

Discovering Something Greater than the Answer to “Why?”

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Each time Gary and I start our Sudden Death Learning Series, we ask participants, “Why did you come? How can we help you?”

One response always surfaces. “I want to understand why?” A confirming look appears on the face of others in the group. I’m sure they came hoping that Gary and I would be able to erase the nightmare of events, gaze into a crystal ball, and assure them there is a reason to go on living. It is human nature to ask, “Why?” and there is seldom a satisfactory answer.

Instead of answers, we often give the bereaved “tools” to defuse the reaction that death has robbed them of someone very special and life ceases to have meaning. They have embarked on an adventure and a journey far beyond their imaginations, and it’s an arduous task that will challenge a lifetime of beliefs and assumptions. It’s a journey of self-discovery. In the search for meaning, there is a priceless gift offered in return for suffering—an opportunity to pick up the pieces and start over again.

This experience will transform who they are today and what they can become. During this transition, they have the potential to discover something even greater than the answer to their collective question. They can discover an inner spirit and an extraordinary courage to survive in a changed world. On their individual journeys, here are a few discoveries our group might find.

Discover the foundation of your core beliefs

We are raised with values and beliefs that influence who we are. We attribute these to our social culture, our religious backgrounds and our educational pursuits. We build a strong code of ethics that reflects our attitudes and our choices in life.

Seldom have these core beliefs been severely challenged before, but nothing challenges them more than the tragic death of a loved one. Our attitude toward what has happened has the potential to “make us or break us,” and our foundation of core beliefs may be the saving grace in our times of crisis.

Gary and I can easily remember how dim the future appeared after the death of our son, Chad, at the age of twenty-one, as the result of suicide. Ten weeks later Jenny, his fiancée, took her life, too, perpetuating the anguish and pain we felt. Our religious belief system was temporarily challenged, because the world seemed unjust, and we held God responsible. We asked questions we knew others couldn’t answer, but we hoped that something would give us a reason to believe again. What we discovered (after our initial anger) was our religious foundation that became a guiding factor in acceptance and peace. Our core beliefs enabled us to search for meaning with the confidence and assurance that our quest was natural during grief.

When something bad happens in our lives, we may think that God doesn’t care or that He has abandoned us. Previously, days may have passed in which we thought little about God, until tragedy struck and we called out His name in anger or in a plea for help. Then, we discovered that God was really there all the time. Searching for meaning helps us redirect our thoughts, sort out our feelings and search deeper to obtain comfort from age-old wisdom. For some, a religious foundation is the greatest source of help and hope.

Discover “Why?” in the treasures of a life, not in the tragedy.

When searching for “Why?” we often put aside our grieving to unravel a daunting mystery. Usually, a satisfactory answer for “Why?” doesn’t exist. With no suicidal background or theory about why Chad’s life ended so abruptly, we became exhausted with the search. My family assured me it was a mystery. Chad’s friends didn’t understand it. Some people just turned away. We were so immersed in trying to solve the mystery that we were forgetting the beautiful life of the person who died. When we finally put our question aside, we celebrated the precious memories of who Chad was.

Soothe your uncertainty with memories and celebrate why your loved one was so special. Remember the *person*, not the perpetrator or the unexplainable event. Make a vow to honor your loved one’s memory through ritual and story. You can live with your memories, but you can’t live with your nightmares.

Discover a new perspective on what’s really important to you.

The tragic death of someone we love makes us instantly realize that something we valued as very important is gone...and now we must adjust to living without.

As a result of grief, our priorities change to reflect what’s really important to us. Are your career and the number of hours you spend at the office more important than having dinner or spending time with your family? Is living in the fast lane, indulging in rich food and spending large sums of money on luxuries more important than living a modest, healthy purposeful life? Maybe plans for an early retirement and travel suddenly seem essential. Only you can make the choices, but it is likely that because of grief, you will discover your priorities have changed. Adjusting our priorities helps us live in the moment, realizing that other moments may not exist.

Discover an acceptable answer to “Why?”—one you can live with.

Sometimes we don’t know or understand the full circumstances of the death—so we ask, “Why?” When that answer is elusive, we begin to investigate all the possibilities. When there are no answers to satisfy us, or the answers are contradictory to what we perceive, we feel resentment. It’s reasonable at this point, to create our stories with plausible answers that help us to accept the tragedy. Here’s how to create a story you can live with: First, explore your theory about why this death occurred in the manner or time that it did. What do you believe happened? Why?

Some reasonable explanations might be:

- (a) He or she made a mistake.
- (b) He or she was reckless or careless, resulting in death.
- (c) He or she ignored health and medical cautions.
- (d) He or she acquired an incurable illness or disease.
- (e) He or she was aging, and health was declining.
- (f) He or she was in the wrong place at the wrong time.
- (g) He or she was the victim of a malicious crime.

There is one more possibility that comforts some people. Their belief system supports the concept that “It was his or her time to die. God was calling our loved one home.”

Choose one of the probable causes (or add one of your own) and use it in your story about your loved one’s death. This allows you the comfort of telling your story and moving forward without being burdened by “Why?”

Discover a belief in something beyond.

Often, in our search for meaning, “Why?” urges us to grasp for something less concrete, something “magical” and healing. Our innate spirituality allows us to stretch beyond our physical world and reach out for the unknown.

- A mother whose young daughter died tragically in an accident feels the presence of angels and a sense of security that her daughter is safe.
- A man has a vivid dream of his son who died and believes it was a “message” from beyond. This confirms his belief in the afterlife.
- A young woman whose husband died of kidney failure is comforted to know that he is in God’s care where there is no pain—and knows that he would want her to go on with her life.
- A wife indulges in meditation after her husband’s death. This helps her concentrate on her inner self, enhances her spirituality and gives her strength.

You can also develop a spiritual sensitivity through meditation, reading and re-building your self-esteem. In turn, this can help you develop a personal philosophy of life and death. Religious roots can be strengthened by acquired spirituality. The two, working together, have the ability to heal the inner spirit.

Discover that “Why?” isn’t important anymore.

Though you can’t change the situation, you can change yourself. Eventually, to heal your pain, it will be necessary to cease the pursuit of “Why?” and move forward in rebuilding your life.

Relentless pursuits of justice can take control of your life. One man was sure that destroying the animal that took his son’s life would be reasonable revenge for his son’s death. A couple felt that after a long, enduring trial, bringing a drunk driver to justice would soften the pain of their daughter’s untimely death. An irate mother tracked down the young men who had been with her son at the time of the car accident, and accused them (without fact) of irresponsible driving, use of alcoholic beverages and the presence of illegal drugs.

None of these actions solved the mystery of “Why?” Nor do they change what has occurred. These attempts to neutralize the pain are often futile. In the end—even if we accomplish what we set out to do—our loved ones still died. A wilted excuse from either a repentant person or one who feels no remorse will not heal the sorrow we cling to. Revengeful acts or lifelong pursuits of justice only destroy the moral character we value most. They may also result in destroying our own lives and the lives of other loved ones.

When we seek to understand death, we become more comfortable with life. These discoveries transform the bereaved. For Gary and me, our search for meaning was a healing journey. Now I can live without the answer to “Why?” It doesn’t matter how the terrible event occurred. I remind myself that knowing won’t change a thing. I have beautiful memories to sustain me through the tough times. My faith has given me a firm religious foundation. My spirituality comforts me in the quiet moments by knowing that “Chad is okay.” With my new perspective, I’m ready to face the possibilities of “what’s next?” And my intuitive self whispers, If you really discovered the answer to “Why?,” would it bring Chad or Jenny back?

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