

Grief on Valentine's Day

We've barely made it through the holidays of December and January, and now the stores are filled with hearts and flowers and candy, all of it in celebration of the gift of love. But February 14th can be a difficult day for those of us who are grieving, and for some it will be the first Valentine's Day since our precious Valentine died. For us there is no celebration; there is only grief.

Sometimes, for fear of "letting go," we may find ourselves "holding on" to our pain as a way of remembering those we love. Letting go of what used to be is not an act of disloyalty, and it does not mean forgetting our loved ones who have died. Letting go means leaving behind the sorrow and pain of grief and choosing to go on, taking with us only those memories and experiences that enhance our ability to grow and expand our capacity for happiness.

If our memories are painful and unpleasant, they can be hurtful and destructive. If they create longing and hold us to the past, they can interfere with our willingness to move forward in our grief journey. But it doesn't have to be that way. We can choose which parts of life we shared that we wish to keep and which parts we wish to leave behind. We can soothe our pain by thinking of happy as well as sad memories. The happiness we experienced with our loved ones belongs to us forever.

If we decide to do so, we can choose to embrace Valentine's Day as a special day on which to commemorate our loved ones and to celebrate our love for them. Death ends a life, but it does not end the relationship we have with our loved ones who have died. The bonds of love are never severed by death, and the love we shared will never die either. For Valentine's Day this year, we can find a way to honor our loved ones, to remember them and to show them that our love is eternal.

We can build a piece of "memory time" into that particular day, or we can pack the entire day with meaning. Think of it this way: *It's much easier to cope with memories we've chosen than to have them take us by surprise.* Whether we are facing Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Memorial Day, an anniversary or birthday, or any other special day of our own choosing, we can immerse ourselves in the healing power of remembrance. We can go to a special place, read aloud, or listen to a favorite song. We can celebrate what once was and is no more.

Personal grief rituals are those loving activities that help us remember our loved ones, and give us a sense of connectedness, healing and peace. Creating and practicing personal grief rituals can also help us release painful situations and unpleasant memories, freeing us to make our memories a positive influence in our lives. What follows are just a few examples of personal grief rituals. The ideas are as unique and as varied as the people who invented them; think of ways that you can adapt them and make them your own. You are limited only by your own imagination.

♥ *Purchase a book – perhaps a children's book – on coping with the loss of a loved one, and donate it to your local library or school. Ask the librarian to place a label inside the front cover inscribed "in memory of [your loved one's name]."*

♥ *Celebrate the life of your loved one by continuing favorite traditions or eating favorite foods.*

♥ *Give yourself a gift from your loved one that you always wished he or she would have given you, and think of your beloved whenever you use it or wear it.*

♥ *If you're a writer, write. It could be an article, an anecdote, a story, a poem, a song, a letter, an obituary or a eulogy. If you don't want to write for someone else, keep a private journal and write your feelings as you journey through your grief.*

♥ *Buy a very special candle, decorate it and light it in honor of your loved one.*

♥ *Plant a tree, bush, shrub, garden or flower bed as a permanent growing memorial to your beloved. Mark the site with a memorial plaque, marker, bench or statue.*

♥ *If you are harboring bad feelings or regrets, gather symbols to represent those hurtful or painful situations, events, or feelings from the past, place them in a container and hold a private burial ceremony, saying goodbye and releasing them as you do so.*

♥ *Write a special note, letter, poem, wish or prayer to your beloved, go outside, attach the paper to a balloon and let it go – or place it in a vessel and burn it, and watch the smoke rise heavenward.*