Continuing bonds

The sometime bumpy journey of the process of grief comes with no road map or instruction manual. Amid the unpredictable waves of emotional distress and confusion, our path may become clouded and our destination unclear. We begin to realize that grief is not neat and well-organized stages, but a messy meandering of highs and lows, peaks and “pukes”.

As we struggle to find our way, well-intentioned friends or family members may urge us toward “finding closure,” “moving on,” or “getting over” our loved one’s death. These concepts, however, become anything but comforting and can often be maddening as we try to envision “getting over” this person who has held such a special place in our heart.

As you courageously continue down your pathway of grief, remember the words of the playwright Robert Anderson. As he begins his remarkable play I Never Sang for My Father, he reminds us that “Death ends a life, but it doesn’t end a relationship....” In that simple statement, he embodies the concept of “continuing bonds.”

Continuing bonds in the context of grief is simply the recognition that people do not “let go” of a relationship, but transform it. They transform it by continuing to incorporate their loved one into their lives even as they invest in new relationships and create a “new normal” for themselves in a world that is forever changed.

What are some of the ways that we can incorporate our loved one into our lives as we move down this path?

Tell the story. Whether with friends or family, find ways to continue to tell your loved one’s story. Each time that you tell it, you will begin to come to new understandings of the role he or she played in your life. And with that understanding, growth and wisdom will develop.

Continued...
Supporting your child:

“What do I say when my child asks where our loved one has gone after death?”

Start by providing concrete details about where the person’s physical body has been taken. Remember that some words (such as funeral home, cemetery, and cremation) may be unfamiliar to the child and thus may need to be described or defined. For example, you might say, “Our loved one’s body was taken to a place called a funeral home, which is a place that takes care of a body when it has died” or “Sometimes a person’s body is buried in the ground in a place called a cemetery, and sometimes the body is cremated, or changed into ashes, which can be kept in a special container, or scattered in a special place.”

Children often ask questions related to spiritual beliefs about what happens to people when they die. When addressing this type of question, try to frame your answers within the context of your family’s beliefs and values. For example, when talking about a person’s soul (or whatever makes a person unique or special), you might start with, “Our family believes that when a person dies....” Be careful when describing the “place” that a person’s soul or spirit has gone, as children hear things very literally and may think they can visit the person at that place.

The concept of “continuing bonds” acknowledges the ongoing memory of a person in a family’s life even after the person’s death. Finding ways to incorporate the loved one into a child’s everyday life can be more beneficial than trying to explain where the person is now. A family shares this example of how they remember their father who died: “On special days, the children light a candle, say a prayer, and talk about Dad and their memories of that day. This tradition helps us through the times we want to think of him, talk about what we miss, or tell him about something that has happened.” This family also sees hearts, “a perfect dirt heart in the grass, a perfect heart-shaped piece of driftwood, and heart-shaped clouds on the first day of school”, as signs from their father.

Finally, books can help kids learn more about death and continuing bonds. Try: I Miss You by Pat Thomas, What is Death? by Etan Boritzer, The Invisible String by Patrice Karst, and The Dandelion Seed by Joseph P. Anthony.