

## Count on Grief

by Joannetta Hendel

### ***Count on grief to increase vulnerability.***

Human beings are most comfortable when they are in control of their lives and circumstances. Death, even when it's expected, represents the ultimate "change in plans." When a loved one dies, our former safety and security no longer seem to exist. Instead, we may experience feelings of helplessness and vulnerability that are frightening, as well as disarming. Yet it is precisely this vulnerability that can break down walls of resistance to new thought processes and open the way for new perspectives.

### ***Count on grief to create change.***

Grieving is a walk through unknown territory. Familiar internal and external stabilities disappear in a whirlwind of changing thoughts, feelings, and emotional flux. We are reminded of our pain at odd times and in unexpected ways. Emotions hover near the surface and tears are hard to control. The stress of daily living taxes our protective defenses to the limit. Depression seems to slip in from nowhere, and anger erupts without warning. Because grief requires so much emotional energy, our finesse for social game-playing is greatly diminished. The bereaved meet the world at a disadvantage, continually surprising themselves and others with unpredictable responses to familiar situations.

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### ***Count on grief to change social structure.***

The bereaved find their social networks changing and transforming around them. Disappointment with family and friends is a common theme. Those we expected to "be there for us" may not be able to meet our needs, and friends we didn't know we had appear "out of nowhere" to fill the void. As we come to terms with whatever limitations and expectations we have for ourselves, we also become aware of the limitations of others. Not everyone we care about will receive what they need from us while we're grieving. Not everyone who cares about us will be able to fully share our pain.

### ***Count on grief to stress marital bonds.***

Grief, like any other stress, complicates relationships. One grieving partner taxes a relationship—two grieving partners find their pain doubled. Because grieving is an unpredictable moment-to-moment process, couples must be prepared to build flexibility into their union. Marriages are challenged when each expects too much from the other, and neither receives adequate support from social or extended family networks. Marriages are strengthened when each partner feels supported and is allowed individuality and freedom from expectations.

***Count on grief to define priorities.***

The bereaved often find themselves realigning their goals and objectives. For most of us, nothing is easily taken for granted after the death of a loved one. We understand that “now” is the only time there is, and that tomorrow may ever come. Relationships are more precious than ever, and we are less comfortable with “unfinished business” relating to those we care about. Because the cares and concerns built into our busy lives pale in comparison to our loss, the emphasis on people versus things takes on far greater meaning.

***Count on grief to increase spiritual awareness.***

The pain of grief prompts spiritual investigation into both the known and unknown. Answers we were sure of before are not always satisfying in the context of our present reality. God is questioned and religion is held up for examination. Typically, there are many stages of distancing, moving

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toward, and moving within old and new spiritual concepts and beliefs. Our struggle for inner peace and unity creates a hunger within us. In the majority of cases, our connection to ourselves and to God becomes far more defined.

***Count on grief to strengthen compassion.***

Grief tears down the boundaries between ourselves and others. Bereavement enhances our humanness and strengthens our ties to the world around us. Our loss is a life-changing event; we will never again be the people we were before. Pain somehow opens us to greater levels of awareness and a greater capacity for compassion and understanding. Bereavement provides the catalyst to become more giving, more loving, and more fully aware.

***Count on grief to define the past and open doors to the future.***

For the bereaved, the world is completely new. The death of a loved one becomes a reference point around which we define where we’ve been and how we structure a path for tomorrow. Grief provides a “crash course” in some of the most profound lessons life has to offer. As bereaved individuals, we find ourselves with fewer answers, but far more insights. In time, we learn there is no loss without gain and no sorrow without joy. As death closes doors behind us, new doors open before us.

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