

A Road Map



Traveling Through Grief

by Carolyn Barlow

While reading an article in the Winston-Salem Journal for January 19, 2002, I realized many of the suggestions staff writer Kim Underwood had given for "Driving in the Snow" could also be applied to dealing with grief.

1. **"Regaining directional control: You turn the way you want to be going."** In driving that means turning into the skid. In grief you must turn into your grief for a time or take the time to grieve. Spend time crying, remembering and perhaps honoring your loved one. Many people think they can run away from their grief. Psychologists advise the opposite. Running away just delays the grief and may bring complicated grief at another time.

2. **"It's important not to oversteer. Doing so can create a skid in the opposite direction. So, you want to turn the steering and then turn it back."** Even though you do want to take time to grieve and only you will know how much time you need, it is important to recognize when what you are doing is not making you feel better but making you feel worse. Then it is time to steer in the other direction. Put away

the photos and reminders. Turn your attention to something new. What was best for me was to focus on others, not on myself. I began doing something for someone else rather than thinking of what others could do for me.

3. **"Several people emphasized the importance of experience, particularly because driving safely in the snow requires some techniques that may go against your initial impulses."** I believe it is important to talk to people who have been through a similar loss. They can tell you what they tried and what worked for them. They can also warn you about some pitfalls that you might encounter. If you can find a grief support group, join it. These are the people who will most understand what you are going through and will be most willing to listen as you talk.

4. **"It is important to differentiate between snow and ice, people said. With care, snow can be driven on. On ice though, no one has any real control."** In grief, it is important to be able to distinguish between regular grief over the loss of a loved one and complicated grief, which may become

debilitating. In regular grief you may be able to drive through with the help of a support group. However, in complicated grief, you are in severe depression and are not able to make the choices you need to make. At that time, someone else must intervene. Seeking the help of a professional is necessary. If you aren't sure whether your grief is regular or complicated, call Calvary's Counseling Center for consultation. Someone on the counseling staff will meet with you to evaluate your situation. They will then make recommendations for what you need to do.

5. **"When driving, do everything gently."** In grief, remember that you will probably have difficulty focusing. Even ordinary daily tasks may take a longer time and much more concentration. Give yourself time. Slow down. Cut yourself some slack. You don't have to do everything that you did before. You can actually ask for help or accept some of the help that is being offered by family and friends.

6. **"Don't allow people tailgating you to get you into trouble."** Tailgating is following too closely. In grief,

many will be following you closely. Some will be family and friends who care about you. Some may be co-workers or your boss. Many of these will give you advice and tell you what you should or should not do. Listen politely, but remember, if they have not experienced a similar loss, they have no expertise in this area. Unless you are in complicated grief, you are the best one to determine what is right for you. There is no one way to grieve. If what you are doing is making you feel better and is not unhealthy, then it is probably right for you at that time.

7. **"Planning is crucial. Going over the route in your head will allow you to anticipate such trouble spots as curves and steep hills."** Be aware that even in regular grief there will be extremely difficult times. Planning ahead for special occasions like holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries will make the day a little easier. Talk with your family or friends about what will make you feel more comfortable. Do you want to follow old traditions or do everything differently? Do you want to spend time talking about the deceased and remembering

them in a special way? Thinking about this ahead of time will smooth the road as you travel it. I even thought about what I would say to friends and co-workers when I saw them for the first time and what I would say when I ran into people who had not yet heard of my husband's death. This reduced the anxiety I experienced in these situations.

In another article, "Don't Go Until the Car Has Been Prepped," Kim Underwood states, **"One of the most important points in readying a car for snow and ice should be taken care of long before the first snow."** This also can be applied to dealing with grief. Advanced preparations can make the days following a death much easier. The most important thing you can do is to build a close personal relationship with God. Turn to Him, and He will carry you during this time. Taking care of funeral and burial arrangements, making a will, and designating a power of attorney and a health-care power of attorney will ease the stress on your family. These were decisions that my husband and I had not made. In the hours following his death, making decisions

overwhelmed me. I was in shock; my brain wouldn't function. "I don't know" seemed to be my only response. Don't let that happen. Talk and make decisions while you can. Your family deserves that special consideration.

©2002 **Carolyn Barlow** is a long-time member of Calvary Baptist Church. Since her husband's death in 1996, she has participated in and taught GriefShare classes at Calvary.