

Name

# Are We There Yet?

## *****by Suzanne Howell*****

One perfectly ordinary Saturday morning, my friend JoAnn’s 54-year-old husband announced that he wasn’t feeling well, sat down in a chair and had a fatal heart attack. His wife and son saw his eyes roll back and knew that he had died instantly.

JoAnn, feeling numb, angry, scared and a little bit crazy, arranged a funeral service and began the process of grieving.

For months, she struggled valiantly to hold life together financially and emotionally. But as the first anniversary of her husband’s death drew near, friends and co-workers began to ask her why it was taking so long.

“Aren’t you doing better yet? It’s been almost a year.” “So and So is doing better.” “Well, Dorothy is coming to the party and her husband died recently.”

Of course, this only made JoAnn feel worse. So, she began to talk to me about why she wasn’t doing as well as her friends expected. Was there something wrong with her or with how she was grieving?

The first thing JoAnn needed to know was that how another person is doing with grief is a poor measuring tool, as is expecting grief to be over in a certain length of time, like one year.

**As unique as a fingerprint**
These measuring tools are poor because JoAnn’s and your grief are as unique as your fingerprint. Only you experienced the particular circumstances surrounding this death.

Circumstances include whether the death was sudden, anticipated, or one of several.

A sudden death like that of JoAnn’s husband is likely to include a long period of shock that slows the grief process.

An anticipated death can wear down your physical strength with long-term caregiving, leaving you less equipped to cope with practical and emotional details.

Multiple deaths require you to grieve simultaneously, and the grief of each death complicates the other.

Your own personality adds to the uniqueness of grief. Do you see the glass as half empty or half full? Seeing it as half full helps you to recognize resources available for you.

Are you a more social person? Then you find it easier to share your story with friends and help yourself face the reality of death. If you tend toward isolation and avoiding strong emotion, you struggle more in the grief process.

Past experiences also color the fingerprint of your grief. Have you experienced other losses and developed coping skills? Are you still coping with a previous life change?

Maybe past experiences taught you poor coping, like replacing the loss. That worked when your bicycle was stolen, but it doesn’t work when your wife has died.

If experience has taught you to cry over your loss, face the reality, and put your energy into the present, this serves you well.

Your relationship to the person who died and how others are handling the death shape your grief process as well.

Important relationships are fluid, always changing. Your relationship at the time of death may be clouded by things you did not get to say. You may have assumed the role of the “strong one” to help others with their grief. These factors change the fingerprint of your grief, usually by slowing the process.

Finally, the support system available to you and how well you use it flavors the uniqueness of your experience.

Family and friends who communicate often help keep you centered, provide listening ears, and help you do the hard work.

JoAnn also needed to provide emotional and financial support for her teenage son, increasing her need for support from others. You may need to augment your system by joining a support group for grieving people.

**A place in time**
All of these factors do more than make your grief experience unique; they make it impossible for you to grieve on a schedule.

I wish that in the three days we are given off work, or at that magical mark of one year, the pain and adjusting would be over. But there is no such magical mark in time.

So how do you know how you are doing and how long it will take? How do you measure grief?

**What do you know?**
The first measure I proposed to JoAnn was one you are already working on, because you are reading this magazine. How are you doing with you