

How to Become a Dream Catcher after Loss



*“Turn your cant’s
into cans..
and your dreams into plans”*
By Nan Zastrow

*“We must be willing to let go of the life we planned,
so we can accept the life that is waiting for us.”*
(Joseph Campbell)

After loss, we emphasize the irrational fears and uncertainty with a multitude of “what if” questions.

What if I can’t cope with the gaiety and celebration of holidays and special family events? What if my family and friends aren’t sensitive to my needs? What if the worse happens? What if nothing can replace our traditional celebrations? What if I don’t feel anything at all?

These are common questions that plague the bereaved when family gatherings are anticipated after the death of a loved one. Circumstances change in every family, and death is not the only reason for the change. Divorce, marriage, illness, disability, families separated geographically also contribute to the necessity of reevaluating our current circumstances and our family gatherings. Things can’t always continue as expected. When life forces change, we begin to re-think how we can do things differently to maintain the camaraderie we previously had.

The phrase “what if” is about speculation. We don’t know what may or may not happen, but we want desperately to cover ourselves for all the possibilities. And amazingly, someone in the family

becomes the person who creatively suggests a new way of doing something. That person becomes the Dream Catcher (someone who created possibilities). They present the possibility of putting the negative “what ifs” behind and focusing on the positive “what ifs” instead!

Traditions we enjoyed with family and friends have a lot of emotion attached to them. Our brains recorded the sights, sounds and smells; and we anticipate how each holiday will be. We expect each to be a pleasant experience. Society has also taught us that family counts, gatherings are essential, and during this time of peace and love we can put aside our differences, if only for a little while.

Sometimes, what we really need to focus on as circumstances change and demand our attention, is how to build a new dream or plan that we can live with and still preserve the integrity of the family gathering we once knew. It's okay to change.

Becoming a Dream Catcher requires taking steps to create a new plan well in advance of the anticipated event. Here's how to begin.

1. Develop an idea. Identify a dream or a tradition you would like to continue, if possible. Or brainstorm about something new that you've thought about as a new tradition for family. Perhaps a memory from your past is too enticing to discontinue. Think about how you can re-invent how you do it. Maybe you have always wanted to try something new...like a themed gathering (make it or bake it). Be creative. Get input from family/friends. Develop an idea old or new.

2. Define the Dream Outcome. Ask yourself, "What outcome would indicate to me that my new idea was a success?" Success can be measured in this: family had fun. You shared memories. You laughed, cried, or share hugs. You felt close to your loved ones and included people you love. If your day wasn't as hard as you thought it would be, you've created a successful revised or new tradition.

3. Take a Dream Reality check. Be realistic. All plans and dreams come with obstacles. Define what might be your obstacles such as your emotions, memories of the past, cooperation of family/friends, financial resources, travel, or time limitations. Knowing what your challenges are before you develop your plan will best help you avoid the objections. Negotiate obstacles before initiating your plan to minimize negative response.

4. Expect Dream Crushers. Inevitably, there will be someone with a negative attitude who discounts your attempts. Clue them into your plan initially. Attempt to resolve the nay-sayer objections, but don't give up because of this obstacle. Sometimes you can be your own dream crusher by giving up when the pain gets personal, when you feel unworthy, or when you make

your dream too big of a project. Deal with dream-crushers and then move forward for the sake of others who like the idea.

5. Enlist Dream Builders. These are the awesome people who are willing to help you achieve your plan. They volunteer and are there to "save the day." They believe in you and give you confidence. Make them a part of the action that makes it happen. If they are invested in your plan, they will help you make it happen!

6. Make your Dream meaningful. Invite participation from everyone. Make your plan a family activity. Create good intentions. Make something big, smaller. Make something small...bigger! Create a ritual. Make it simple, but not a surprise. Let it unfold either as it is planned or as it evolves. Meaningful is far better than perfect.

7. Commit to your plan. "Turn your cant's into cans. And your dreams into plans." If you have to write it down to follow through, do so. But in all ways commit. When the event is over, you will be so grateful for the thought and time you put in to making it "better" than expected.

The benefits of becoming a Dream Catcher and building a new dream will continue to help you heal your grief. You will see that change doesn't need to intimidate you. If you can re-invent a tradition, you can re-invent your positive attitude about life. You will see things differently. Being a Dream Catcher also allows you to share the legacy of your loved one who died. And most important, it can inspire you to live at least one day of a family gathering with purpose—not pity. It is a path to Hope.

Over the years, since the death of our son, Chad, our family gatherings have evolved and changed numerous times due to circumstances such as death of family members, marriages, college, and a smaller number of people attending. I'm not suggesting that the nostalgia for the way things used to be doesn't creep into my thoughts almost every time, because it does. But, I've also realized that life changes are a reality. My life is now driven by "what's next?" and how do we cope with that? Every situation has possibilities and most times the changes are welcomed, simpler, and just as satisfying. But that never stops me from having a new Dream!

This article is based on the community program *How to Become a Dream Catcher* presented by Nan & Gary Zastrow in 2014.