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## **Memories Can Overcome Grief**

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"The act of dying is one of the acts of life."- Marcus Aurelius

The burden of watching someone you love in the final stage of life is very difficult. As I drove to my grandmother's house recently, I felt a tremendous weight of sadness and impending loss. My grandmother is two months shy of her ninety-third birthday and is dying. She is bedridden and rapidly losing weight due to an inability to swallow. In the interim, I have been watching helplessly as she slips away, fading into the shadows. As I approached my grandmother's house I felt an overwhelming sense of apprehension, unsure what to expect. When I entered her room, I realized that her condition had deteriorated considerably since my visit two weeks prior.

I knew it was time to say good-bye to the grandmother I loved and who gave me so much—courage, confidence and unending support. My grandmother always had the strength to transcend with dignity and class the sometimes difficult hand life had dealt her. She kept her family together after the sudden, early death of my grandfather and she has been the glue that kept the extended family together all these many years. Now she looked small and frail, her breathing labored and her body weak from lack of nutrition.

Despite her compromised, fragile condition, I saw only the still the wonderful, loving, larger than life matriarch of my childhood who was my mentor and model for strength and independence. Even though my grandmother could no longer speak, my thoughts traveled back to times and memories of her lively discussions about politics and religion. During my visit, my aunt and I spent some time taking a walk down memory lane and reliving the paths our lives had taken, many that included my grandmother and some that did not. No matter what the topic of discussion all the stories reflected her powerful influence on our lives, either directly or indirectly.

Relationships define us and who we are; they become intimately entwined into our sense of self and are thus a living part of us. It is terribly painful to lose key relationships, because with such losses, we also lose a part of ourselves. It is not easy to let go of close relationships that were instrumental in molding who we are and were positive influences in our lives. Dealing with the emotions that occur in the grieving process takes much time and energy--both physically and emotionally. It is normal for people to grieve in different ways, thus there is no correct way to grieve. During this visit with my grandmother, I watched as three of her children spent the

precious time that remained dealing with a myriad of emotions while easing their way through the important business of grieving the loss of someone they loved. The grieving process was very individualized for each based on their own needs, personality and personal relationship with their mother.

Learning that a loved one's death is imminent can be very difficult. There are many different emotions that may be triggered when hearing about the impending death of a loved one. Not all the thoughts and emotions experienced will make sense or fit well together, but they are all valid and important experiences. Elizabeth Kubler Ross is well known for her paradigm of the grief process and grief stages. In situations where a loved one is dying, persons may experience what is referred to as anticipatory grief--a grief reaction that occurs prior to an impending loss. The most common components of an anticipatory grief reaction include: depression (mood, appetite and sleep changes), heightened concern for the dying person, and attempts to adjust to the consequences of the death. Just as there is no right way to grieve after someone dies, there is no right way to work through anticipatory grief. Grief emotions may vary in their intensity and how much they impact an individual. This often depends on one's coping style, personality, previous experience with death and dying, the relationship with the dying person, and the time left to establish closure.

As I drove home a few hours later, I realized that my sadness was somewhat lifted as I was able to grasp the perspective that death is part of the cycle of life. It is an inevitable, inseparable part of living. Death should not cause us to live in dread but rather to live our lives to the fullest and in the best way possible so that the legacy we leave behind lives on in others. That is exactly what my grandmother has done. Her children, grandchildren, great grandchildren and extended in-laws are grieving each in their own way. While my grandmother's house may no longer be the hub of family functions, the stories and the voices still echo through my mind and my life. I know that while things may never be the same once she is gone, the cherished memories will never be erased and will replay over and over again.