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COPING WITH FRIENDSHIP ENDINGS BECAUSE OF DEATH*

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Other generations had wars and a shorter life expectancy as the reasons they might have had to cope with the premature death of friends. Today, terrorism attacks, AIDS, car accidents, cancer-related deaths, heart attacks, plane crashes, as well as homicide including school and workplace violence, have tragically increased the likelihood that you may lose a friend, at a younger age, or more suddenly, than you might have expected. The older you become, furthermore, the more likely it is that you will have to cope with the death of your friends. In addition, whatever your age, you, or your children, may find that you need to be there for a friend who has been touched by the loss of a loved one, whatever the cause of death or the age of their dearly departed.

When a Friend Dies

The death of a friend is a different kind of ending to deal with than endings due to unmet expectations or conflicts [discussed in the rest of this chapter]. Just as a child often harbors the fantasy that divorced parents will remarry, friends with ruptured relationships have the possibility of reuniting in the future, even if it is a remote one. Not so if a friendship ends because of death.

In some cases, illness may precede the death of a friend. Few are trained in how to cope with a sick or dying friend. Witnessing someone who has the skills to be there for a sick friend can provide a lifelong lesson in compassion, however. As Atlanta-based writer Lynne Alpern testifies, it was just that ability of her friend Dian to be there for a mutual friend throughout an illness and subsequent death that so impressed Lynne more than 20 years before:

We have the usual assortment of shared trials, tribulations, joyful occasions and much laughter. But what I really learned from observing Dian, early on, was dealing with death. As someone with a high degree of empathy

and therefore a low threshold for tragedy, it was difficult for me, then in my 20s, to visit people in the hospital, attend funerals, et cetera. Watching Dian, with grace and compassion, continue to love, visit, and support her friend Gloria, a rabbi's wife whom I did not know, during painful and debilitating months of dying from a brain tumor—when many others "were too upset" to do so—taught me a lot about facing the unfaceable and doing the undoable.

As wrenching and traumatic as it may be to share the weeks, months, or years of decline that a terminally ill friend may endure, it does at least offer you both the opportunity to express your feelings, to reminisce, and to say good-bye. Sara Nelson, in her *Self* magazine article, "The Day AIDS Hit Home," writes about the last six months in the life of her close friend Artie, a filmmaker 14 years her senior who "adopted" her when they first met in San Francisco 12 years before, when Nelson was 18. Although Nelson moved East, they maintained their friendship over the next decade through phone contact every couple of months. Then, in one phone call, Nelson got the news: "I just got out of the hospital. I have AIDS." Nelson combines her personal experiences trying to be there for her friend through his last months with expert interviews about coping with a friend who is dying of AIDS. She concludes:

Artie died a month ago, soon after I ended an I-can't-deal-with-it phase and called him. "How are you?" I asked. "Terrible," he said. "I don't feel like talking." "Okay, I'll call you next week," I answered. "Love you." "Me you too."

In their fascinating book, *Final Gifts*, hospice nurses Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley point out that the stages of bereavement, as described by physician Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and others, that apply to how you react to the death of a friend—shock, denial, disbelief, apathy alternating with anger, bargaining, and resolution—also applies to how the dying, and their friends (and family), deal with their friend's terminal illness and impending death. The advice they share with friends from their first-hand experiences caring for the dying and their family and friends is that *listening* is what those who are dying need most. Interestingly, all the skills that contribute to being a better friend, as discussed throughout this book but especially in Chapter 8 in the section, "What kind of friend are you?" will serve you and your terminally ill friend well at this stressful and emotionally draining time. Unfortunately, as Callanan and Kelley point out in their book, too often friends are in denial about their friend's terminal illness and avoid visiting their friend because they cannot deal with their friend's condition, or they are afraid of saying the wrong thing. If they do visit, they often think it's best to cheer up their friend with such well-meaning but hollow phrases as, "I'm sure you'll get better soon."

These experienced hospice nurses, however, think the dying need understanding and empathy from their friends to approach death peacefully and comfortably. Their discussion of the phenomenon that they observed in the terminally ill, which they call "Nearing Death Awareness," is outside the scope of this book, but the key ideas that apply to friends are that you need to listen to your dying friend's needs and try to be there for your friend, as much as you can manage, emotionally and time-wise. In the section entitled "Talking About Death" they write:

Show that you're willing to talk, then let the conversation develop. You might begin with a simple comment: "I'm sorry to hear that you're so ill," or "I really feel sad when I think about what's happening to you." Wait for a response. Listen. There is no one right thing to say, although it's never wrong to speak of your love and concern.

Don't worry about saying or doing the "wrong" thing....

What's often harder to forgive—whether for the dying person or in one's self—is the failure to do or say anything....

Losing a close or best friend through death results in the same kind of loneliness and need for emotional support that is experienced by those who lose any meaningful intimate relationship. Kubler-Ross's stages, as applied to terminal illness, as noted on the previous page, will now come into play upon the actual death of a friend. How long you remain at any stage, such as shock, denial, or apathy alternating with anger, or even how many stages you go through, may have more to do with your psychological makeup, as well as how many other intimate relationships are now available for support, as it does with the closeness or value of the friendship that death just ended.

It is pivotal that others recognize that you are in mourning for your departed friend, and that you are entitled to feeling grief and sadness the same as those who lose a spouse, parent, grandparent, or any other close relative. Friends grieve just like family members and relatives. As Montaigne wrote in his essay, "Of Friendship," about the death of his best friend, Etienne de la Boetie: "There is no action or thought in which I do not miss him, as indeed he would have missed me. For just as he surpassed me infinitely in every other ability and virtue, so he did in the duty of friendship."

The unexpected death of a friend may result in the "if onlys," regrets, and remorse that you lost the chance to tell your friend how much he or she meant to you. Back in 1977, I clipped from *The New York Times* the Private Lives essay by John Leonard

entitled "On Losing a Friend Your Private World Can Least Afford." Leonard begins by sharing how, in the face of death, he gets "stupid." He goes on to share details about his late friend Al Marlens, a 49-year-old fellow writer and friend who died of a heart attack while playing tennis, a man who, according to Leonard, shunned formality: "He owned just one tie, which stayed in a drawer in the desk of his office, waiting for the publisher of this newspaper to convoke a solemn lunch," whose "admirable sons...decided to bury him without a tie, in the tennis clothes he was wearing when the universe made a criminal mistake." Faced with the loss of his friend, by writing this emotional essay, Leonard concludes, "this time around I would be stupid in public."

I am reminded of the gathering of her daughter's friends organized by the mother of a high school senior who had been senselessly murdered in Central Park by a young boy who stole her bicycle. At that assemblage, which tried to be a celebration of her daughter's life and friendships, music was played and selections of her daughter's diary were read, sharing her intimate feelings in a way that granted her a kind of immortality.

I heard that story almost 20 years ago from that young woman's mother and sister when I was researching a book on crime victims. I hope that over these two decades at least some of those friends have kept in touch with their murdered friend's family. It is important to remember that your late friend's family has lost more than their beloved; they have also lost their beloved's peer group of devoted friends. Those friends will no longer actively be a part of their family's world as well. You might make the effort to reach out to those family members to keep their world from shrinking more than necessary. It might not be right after the funeral or even during the first year after their loss that you reach out; it might be a year or two, or even a decade, down the road. I remember calling the widow of a writer I considered a friend to express my remorse as soon as I belatedly heard that he had died the week before. I asked if she wanted me to stop by or if there was anything I could do to help. She replied expressing this thought, even if not in these words, "Call me in a year, when no one's remembering me anymore. Right now, I'm overwhelmed with visitors and attention." In *Women Make the Best Friends*, Lois Wyse expresses a similar thought when she writes about how friends are the ones that come through in widowhood: "I know that Liz's friends were on call when her husband became ill. Friends were there through the terrible times. And I'm sure she has a houseful now. But the ones who are still there after the last casserole disappears are the stayers; the others are the goers, off to the next event. Staying is what separates acquaintances from friends."

Friends offer each other a kind of immortality as they name their

children after a friend or organize a memorial at the time of death, or even a decade or two later. Writing down your feelings about a friend who has died, in a diary for yourself, in a letter to a mutual friend or to their family as a way of sharing those feelings, or for publication, so others may share those thoughts as well, are all ways of granting your friend an immortality and trying to work through the intense emotions and void conjured up by death.

When Someone Close to You or to Your Friend Dies

Another way that death affects a friendship is when someone close to you or to your friend dies—a parent, sibling, grandparent, child, a miscarriage, or even a cherished pet. Does your friend come through for you? Do you come through for your friend? If you are unable to attend the funeral, do you at least phone, visit, or somehow express your sincere condolences? Some may find it hard to share their feelings in such situations, but friends need to get beyond those excuses and be there for each other. Just how important is it to come through for your friends at these times? As a 33-year-old New Jersey woman writes: "I sincerely believe my friends are more dependable than my relatives. I discovered this when my mother died. I felt the support from my friends and sorority sisters at that time."

For me, coming through for a friend when someone he or she loves has died is my definition of a tried-and-true close or best friend. I guess that's why it is not a coincidence that I have only maintained friendships after the age of 20 based on whether or not they attended, or tried to attend, the funeral of my older brother, who died tragically at the age of 23. The stupidest comment I heard at that time was from a former friend who, in explaining why she was not going to go to the funeral, said, "After all, I didn't know your brother."

When someone close to a friend dies, to my mind, you attend the funeral to support the living, and help them feel your support at this trying time. Of course you might also attend the funeral of a friend's loved one because of the relationship you had with the dearly departed, but that is not a necessary condition for your presence.

That lesson served me well over the years; peers, less experienced in these matters, thanked me for steering them in the direction of coming through for their friends in their darkest hour, such as attending the funeral of a friend whose younger sister, who was in her early 20s, was murdered by her ex-husband when he supposedly came by to get the rest of his things, only to shoot her, and then commit suicide. No one knew our friend's sister; but we were all there at the funeral, at least six of us en force, for our

friend.

There are numerous ways you might want your friend to be there for you at your time of need. Some friends you might expect, or want, to have at the wake, viewing, or calling hours, attending the funeral, going to the cemetery, or paying a *Shiva* call, if you are Jewish and you are observing the custom of visiting the bereaved to pay a condolence for as many as seven or as few as three days. But since funerals are rarely planned, there may be some friends who live too far away, are away on trips, are ill themselves, or have their own obligations they are unable to put aside, such as a family member's wedding or graduation; or they are emotionally unable to deal with death or funerals.

But before you discount your friend as uncaring or selfish because she or he failed to come through for you by attending, and sharing, in any or all of the customs surrounding a death, consider whether your friend's explanations and apologies are heartfelt or lip service.

In a nutshell, when someone close to your friend dies, this is not the time to wonder how close you are to your friend, or even to their departed loved ones. This is not the time to be pondering, "Do I really *have* to send a card?" "Should I really go to the funeral?" "Should I spend the money on a basket of fruit or flowers?" "Will they really appreciate this donation to charity in the name of their dear departed?" You may want to do one or all of the above to show support for your friend, or something else entirely.

Furthermore, think about each friend in particular: what is his or her background or personality that might make it hard or easy for him or her to come through for you now? When it comes to dealing with death, you have to be careful to "cut your friend some slack" if you really care about your friend. Some friends, because of their own recent losses, or just because it is hard for most everyone to deal with dying and death, may find it impossible to attend a wake or a funeral or go to the cemetery. Those death rituals just may be too much to expect from some friends. It may not be saying anything about your friendship, or you, but about *them*. For instance, I found when my 80-year-old father passed away after two months of a debilitating illness, some friends found it somewhat harder to share my deep grief if both their own parents had died at relatively young ages, in their late 50s to mid-60s, and they had spent the last decade or more without them. For them, my father's relatively long life was a stark contrast to their own early losses. As a close friend in her late 40s shared with me, "My father's been dead 30 years." Or, as another close friend, whose father had died suddenly of a heart attack just two years before, responded when I told her about the

funeral scheduled for the next day, "I'm having a hard time with funerals lately."

A few years before, and if not for all the extensive research and thinking I have been doing about friendship, I might have written off any friend who was a "no show" at my father's funeral (unless those friends had really good reasons). Instead, I tried to, and succeeded at, understanding their behavior from their perspective, and to discover other ways they were each showing their support for me based on their own emotional ability at that time. It is, therefore, valuable to ask yourself at these trying times, and afterwards, "Is my friend's absence at the funeral or less-than-sympathetic behavior toward me in this time of need a one-time thing based on circumstances or their inability to deal with death, or is this just another example of a pattern of disappointments that I have to address?" If this is a one-time aberration, not a pattern of selfishness or lack of concern, you might consider attributing their actions to the overwhelming experience of death. In that way, you could keep the fatalities down to just the recently departed; it is probably in your best interest to avoid adding one or more failed friendships to your list of recent losses. (That death is such a seeming "test" on a friendship may be why some people, consciously or unconsciously, do not even tell even their close friends about a parent's death until after the funeral; in that way, their friends could not have attended the funeral since they did not know about it. Then, whether it is true or not, everyone can believe it when they say, "Oh, I would have gone to the funeral if you had only told me in time.")

In addition, during the initial shock of a loved one's death, and the acute bereavement period, you may want to avoid a definitive decision about who is and is not your friend. Certainly keep track of what friends say or do, but postpone any "crossing the line" or "trigger" incidents or comments until your life returns to a more normal state and you can put everything into perspective.

Rather than shut out any friends who, even if you told them in time, failed to show up at your parent's or loved one's funeral, as hard as it is at your time of grief and sadness, try to think about where they are coming from; what's behind their behavior. Try not to take it personally; as long as you know they would have liked to have been there but emotional or practical forces stopped them, in time you will figure out if this is, indeed, a tried-and-true genuine friendship or a phony one. For now, give your friend the benefit of the doubt. Consider what other ways they are able to show that you, and your friendship, matter to them. It could be as Herculean as attending a funeral, even though you live on the opposite side of the country, or something as simple as sending a card or making a phone call; other ways are sending a meal for the bereaved to eat during the mourning period, donating to a

favorite charity, planting a tree in the deceased's memory, writing a poem, visiting after the funeral, sending a plant, flowers, or a basket of fruit, or offering to help address the thank-you notes for the expressions of sympathy.

Therefore, the key to being there for your friends through the death of someone beloved, and the key to them being there for you when you are in need, is denoting that you care, even more than exactly how you show it.

Instead of becoming vindictive because someone disappointed you, consider that they probably missed out more by failing to attend the funeral of your loved one than you lost by their absence, especially if it was an uplifting service, as my father's was, that allowed those present to find some peace and closure in their feelings.

However, just in case you wonder if you should attend a funeral because you doubt having one more person makes a difference, I will share this anecdote: I counted up the number of entries in the sign-in book for my father's funeral. I told my mother that I counted 50 entries, so there were at least 50 people present. The next day, she corrected me, pointing out that she had looked over the book and counted at least 67, if you added up those who attended together.

A phone call, phone message, card, or note can go a long way in demonstrating your care. Phone calls or messages should be brief and to the point unless your bereaved friend wants to talk longer. Try to avoid asking for extensive details about the death, unless they are volunteered. Then, be prepared to listen to your friend as long as necessary. If needed, in advance of your call, rehearse saying something that you would like someone to say to you if the positions were reversed; avoid platitudes, hollow comments, or downright offensive or negative opinions. Try to call at a time you think will be best for your friend; not too early in the morning, or too late at night. Since exhaustion and numbness are common reactions to death, do not take it personally if your friend is unable to talk for very long, or even to talk at all (and another friend or family member is answering the phone and taking messages on their behalf).

Cards or notes, in addition to a phone call, or as the only expression of sympathy, do not have to be long or elaborate, but it should be sent as promptly after you hear the news as possible.

By the same token, the bereaved have to take the time after a reasonable period of grieving—after a minimum of about 30 days—to thank those who express their sympathy, whatever form it takes.

How you show support will depend on a great many factors, but three principles to remember are:

- Do *something* to show your support for your friend.
- Don't ignore the situation.
- Try to think about your friend's needs, acknowledging the situation, even saying directly, "I'm sorry for your loss," and asking, "What can I do to help?"

Coming through for others when they are going through the terminal illness or death of a loved one may not guarantee you are, or will become, better friends, but *failing* to come through may stop that relationship in its tracks.

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