult for me. In fact, it was impossible for me for the first two and one half years. It wasn't until Gretchan's book came out that I slowly started to tolerate that idea. Up to that point, I was still trying to change it, to fix it – get her back. So I couldn't find any purpose until I accepted her passing. At the same time, accepting her passing without purpose was intolerable. So for me, I had to do both together. Until I could do that, I had been clinging to some vain hope that I would be able to get God to change it. After all, I would reason to counselors that God can do anything. He can change and/or create anything – He can bring her back.

Gretchan's book *Lulu's Rose Colored Glasses*, although a children's book initially, has a profound message. It is so simply and succinctly put by a four year old that anyone should be able to get it, even a madman (like me when at the gym). To see the world and life through a child's eyes or through rose colored glasses is incredible. To remember when, as a child, how beautiful, how magical, how full of hope and promise and how everyday seemed like a wonderful new adventure full of all possibilities. And how, as children, we can feel such unbridled and uninhibited love. This is what I could accept was so important for her to come into this world with such difficulty and leave so dramatically for. I could finally accept that she and us (her family) had agreed upon with God that this would be her mission/message and that we would have her for only four short years but four precious years. If on some subconscious or spiritual level we had agreed to do this with her, then I must do my part.

Once I was able to accept purpose for all this anguish, much of the pain and anger could be better accepted. There are times, however, and always will be I suspect, where something triggers the Torment Cycle again. Then there is the pain that comes and when I have the need to see her, to touch her, smell her hair...but can't. All the while realizing with every passing day those physical connections get weaker. But accepting those losses is more tolerable because there is a purpose here. This much pain without purpose is now unacceptable.

All life has purpose no matter how short. Even the connection a mother has with her fetus must be incredible and purposeful (I cannot know about this but it must be magical). I think our challenge in going through tragedy, losing children or loved ones, is in trusting God that there is a plan, a purpose until you can discover it for yourself.

## **Empowerment**

What we can influence, change or control is empowering. What is unchangeable or out of our control is disempowering. Olivia's accident was and is out of our control. I cannot change it, and God knows I begged and pleaded, like so many others, for Him to change it or to show me what to do to change it. This was a process I had to go through. I felt if I persisted long enough or asked the right person, I would find a way. In his book *What Happy People Know*, Dr. Dan Baker gives a message that helped me. The message was roughly, there are some things in life that are controllable and some are not. To focus on what is out of our control is pointless and will make you feel more out of control. This can put us into a deepening cycle of desperation and depression. Instead, focus on what you can control, even starting with the small things. With one of his institutionalized patients, they began with her tying her own shoes, and with this little step she began taking back control of her life (at least parts). These little steps can lead us down the path of empowerment.

Focusing on Olivia's accident (uncontrollable) and trying to bring her back (unchangeable) was leading me further into a desperation and depression cycle. Eventually, I can see how this could lead to a complete loss of control, not only of the mind but also of life. By focusing my mind and energy on something I could control made a huge difference. As mentioned earlier, for me I had to get to the point of finding purpose, then I could focus on how I remembered Olivia, how I thought of her, what images to think of and what to think of her life. I'm not saying I am great at this all of the time because I am not. I have tears in my eyes writing parts of this and I still, probably always will, have a guttural roar come out of me when I hear certain songs, see some things, etc. But I do try to bring my thoughts back under control to focus on the positive and happy aspects of her life.

One way I've seen of coping in the grieving process is to disconnect emotionally. I think this could be a dangerous route to go because of the risk of disconnecting with everyone and everything in an attempt not to feel the pain. We have people around us that need our ability to feel emotionally, to dare to love again and to reconnect. I am 6' 4", 240 lbs. and I may tear up over a movie, T.V. commercial, song or a touching story, but my family needs me to be here emotionally so I accept being emotionally volatile. Because my heart is already broken, it doesn't take much to make it weep. So be it.

Couples can help each other in becoming empowered again. Helping each other to find what we can do, tapping into our inherent strengths, to find something, anything constructive to do. Gretchan helped our boys and me to experience that empowerment again when her book first came out. For the first time in two and one half years, we all had something we could do that was tangible and constructive and within our control for Olivia. It even felt like we were doing it with her. This was a big thing for us all to be involved with and helped to jump-start our empowerment but any small step can be added to another small step to start the process. With these steps, the hemorrhaging can be stopped, but be careful of recurrences because the wounds do not heal completely. This has become evident from communicating with others whose loss was over twenty years ago.

Couples also have each other for support but I've heard that 80% of marriages end up in divorce when there is a loss of a child. We are trying hard not to let this happen to us. Most of the time, Gretchan and I don't have a grief crisis at the same time. However, it does happen at the same

time occasionally and then it is very very difficult. We can be so confused by our own grief that we can't think of how the other person is feeling. All I can say about this is to at least be aware that you are hurting the other person also. You both are in need of support and compassion but because of the heartbreak and sorrow, neither can give it. Very quickly, the couple is hurting each other more and more until there is nothing but pain on both sides. At times like this, feeling emotionally abandoned can be too much to handle. Also, try to remember there is absolutely no other person on this planet that knows how you feel better than your spouse. It is important to let each other grieve in their own way even if their way bothers you. The trick here, I feel, is to communicate your feelings and be open to receive the other's feelings even when your heart is being torn out.

As I read what I have written, I know it is much easier to write about these mechanisms than to actually do them. To be told to just do this or that can seem preposterous when you're in the depths of grief. I know, I've been there. I've been maddened by the arrogant advice of those who do not know about what they speak of. However, there has been advice in books and from compassionate people (people who know) that has been helpful. The concepts can seem simple enough but putting them into practice is the difficult part. The intrusive thoughts keep coming back. I have found I do not need elaborate rituals nor do I need volumes of procedures. I just try and retry these simple steps. You can start with shifting your mind onto something beautiful, precious and filled with love concerning the one who has passed.

The more powerful this image or thought, the better because the painful ones are likely very powerful. In the beginning, if you can do this for just a minute, you are successful. If you can do it for one minute then with time and practice, longer periods of time can be accomplished. Putting your efforts into what is under your control instead of the uncontrollable works synergistically with this. If you can also find purpose for your loved one's life and find a way to honor that life, then you can be on your way to empowerment. In this way, I am hopeful that we can slowly regain some positive direction to our lives. This is a much better place than the Torment Cycle.

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