

THRIVING

A JOURNAL OF WELL-BEING from
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Living With Grief: How to Survive a Significant Loss

One of the hardest things we'll ever experience is the loss of someone—or something—dear to us. Grieving is a normal and natural response to this loss. While death is one of the most common losses, grief also comes with other big and small life changes, such as a serious illness, the end of a relationship, the loss of a job, relocating to an unfamiliar city, or other lifestyle changes.

Even if you aren't currently grieving, it can be beneficial to think about the grief process. At its core, grief is a part of the experience of being alive...and human. And while grief isn't pleasant, it can give us insight, compassion and strength that we wouldn't otherwise have found.

Here are some ways to access those greater qualities, survive a significant loss or help someone experiencing grief.

1. Expect a process.

In stark contrast to how frequently TV characters talk about "getting closure," in reality, grief is an ongoing experience. The goal of grieving isn't to "get to the bottom of it" or to stop feeling a certain way. Instead, it's a process of learning to live with your emotions every day and every moment. Even years later, reminders like a special day or the smell of a favorite meal may trigger a fresh wave of memories and feelings linked to the loss.

2. Acknowledge the loss.

"When a person is born we rejoice, and when they're married we jubilate," wrote Margaret Mead, "but when they die we try to pretend

nothing has happened." If someone in your life is grieving, do your best to acknowledge that something has happened. Avoid clichés. Don't force a conversation if the person isn't ready to talk. While it may feel awkward, a simple gesture like a hug or sitting together in silence can have meaning. An offer to help with a household task, such as running errands or making a meal, can also go a long way.

3. Do the grief work.

In our fast-paced world, we tend to expect things to be quick, direct and convenient. Living with grief isn't any of these things. There is no "one-size-fits-all" solution, no series of steps to make it hurt less, no magical approach that shortens the time it takes to heal. Instead, living with grief requires us to feel our feelings, fully and completely. In the words of poet Emily Dickinson: "The best way out is through."

4. Ask for help.

Lean on your support system. If you're not sure how to ask for help, "I'm having a hard time..." is a good way to start. If you need help beyond what your friends and family can provide, seek the support of a grief group as well as your counselor or therapist.

As with any process, it takes time to learn new skills and ways to cope with grief. Be gentle with yourself as you experience strong feelings. That kindness toward yourself can be the important first step toward a broader healing that will have ramifications after the grief has subsided. *

10 Things to Change in 2011

The turning of a year turns our thoughts to how we might improve upon the year that's receding. Here are 10 suggestions for things to change in 2011.

1. Fear of making a mistake.

Face it, you will. Do your best and no one can fault you.

2. Jumping to conclusions.

Think situations through before rendering judgment. Consider whether you know all of the facts.

3. Trying to please everyone.

It's just not possible, and the effort usually makes YOU displeased.

4. Thinking you're always right.

Opening to other points of view can be a liberating experience.

5. Putting yourself down.

Modesty may be a virtue, but self-denigration does nothing but harm.

6. Overly focusing on the negative.

You don't have to be Pollyanna, but don't miss the good things in your life.

7. Regret. Learn the lessons of the past, and then let your regrets go. Nothing is served by dwelling on them.

8. Comparing yourself to others.

This is a destructive game you can never win. Refuse to engage in it.

9. Despair. No matter how unfortunate your circumstances, it is possible to improve them. Seek help and support.

10. Fear of aging. Medical advances, exercise, good nutrition and community raise our life expectancy and well-being. Embrace those elements and enjoy your longer life. *

A Letter From

Margaret Hood Black



Grief is the natural result of a loss of some kind. That loss can be big, such as the death of a loved one, or smaller, such as a change in lifestyle. Whatever the source, grief deserves our attention and respect. As the article on page 1 explores, when we acknowledge our feelings of grief, we receive gifts of insight and strength in return.

Another condition that deserves our attention is unworthiness. Too many of us feel unworthy and then set out (unconsciously) to prove that we are through poor choices. As the article on page 3 reveals, we're usually not even aware that unworthiness is at the root of those choices. The article offers a three-step process for routing out unworthiness and replacing it with affirming beliefs instead.

One of the ways that unworthiness can manifest is in addiction, such as addictive eating, the subject of the article on page 4. Often fueled by anxiety, addictive eating can lead to serious health consequences. The article includes warning signs of the disorder as well as a path for recovery.

Also in this issue, the quiz asks how healthy your sex life is and the Top 10 suggests things to change in 2011.

If you have questions about any of the articles or would like more copies, please don't hesitate to call.

May this season bring you deeper connection with yourself and others.

How Healthy Is Your Sex Life?

Sex is play. It is celebration—the glue that keeps a relationship together during difficult times. However, keeping that sexual spark alive in a marriage or a long-term relationship can be a challenge. But those who take the time to cultivate a loving and tender relationship will reap the reward of feeling more connected. These couples also tend to be more physically healthy! Take the quiz below to find out if you have a thriving sex life.



True False

- 1. My partner and I communicate in an open and loving manner about most things that matter to us.
- 2. I am able to articulate my sexual needs to myself. I know what I like and what I don't like.
- 3. I communicate those likes and dislikes to my partner. I don't expect him or her to "just know" how to please me.
- 4. Without judgment or embarrassment, I talk openly and fearlessly with my partner about my thoughts and feelings about sex.
- 5. I share my sexual hopes, dreams, and aspirations in an intimate manner with my partner.
- 6. I avoid making assumptions about what does and doesn't turn on my partner. I ask for feedback and guidance.
- 7. Experimentation and play are key elements in my sexual relationship.
- 8. I have realistic expectations of my partner and I avoid being overly demanding.
- 9. I enjoy having sex with my partner on a regular basis.
- 10. I look forward to having sex with my partner and do not see it as a chore or obligation.
- 11. My partner and I make time for sex and don't allow it to end up on the backburner.
- 12. I leave unexpected notes and surprise gifts for my partner.
- 13. Foreplay is an integral part of my sex life.
- 14. My partner and I are able to embrace and incorporate each other's turn-ons in a healthy and loving manner.

If you marked true on most of the questions, your sex life is likely healthy and vibrant. If you marked "false" on most of the questions, don't worry. Cultivating a loving sexual relationship with your partner is possible. Jack Morin, author of *The Erotic Mind*, recommends that couples hone their communication skills as a first step towards a healthy sex life. If you have questions or want to talk about your response to this quiz, please don't hesitate to call. ✧

Are You Worth It? You Decide.

As comedienne Lucille Ball quipped: “You really have to love yourself to get anything done in this world.” Part of that self-love is feeling that you’re “worth it”—that you are good enough, and that you deserve respect, kindness, and satisfaction with your life. Although this seems simple enough, unworthiness is more common in our culture than we might expect.

Simply put, “worthiness” is a person’s judgment of their own value, merit, or usefulness. It stems from our deep human need to be known and seen for who we really are and what we have to give. In healthy amounts, it’s the sentiment most clearly expressed in the words of author and poet Maya Angelou: “I’m not perfect, but I’m pretty good.”

In contrast, unworthiness is often a self-fulfilling downward spiral, where a person believes she isn’t helpful, useful, or good. Someone who believes that he’s worthless may also set out to prove his worthlessness through a series of poor choices.

How to Recognize Unworthiness

Many people who have issues with unworthiness tend to internalize and overly-personalize situations. If something goes wrong, they’re at fault. *Of course he yelled at me, the thinking goes, I burned the chili. Or, I’ll never get that pay raise, so why would I bother even asking?*

Unworthiness tends to involve repetitive, unhelpful self-talk that’s dominated by what has been called “the Judge” or one’s “inner critic.”

Remember what happened last time? this voice warns. You made a fool of yourself.

But for every instance where unworthiness manifests as a habit of underachieving at work or the avoidance of healthy risk-taking in relationships, there are just as many instances where unworthiness is so embedded that a person isn’t even aware that it’s at the root of their choices.

For instance, a person may find herself in a series of abusive relationships or with an addiction. Such issues often act as masks, covering up a core feeling of unworthiness. In order to successfully address the issue, the unworthiness needs to be addressed also.

The “Quest for Dignity”

It’s been said that all of life is a quest for dignity. And as you continue on your own quest, here are three starting points for developing a stronger sense of worth:

1. Look at your patterns.

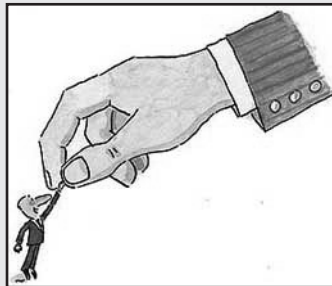
Overcoming unworthiness asks us to become more reflective and self-aware. This isn’t always easy—especially when your inner critic has a stronghold on the way you talk with yourself. It would rather you continue obeying it, rather than learn to listen to kinder and more nurturing parts of yourself. In the face of your inner critic’s resistance, be brave. Examine the choices you’ve made in the past, and notice what they share in common. If things always seem to go well, *right until the moment you mess it up*, there may be a deeper belief of unworthiness that’s overtaken your healthy sense of perspective. Deep down, do you believe you actually deserve success?

2. Zoom out.

Take a moment—and a deep breath—and consider the external factors that lead you to doubt your own goodness and worth. Was a parent or other authority figure critical of you? Sometimes the loudest inner critic isn’t our voice, but one that we’ve internalized and adopted as our own.

3. Make a decision.

You have the power to choose which beliefs are in your life, and which are not welcome. Once you accept and internalize a belief, it’s harder to uproot it from your subconscious mind. So cultivate awareness of the beliefs and judgments in your life, and get in the habit of deciding whether or not each one deserves a place in your mind.



To aid you in that, try this Gatekeeper Exercise: the next time someone tells you or you tell yourself: *You’re not [articulate/confident/attractive] enough* or *You’ll never [start your own company/find a sexy and loving relationship/lose 60 pounds]*, take it as an invitation to pause, take a deep breath, and decide whether to “accept, reject or reflect” upon it. With practice, you may be surprised how many beliefs and judgments come your way that you no longer automatically accept as your own...and how the simple act of gatekeeping helps to protect and build your sense of value and self-worth.

While overcoming unworthiness is a process that takes time and effort, the payoff is nothing short of life-changing. *

Addictive Eating: Are You Powerless Over Food?

The holidays of winter often bring to mind the image of a full table—and a full stomach. We gather with friends and family and feast merrily on pies and potatoes, turkey and ham and all of the fixings that many of us dearly enjoy.

There is another side to that pretty picture, however.

What if our extra consumption of calories during the winter is fueled not by good cheer and companionship, but by anxiety? And, further, what if it's not the gathering of loved ones that we most look forward to, but the food that we can't get out of our minds?

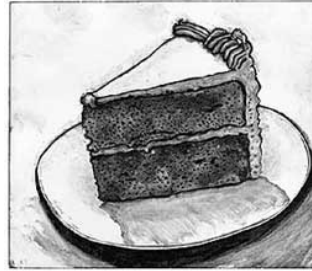
Also, while we may welcome gatherings with friends and family, they do bring with them extra stress and preparation. Add to the mix the anxiety caused by a sputtering economy, and many of us might find ourselves reaching for "comfort" food.

An anxiety-provoked behavior, such as overeating, is an attempt to cope with that anxiety, but as with most such behaviors, it can become a problem itself. Overeating can become a compulsion and lead to health issues such as diabetes and obesity.

This is not to say that you should reflexively turn down that second piece of pumpkin pie, but if you were dreaming of that pie for days, and if, in fact, you care more about that pie than the people around you, then you may have a problem that needs attention.

According to Overeaters Anonymous, here are a few other common markers of compulsive eating:

1. Do you eat when you're not hungry?
2. Do you go on eating binges for no apparent reason?
3. Do you have feelings of guilt and remorse after overeating?
4. Do you look forward with pleasure and anticipation to the time when you can eat alone?
5. Is your weight affecting the way you live your life?
6. Do you resent others telling you to "use a little willpower" to stop overeating?
7. Despite evidence to the contrary,



have you continued to assert that you can diet "on your own" whenever you wish?

8. Do you eat to escape from worries or trouble?
9. Does your eating behavior make you or others unhappy?

If you think that you might be overeating compulsively, it is possible to recover. Help is available through the 12-Step programs Overeaters Anonymous and Food Addicts Anonymous, as well as a therapist or counselor.

With the help and support of others, you can uncover the reasons behind your compulsive eating, find other strategies for coping with anxiety and get on a food program that can sustain and, even, restore your health.

While you may still have those dreams about that second piece of pumpkin pie, you can also live a happy, healthy and fulfilling life without it. *

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Margaret is a Licensed Professional Counselor and psychotherapist. Margaret provides couple, individual and group therapy. In addition to working with adolescents and young adults, Margaret has a special interest in marriages, families and women's issues. Margaret has two offices conveniently located at: 1960 E SH 249 (NW Houston) and in Bellaire (Galleria Area).

For more information on her services, please feel free to call: 713-562-7819.