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Will I Ever Know Happiness or Joy Again?

by Susan Whitmore, Erika's Mom
Founder & President



As you may know, we facilitate support group meetings and offer private, confidential grief counseling. Our support group meetings are beautiful. The parents are amazing and courageous. The process is powerful and inexplicably healing—the love and support, palpable. The camaraderie and bonding that occur over time is life-altering. I am regularly humbled being there midst such beauty and insight. During these meetings, in the online emails you send us, and in my private grief counseling, I hear the same question over and over again from every parent, and that question is what I want to discuss with you today. I asked it myself for the first two years: “Will I ever know another moment of happiness or joy again?” Erika was gone, and with her, I believed, went all the happiness and joy life held. From that place, I didn’t see how it was possible to ever be happy again.

Of great concern to each of us whose child has died is whether or not we will ever know true happiness or experience real joy again. We are experiencing a loss and emotions that are beyond understanding or explanation. Regardless of other losses we have been through in life, nothing could have prepared us on any level for what we experience over the death of our child. The pain in the beginning is so intense and relentless that we can’t feel anything else, so we don’t see how we could ever start from there and make our way to a life that includes happi-

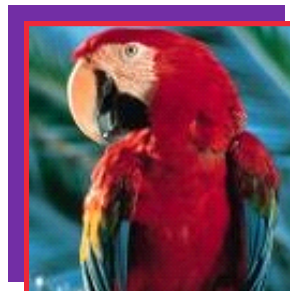
ness and joy. The distance seems simply too far, and the task beyond daunting—it appears to be utterly impossible!

From that perspective, the logical conclusion we draw is that our lives—with all the beauty, love, and happiness they included when our children were here with us—are over. We fear that our lives will be nothing more than a game of endurance until the day we die. It is a frightening notion that we leave a life of “automatic” joy and happiness and enter a life where its presence is utterly absent. It is also somewhat shocking when we realize how **much** our child was the source of our everyday happiness. It’s as if a vacuum comes along and sucks all of the positive things right out of our lives, leaving despair in its wake.

That is how it is.

Yet it is only true for a while.

The Dalai Lama said, “Consider the following. We humans are social beings. We come into the world as a result of others’ actions. We survive here in dependence on others. Whether we like it or not, there is hardly a moment of our lives when we do not benefit from others’ activities. For this reason it is hardly surprising that most of our happiness arises in the context of our relationship with others.” Nothing affirms that statement more than the relationship we share with our children. They are everything to us—our meaning and purpose in life, and the source of a love we had never known before they were born. When they die, life seems desolate, like taking a col-



orful photo and turning it to gray. No color is left in our lives, and all we can feel is pain and hopelessness—all we can see is a dull, drab world all around

us. Parents don't see how they can take a bleak, gray canvas and restore it to the beauty, radiance, and boldness it used to hold.

I have learned much about happiness and joy since Erika's death. I know that, despite other losses I had experienced in my life, I often took the presence of happiness and joy for granted because it came and went regularly. It never dawned on me that I might reach a point in my life where I had to actually "do" something to create a life that would include what I refer to as a "new joy" and a "new happiness." Yet just ask someone who has endured a lifetime of chronic depression, and he will tell you what it is like to have to consciously "do" something to create happiness. Benjamin Disraeli said, "Action may not always bring happiness, but there is no happiness without action."



This is a foreign concept to many. Mostly, we are used to "going with the happiness flow." Happiness is just there, and when it isn't, we know it will return. I learned that I had an expectation that life should include more joy and happiness than trials and tribulations. My assumption was that life was "supposed" to be more happy than not—and, when it wasn't, I believed something was wrong. I have learned to better accept both as a natural part of living.

So what is the secret to happiness? And will we ever know and feel it again? Leo Buscaglia said, "What we call the secret of happiness is no more a secret than our willingness to choose life." There is a key word in that statement: *choose*. And never have we had to more forcefully make that conscious choice than after our child has died. What I knew of happiness before Erika's death was that it could be counted on. After Erika's death, that changed. Although other parents further along in their grieving process would assure me that happiness would return, I didn't see how that was possible, and I certainly didn't know how to actually make that happen. There was no "how to" manual with directions for that one. Erika was gone . . . forever. The only logical conclusion based on my experience was that the happiness I knew in my life was gone forever, too.

Yet I kept trying to create the same feelings that I had when Erika was here—kept trying to get back to "normal." I said, "Okay, there's been enough pain. It's been long enough, so can I please get better and get back to living life again?" I was frustrated! *That* "normal" never happened, and I know now that it never will. Because the life I led then—the life that I kept trying to get back to so everything could be normal once again—was the way it was due in large part to my relationship with Erika. Now that our relationship had changed with her death, so had my life, and so had my "normal." That also translated to "the old life as I knew it was over, and the new life was waiting for me to make it what it would become." The ball was in my court. The canvas was in front of me, and there was a "new normal" waiting. So now what?

As much as we want to, we can never go back. We all know that is true on an intellectual level, but we humans

do not change easily, especially when life was good before. With other traumas or tragedies, we have most likely looked back and said, "It was hard then, but I'm glad it happened because, otherwise, I wouldn't be where I am today." Haven't we all heard someone who has been through a difficult period say that, if they had it to do over again, they wouldn't change a thing? This time, however, that does not fit. My friend, Marc Klaas, father to the beautiful Polly Klaas, gave me this gem. When I interviewed him for *Portraits of Hope*, I asked him how Polly's death had changed him. Marc gave me a list of positive changes, noting the more loving and caring person he had become, how he was able to go forward into his life, literally giving his corporation away and creating *Klaas Kids*, and doing so without any fear or hesitation of how he would make money, and he shared how many amazing people he had met since Polly's death. Then he paused, looked right into my eyes, and said, "But, I would trade it all back for being the crappy little materialistic, happy pig I was before in a heartbeat."

Since going back to the lives we had before is not possible, then we must go on, eventually re-investing in life. Of course, this is not realistic in the beginning, as there is a proper time for everything. But when you are ready, and you will most likely know when that is, you will turn your vision to the future and start taking the steps needed as you rebuild your life and create a new, wonderful relationship with your child. Yes, Buscaglia said it accurately when he said the secret of happiness was "choosing" life. And you don't get there quickly or easily. You might even feel upset just reading these words, because every part of you is crying out against the very concept of "going on," as if that translates into "leaving your child behind." Yet, in reality, you are in control of doing what-

ever you need or want to do to create your new life and bring your child with you in a new way. You are in control of creating a beautiful relationship with your child that will be loving, powerful, and real. Perhaps you feel guilty even thinking about being happy again, as if that would somehow dishonor your child. Some parents feel they have no right to be happy when their child has died. Yet we are here, and getting back to choosing life—living it to the fullest—we must, and that includes embracing all of the beauty, love, happiness and joy that life holds. Otherwise, we have chosen to lie down and give up. That is no way to treat our precious self, nor is it the way to honor our child's memory. So how do we do it?



" . . . our willingness to choose life."

It is called grief "work" for a reason, because it takes work and a deep commitment to make your life one of new meaning, joy, and happiness. You

need to re-invest in “yourself” by setting a clear goal, just like you have at other times in your life. Here are a few examples of what I am talking about: getting a degree, learning a new trade, losing weight, running a marathon, being a good parent, climbing the corporate ladder, building a home, learning a new language, changing a bad habit, fixing a troubled marriage, and overcoming an illness. All these entail a strong commitment, sacrifice, hard work, and a stick-to-it attitude. You have your own examples you could add to the list. And how did you achieve any of your challenging goals in life? Did you just go through life waiting for everything to fall into place? No. You worked hard at it and went through whatever motions you had to in order to achieve that goal. So the answer to that question, “So how do we do it?” is the same as the answer you



This is our backyard, and my dear neighbor’s cat has set a very clear goal for himself, as he sits inside our bird bath, patiently waiting.

would give anyone who asked you how you achieved any other goal. You achieve rebuilding a new life of happiness and joy the exact same way you accomplished any goal you set for yourself in life. The concept may sound strange—setting a goal of rebuilding your life with new meaning and purpose—yet that is exactly how we begin the process. Anyone who has accomplished any meaningful goal in life will tell you that they made a commitment and then took the first step.

My friends, I say that this is the most important goal you will ever again set for yourself; it is your life!

I want to share a technique with you that has helped me on this journey of learning how to live life without Erika. I do not share this from any kind of professional perspective, but rather as a mother who is constantly searching for support tools that work and that I can then share with you. This is a tool I suggest you try and see if it helps you achieve your goal of rebuilding your life. I used this technique regularly in the first year, since that was when the grief was so difficult and persistent, and I used it off and on throughout the second year as needed. Now I use it when I need to with all areas of my life, changing the phrasing around to suit the situation. It works because, as we already know, what we tell ourselves over time has a deep impact on what we believe to be true, and that influences our outcome. If you aren’t used to trying things “outside the box,” this may seem a little strange or silly at first. Yet you might find, by staying open and being willing to give it a try, that it not only works, but that it is very powerful. Say the

words below, or similar words, out loud at times when you need encouragement and hope. I found they especially worked for me when I was ready to go to sleep, just waking up, crying, or looking into a mirror. As I said, for some of you it may seem silly or feel odd at first, but for me and many others, it has been of tremendous support and assistance. Do it in private. Say the words to yourself over and over again. Eventually, the message starts to become a part of you. Here are several options. By the way, saying “you” instead of “I” is on purpose. I have used my own name in the examples, and you would simply use yours. I used this one sometimes when I was crying and in a lot of pain. I would look in a mirror as I was crying, and I would say:

“It will be okay, Susan. I promise. It will be okay.”

And I would repeat that over and over. And here are phrases I used at other times:

“We will make it, Susan. We **will** make it.”

“Others have done it, and so will you.”

“You **WILL** experience happiness and joy again.”

“You **WILL** create a good life again.”

“You **WILL** find and know inner peace again.”

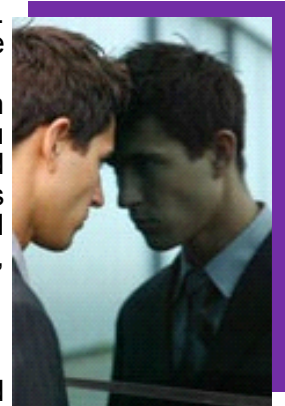
“You **CAN** and **WILL** do this.”

“You **deserve** to be happy.”

These words become true if you are willing to make the commitment and do the work. Just as you did with other goals you have set and achieved in your life, you will need to set a conscious goal of creating a new life that includes happiness and joy. And remember, rebuilding your life means that you bring your child along with you into that new life by creating a new, meaningful relationship with him or her. You will create a new way of relating to your child because, even though your child has died, your love and your relationship has not. **Don’t give up—ever!** You are and always will be your child’s parent. The reality is that, with all of the tools and support *griefHaven* and other organizations offer, and by surrounding yourself with good, supportive, loving people, you can and will achieve your goal.

When you are ready, set that goal and know that we are walking with you every step of the way. Give yourself the gift of at least trying the different types of support that come your way. Although the journey isn’t easy, you have the power within you to mold your life into one that counts and one that honors your child. After all, it’s your life, and life holds an endless host of possibilities.

On behalf of everyone on our Board and Advisory Board, we remind you that you are not alone, because we are committed to you and your journey . . .



griefHaven T-Shirts

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Visit the griefHaven Store—www.griefHaven.org/store

Our logo is an upside-down heart, which represents a heart in grief, a broken heart.

We know that, with hope, love, and support, we are eventually able to turn our hearts right-side up again.



Until they last . . .

Not all sizes are left in all styles. Simply order, and we will let you know if your style and/or size is available. If not, we will send you a full refund.



“Peace of Heart”—Enveloped by hope, love, and support, a broken heart eventually finds its way and is turned right-side up again.



“Where There Is Hope”—Where there is hope, there is a reason to live life fully. We believe the word “hope” is one of the most important words in any language. Wear it proudly.



“Warm Hearts”—With the warmth of hope, love, and support we are able to turn their hearts right-side up again.

“Hopeful Hearts”—This shirt represents the beginning of our journeys with our upside-down heart and all of the different paths and ways we all grieve. In the end, we are all heading for the same place, and that is to turning our hearts right-side up again.



“Nature’s Joy”—We often find that it is through nature that we begin to experience joy and happiness once again. This shirt includes orchids, ferns, and the words “Where Hope Resides.”

These beautiful shirts were designed just for us and represent our journey.

Buy them for yourself, a friend, or just because they look great with everything!