



AM I MAKING PROGRESS?

Darcie D. Sims, Ph.D., CHT, CT, GMS

January is a reflective month. Ice ponds reflect the leaden sky, and the heart reflects the emptiness of a frozen spirit. When will we begin to thaw? When will we feel like we're making some progress in this place of icicles and cold sheets, sunless days and long, empty nights? Will we ever be happy again? Will I ever be ME again?

January is also the month for making promises, commitments and resolutions (which are FANCY promises).

We begin our new year with high hopes, strong wills and long lists of things that will be different this year. To celebrate my commitment to a New Me, I bought a jogging suit, expensive shoes, and a digital watch, complete with timer, pulse meter and M & M dispenser. (You've got to have some motivation!) **THIS YEAR WILL BE DIFFERENT.**

We also spend some time looking back over the road we've traveled, and sometimes we wonder if we have made any progress at all. In the beginning, we misplaced car keys, checkbooks, toothbrushes, relatives and important stuff like the TV Guide. We had to begin making lists of everything. We simply couldn't remember anything. I couldn't remember my address, social security number, zip code or my mother-in-law's birthday. (I never could remember that.) I even started making lists of my lists! I knew I was going to be okay when I first discovered I could remember that I had made a list.

You know you're making progress when you can coordinate an entire outfit again. Shoes, belts, ties, purses, even sweaters and jackets often got left, simply because we couldn't think about what to wear when we were hurting so terribly. Many of us didn't even know the panty hose were on backwards, or the tie was crooked. If you are wearing matched shoes right now, then you are making progress.

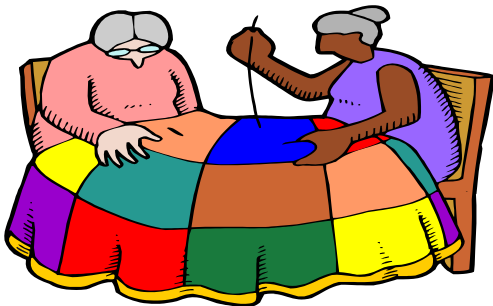
You're making progress when you no longer choke when you say your loved one's name. When you can walk down the cereal aisle in the supermarket and not dissolve into tears, progress is being made. When you can enjoy baking HIS favorite cookies or pie or cake again, you are on your way.

When the pictures come back out and you can wander through the scrapbooks again, letting the smiles peek through the tears, hope is returning. When memories, for the most part, bring comfort and warmth instead of emptiness and pain, January grows shorter. When you begin to understand that putting away your loved one's things does NOT mean putting him out of your life, your step becomes lighter.

Progress occurs when you completely understand that your loved one DIED, but the love you share between you can never be destroyed. Hope begins to return when you can hear laughter again--and some of that laughter is your own.

Recovery is possible once unrealistic hopes for a lost future are given up, grieved for and moved beyond. Perhaps it is not so much saying good-bye to our loved one as it is saying farewell to the old us and the life we shared. Making progress through grief doesn't mean that you no longer miss your loved one. He is a part of your life forever, but his role in your life changes. Our lifestyle and habits change to reflect a different family landscape.

Now , as you look back, it is amazing to see the life fabric--no longer ripped



apart with a gaping hole, but mended with tiny stitches, left perhaps a bit lumpy (like lots of us), but patched with time, effort and love. Old threads and new threads have blended together and have been re-woven into a pattern not quite the same as we had originally planned. It is a tapestry of love given and received, remembered and shared.

Life can become good and whole and complete once again; not when we try to fill up the empty spaces left by loved ones no longer within hug's reach, but when we realize that love creates new spaces in the heart and expands the spirit and deepens the joy of simply being alive. The renewed energy and love we feel as winter turns into spring becomes the memorial to our loved one ... not the grave markers we decorate, not the books we write, not the speeches we give, but the LOVE we share and pass on.

You know you are making progress when all of this begins to make some sense (save this column to read later!). When the shoes match and the car keys are found and the list of lists grows shorter, then you are making progress. Then the laughter can return, and with that magical sound comes the healing of the hurt and the shedding of the band-aid, because the heart is learning to sing again.

January ... the month to check on our progress, to make new commitments and to start jogging.

