



No One Told Me About Vacations

By Judy Kaplan

“No one told me about vacations,” is a statement frequently heard from bereaved parents. “We thought getting away might make life easier for us, but it only made it clear how tough things really were.”

To understand why bereaved parents feel this way, we must first understand what vacations symbolize and then examine some unique difficulties vacations present to bereaved parents.

Family vacations have become an American ritual, laden with the symbolism of togetherness, fun, financial success and the reward for working hard. Vacations have come to represent a reaffirmation of family life: providing an opportunity to strengthen the family bond, creating a history of shared experiences, and sharing moments of closeness and intimacy. In addition, vacations are a time for healing the stress of everyday life, and for getting away from familiar environments and routines.

Following a period away from home and the fun of sharing and retelling experiences to family and friends, there is another aspect to vacations that we frequently forget. This aspect of vacations does not necessarily become part of the family history. Although most vacations are fun and rewarding experiences, many families experience a period of adjustment as they become reacquainted without the barriers of school, work and regular routines. We forget rushing to get ready, arguing and bickering among the children, getting lost on the freeway, or losing luggage at the airport. We forget the car was crowded, we were exhausted.

In addition to these typical annoyances, there is another aspect to vacations that is often not spoken about; that is an idealized or uncommunicated expectation of what family vacations have come to mean to us and what we expect from them. For instance, while one spouse may be looking forward to a relaxing respite from work, the other spouse may be hoping for an opportunity to reestablish the closeness and intimacy that has been missing in the relationship. Children may be expecting relaxed rules, less parental control and more freedom. These unexpressed expectations, or hidden agendas, may not be fully understood or appreciated by other family members. Uncommunicated expectations can lead to stressful vacations or a period of adjustment as individual family members develop an awareness of each other's expectations and needs.

Where do bereaved families fit into this picture as they try to go on with their lives, to reestablish a sense of normalcy for their surviving children and a sense of hope for the future? Why do bereaved parents return home from a first or second vacation feeling disappointed and let down? What about those families where the family structure has changed in such a fundamental way that parents take a vacation without children along, perhaps for the first time? To understand what happens, perhaps we have to examine the needs of bereaved families within the context of the familiar family vacation.

Bereaved families, like other families, need a respite from the stress of everyday life and work. Unlike other families, however, some bereaved families want to escape from the stress and presence of intense grief. They need relief from trying to adjust to a familiar environment that no longer includes their child as well as a sense of normalcy for their surviving children. Thus, for bereaved parents, vacations take on an additional meaning and can be perceived as an opportunity to reach some vaguely defined grief-related goals.

There are other problem areas as well. For some bereaved parents, there is a belief that vacations may provide an opportunity for relief from grief and escape from a painful home environment. For others, vacations can be potentially fearful experiences. Some may experience ambivalent feelings about being together without the familiar and sometimes comforting barriers of home and work. After all, getting away together, without the protection of these barriers, tends to emphasize the absence of our child. Furthermore, the absence of regular routines and obligations weakens our defenses against dealing with painful emotions. Sometimes, a relaxed atmosphere and free time allow more time than we want for painful thoughts and reflection.

Many newly bereaved parents recall the fearful anticipation of leaving home for the first time after the death of their child. Whether it is leaving memories of the child, creating new memories, or fearing another tragedy, leaving home seems to be a common dread. Also, some parents feel that simply making vacation plans causes anxiety while others suggest it has more to do with coming home and once again facing the reality of life without their child. Many bereaved parents remember the experience of visiting extended family for the first time after the death of their child. Not only are they faced with the discomfort of socializing with numerous relatives, but it often seems as if no one wants to talk about the child or what happened. As a result, these family reunion vacations may leave a residue of bitter feelings and needs left unmet.

Expectations of what vacations can and cannot do to facilitate the healing process also enter into the picture. Spouses may have unexpressed expectations about sharing their grief, resolving issues of guilt or blame, or sharing memories of the past. One spouse may see the vacation as an opportunity to share his grief while the other spouse may want to avoid any discussion at all.

Having said this, what are the options for bereaved parents? Should we not take vacations? Are there too many potential pitfalls that will result in further distress for us? The response to this question may appear obvious, but it is not that easy.

Bereaved parents need to be aware of what vacations can and cannot accomplish. Each of us who has experienced the death of a child comes to realize that there are no simple answers or solutions to getting through the grief experience. We do, however, come to understand that there are things we can do to make life easier for ourselves, and we need to keep these in mind as we plan vacations, just as we do for other grief related issues and concerns. In addition, we need to remember that there are no absolute 'shoulds' or 'should nots' to living with grief. There is no right or wrong way; we do the best we can under difficult circumstances.

Some of the following guidelines may be helpful as you plan your vacation.

1. Previous vacations: Remember previous family vacations, not all of them were tension free or without periods of adjustment, but that did not mean they were not successful experiences. Family life and raising children are never easy, and vacations provide one more avenue of learning about each other as well as learning to live together. We still have to live with the everyday upsets and annoyances of marriage and family life as well as the added stress that grief places upon these relationships.
2. Expectations: Share your expectations and your hopes about the vacation. Do not assume that your spouse and children know how you feel. If you need time to share your feelings, to remember the past, or to be alone, make sure these needs have been expressed.
3. Realistic planning: Plan a vacation that is neither totally relaxed time without a schedule, nor totally hectic sightseeing. Arrange time for planned activities as well as time to relax and to recoup your energies. Discuss the pros and cons of going back to a familiar place or visiting a new area or having a new experience. Neither option is a perfect solution, but talk about what might be most comfortable for your family.
4. Coping with grief on vacation: You do not leave grief at home; it goes with you in your suitcase, on the airplane, and in your car. It is important to be realistic about what a vacation can accomplish.
5. Anticipation: Remember that the anxiety created by the anticipation of an event is often more intense than the actual event.

Whether you leave town or remain at home while on vacation, it is important that you take that time for yourself. Grief takes its toll; it is physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausting. And, imperfect as they are, vacations do afford us an opportunity to become re-energized. Over analyzing a vacation can be hazardous. It is helpful to discuss how things are going, what helps, and what does not, but trying to figure out all the answers can be an overwhelming task itself. It is important to allow yourself to be distracted, to relax and to do what you can to enjoy yourself. There are no quick fixes, easy answers, or perfect solutions. We do the best we can. That's true for vacations, just as it is true for everyday life.