

## Grief and Loss series, #2 from Fr. Tom Konopka

*Could I have done anything to prevent this?*

So often after a death, divorce, death of a dream, loss of job, we have a tendency to look back and try to figure out if we could have changed the outcome. I often hear: I should have noticed he/she wasn't feeling good; I must have done something wrong that my relationship died; if only I had listened better or said something; etc. I am always reminding people (and myself) that we make decisions and choices based on the data we have in front of us at that moment in time. Many times, the circumstances are also beyond our control. When someone dies suddenly, the shock is so great that people feel out of control and ungrounded. We lose the person who stabilized our lives and we are free floating in space. For many, this is the scariest time.



For someone who loses a spouse, stability is often a major concern. How will I pay the bills? Can I afford this house? If it is a divorce, how will the children go to college? For a parish community, it is the same. What can we do to stay open? What will happen to us? In a parish community, people will stop coming to Mass because it is too hard to see someone else at the altar. Others will try to maintain everything the way it was, to not acknowledge the death. Often, in a family, people will try to maintain a holiday the way "it was always done" which ends up being a disaster, because the harsh truth is - it will never be the same. In the fear mode, people can develop a lot of shame and guilt, because they feel responsible in some way, whether it is rational or irrational.

It is easy to get stuck in the fear mode and never move into the next part of life. As much as a person is loved and respected, to stay afraid of the future will be paralyzing. One thing that we need to realize as Christians is that our stability is in Jesus. When my father died from cancer when I was 17, my world ended in many ways. A loss of innocence; what could I have done better; if only I had; etc. were my responses. Thankfully, by talking with some good people and saying those things aloud, I was able to move beyond this part of the process and write the next chapter of my own life narrative. I credit my faith in Jesus for helping me see the light, even in the darkness of grief.

A simple practice to use to move beyond this is to take an honest look at what happened and ask yourself, "Given what you knew at the time, could you have done something different?" Even if you could have done something, would it have changed the outcome? Monitoring your anxiety level will also help you to stay in tune with your fear. If it is increasing, start to learn how to do relaxation breathing. Much of the research in anxiety management focuses on the importance of mindfulness. To live mindfully is simply learning to live in the present. It sounds easy, but it demands a lot of practice, but it is worth it.

One other coping mechanism that we have come to terms with is the hard truth that we are not in control of someone else's life or decisions. In fact, there are many things in life that are totally out of our control. As we realize that we could not change the outcome, no matter what we did or did not do, we move into Part 3: I am so mad this happened!