

# Time to "Spring Clean" Your Grief

By Megan Meade-Higgins LMSW

Winter is finally almost over! Trees are budding, animals are coming out of hibernation- even people are "thawing out" after the long, cold days of winter. It's time to get ready for spring!

## AFTER A LOSS

The death of a loved one can feel like the bitter days of winter. You go into hibernation, and turn inside yourself to cope with your pain and sorrow. It may be months before you pick your head up and look around and realize you've been immersed in your grief for so long that you've tuned out everything else- your family, your friends, even the change of seasons. You can only just now start to look around and move a little more outside yourself. This is what I call the heart and soul's "spring awakening." It is the time in your grief journey when your heart and soul begin to "bud" with little shoots of hope- where you can recall your loved one's death and still feel sorrow, but you also begin to remember the joy of your relationship.

## "SPRING CLEANING" YOUR HEART AND SOUL

You will feel a momentum inside you when it is time to start "spring cleaning" your grief. Many people in your life may think they know when it's best for you to start this process. Friends and family may tell you to "get over it and move on," often before you are ready. But only you will know when the time is right. Respect your own timeline for grief; it will be different from everyone else's.

One suggestion for everyone, however: DO NOT DO ANYTHING DRASTIC FOR ONE YEAR. The first year after a loved one dies is full of "firsts:" first holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, etc. Your loved one's death is often too new and the grief too overwhelming for you to make any major decisions such as moving, changing careers or beginning new relationships. Let yourself ease back into life. How you feel right after a death and how you will feel in a year will be different. Commit to the one-year rule, and when that is over, take a deep breath and take stock of your life. Where are you now?

## THE "STUFF" DOES NOT EQUAL THE PERSON

When you are ready to begin to "spring clean" your grief, you will begin to go through your loved one's "stuff," clothes, belongings, etc. It will be a sort of "life in review" for you. As you look through those papers and clothes and files and personal items, the things they loved and used and cherished, don't be surprised if it opens up the sadness all over again. The intensity of this grief may take you by surprise, like an unexpected snow in April. This is normal! Remember: as you go through their belongings, you are NOT giving away the person; you are only giving away and throwing out the stuff. You can never give them away; your love for them will always be with you and comfort you. It is actually very healthy for you to reminisce and cry and daydream of your loved one. While you are literally cleaning out your house, you are also cleaning out your heart and soul... and that is healing.

## "SPRING CLEANING" TIPS

One really great way to do this "spring cleaning" is with someone who loves you and understands this bittersweet time. Reminisce about your loved one. As you go through their belongings, tell stories of



the life you shared with that person. There is comfort in the shared joy and sadness this task will bring. Sometimes, knowing you are helping others can relieve some of the grief you are feeling. Many people give away some of the stuff they clean out to charities so that the gift of your loved one's life can go on. Keep your most treasured, favorite items to celebrate the life of the person who has died, and if you want, display them proudly!

Time by yourself can often be good for "spring cleaning" your heart and soul, too. Alone time gives you the chance to reflect on your life with your loved one, and to start thinking about where you are headed. Lots of people will tell you it will take time, but you'll get "back to normal." A very important thing to understand about losing a loved one is that you will never be "back to normal." Things can never be exactly the same as when your loved one was alive. Instead, you will have to go on without that person physically in your life and create a "new" normal. Your loved one will always be with you, but now, it will be in a different way as you learn to live in the world without them there. How will it all turn out? No one knows... you cannot control the future or plan too far in advance. Make small changes, lean on your friends and family for support, and take it one step at a time. You CAN do it.

### **SEASONS CHANGE, BUT LOVE NEVER DIES**

The death of a loved one is devastating. But death and loss are NOT the final word. Seasons change, and with death, relationships change, too. But in the circle of life, spring always follows winter, and new life grows from the greatest despair and loss. Embrace your pain, and when you are ready, do some "spring cleaning" and start letting it go. Your emptiness will be filled with new gifts and ways of loving your loved one, and you will be able to move on to the next season of your life.

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Megan Meade-Higgins is a Licensed Master of Social Work (LMSW) specializing in bereavement issues and grief management.

