

KEEPING MEMORIES FRESH despite the passage of time

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“How long has it been?”

Bereaved parents are often asked this question. I ask it of you, “How long has it been?”

Now answer this question:
“How long does it feel like
it’s been?”

A common answer is, “On one hand it feels like yesterday. On the other, it feels like a long time ago.”

Why do we experience our lives like this? How can something five or ten years ago feel recent, and something that occurred last week feel forever ago?

Let’s look at the concept of time and try to make some sense of it, with the added bonus that we can gain some insight into our own bereavement process.

Scientists tell us that time can be measured in two ways. One is by a unit of measurement such as seconds, days, years. For example, how old are you? Virtually everybody answers this question in years. But, did you ever consider how many days

old you are? Parents whose child died at less than one month focus on their child’s age in terms of days or weeks of life.

If you are near the age of 27 years you have lived approximately 10,000 days. If you just turned 41, you are nearing 15,000 days. How many of those days in your life do you remember?

If you consider life in terms of seconds, the average American lives about two billion, 500 million seconds (75 years). For many bereaved parents, one of the long-term sources of grief is the fact that their child was deprived of years and decades of living.

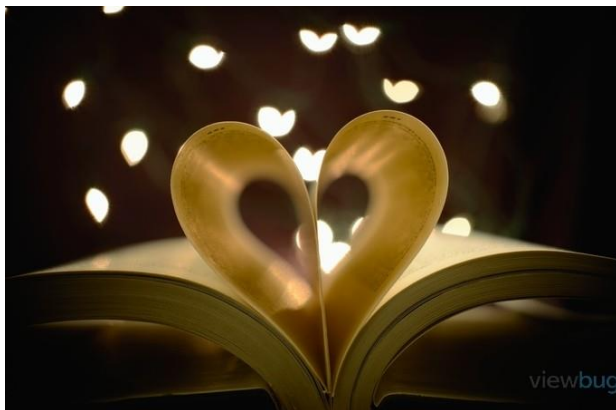
Another way to measure time is by events. How many events of your child’s life do you remember? How vivid are they? What are the triggers of these memories? As the months and years pass, many parents fear forgetting events in their child’s life.

I have a suggestion to help you call up positive memories of your child whenever you wish. First, take out a pen and paper and write every memory that immediately comes to mind. Don’t worry about details for now. Just write. Next, find a label for each of the memories.

For example, a mother whose seven-year-old daughter died writes out on paper four memories that immediately come to mind:

- ◆ her daughter's first day of school
- ◆ hunting for Easter eggs in her new dress
- ◆ riding her bike on her sixth birthday
- ◆ sandcastles they built on their trip to the ocean.

She creates the following labels: First Day at School; Easter Dress; New Bike; Sandcastles. Next, go through each memory and create as much detail as possible for each memory. Describe the setting, what was said, colors, temperature, smells, sounds, touches. Make a story out of the event.



Next, I want you to associate each memory with a different finger on your hands. For the woman above, she would grab the forefinger of her right hand, close her eyes and re-experience the first day at school. Next, she would grab her middle finger and associate it with the Easter dress story, and so on. Then she would practice by associating each of ten stories with a different finger, bringing up the full memory of each event.

Practicing this for a few days can create a very powerful list of quite wonderful memories that you can access at will.

Picture a father standing in line at the grocery store. His 15-year-old son died two years ago and he has recently put together a list of ten of his favorite memories. As he stands in line, he says to himself, "I'm going grab my little finger and, for a few seconds, think about the time we went windsurfing."

As he grabs his finger, he sees his son being shown the fundamentals by the instructor, practicing on land, bending his knees, shifting his weight, getting into the water, climbing on the board, and attempting to stand.

He smiles as he sees both his son and himself fall off the board again and again. He nods as he next has a beautiful scene in his mind of his son proudly standing and gliding across the water with the sun and blue sky in the background. He reaches the check stand, pays his bill and walks out of the store somewhat comforted by a memory he knows he can bring up whenever he wants.

Give this technique a try, but make sure you create crystal clear memories of events in your mind.

Our brain functions in such a way that, as we are aware of the passage of time, we understand that some memories are "older" and more distant than others. However, if we practice on bringing up memories from time to time, we can reinforce the images and transcend the time gap between then and now. As you know, memories are all you have. Why not use them?