

Death and The Fog of Recovery

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Later this afternoon, I will be putting my oldest cat to sleep. Dinky is 18 years old, and she's been with me since she was three. She's a very mellow cat, so much so that I don't ever recall having heard her once meow. She does purr a lot, however, and she has been a loyal and loving friend to me for these past fifteen years. Sadly, age has taken its toll, and recently Dinky lost both her sight and hearing, and now she refuses to eat and barely drinks any water. So, rather than wait for something worse to happen, I've decided to put her to sleep before she has to endure any more suffering.

Death of a loved one, person or pet, is possibly one of the most painful events in our lives. Even when a long and enjoyed life is lived, the ending still brings unbearable sadness and grief. And in cases where death comes to someone way before their time, the impact can go from unbearable to devastating. For those of us in long-term, stable recovery, the death of a loved one can be a soul rendering process which leads to relapse.

There are two types of grief we experience when someone we love dies. The first and most obvious is for the loved one themselves. We feel the pain of empathy and compassion we have for their loss, their final suffering, and their death. Though we have not yet had this experience ourselves, we know how difficult and trying this process must be for any dying individual. But there is also another type of compassion we experience when someone we care about dies: grief for ourselves.

When a loved one passes away, not only do they die, but an important part of our own life passes away as well. We no longer get to experience the joy of spending time with this individual any more. We no longer get to communicate with them and share time with them as we have become accustomed to doing. And we are left with an unexpected and unwanted void which we are usually ill prepared to handle. So their loss becomes our loss, and we grieve for both them and ourselves.

Recovery, like life, is a day-by-day process that is continually changing, continually challenging, and continually calling us to be our best. Stressors, on the

other hand, though at times slow like rust, can often be violent assaults against our stability as occurs when a loved one dies. And so, too, the fog of recovery can either cover us slowly, or we can find ourselves suddenly immersed in an unfathomable haze brought on by the trauma and loss of death.

Often we have little means to prepare for death, as it can occur suddenly and without warning. At other times, it can be the result of a protracted illness or just a normal end to the aging process. No matter what the cause, sudden or prolonged, though we can do some preparation, we can seldom do enough. Even in cases where we know death is eminent and pre-grieving gives us some comfort and relief prior to their departure, the end result can still shake us to our core.

Death is possibly the greatest stressor anyone's recovery process can endure. The initial shock can last months or even years, and though time can ease our suffering, the pain never completely goes away. It is, in one sense, the gold standard of a stable recovery, for if you can endure the loss of a loved one without relapse, then you have truly achieved a remarkable degree of stability. And should you waiver under the unbearable weight of such a loss, shore up the foundations of your recovery against that fog by going back to the basics: attend meetings, seek grief counseling, talk with others, avoid isolation, etcetera.

Though we can not survive our own deaths, we can survive the deaths of others, even of those we love the most. It is the price we pay for being loving and lovable beings, and it is a challenge like no other to our stable recoveries. But like all challenges, it can be managed and, over time, become bearable as we continue on our recovery pathways.

For Dinky: 1998-2016

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