

Continuing Bonds: Adjust and Redefine Our Relationship with the Deceased

Before his death at 81 years old in 2020, country western artist Billy Joe Shaver not only recorded his song, but so did others, including Elvis Presley, Kris Kristofferson, and Waylon Jennings. After nosing his son and longtime guitarist Eddy, who died at age 38 of a heroin overdose in 2000, Shaver began talking about his son's death publicly. In a 2015 interview, he said he still talked to his son when he was performing on stage because he felt like his son was still with him in significant ways.

"I do believe when people die their goodness, the good things they've done, it seems like they melt into your likeness, and you become a better person for it."

Contrary to what some believe or may have been taught, grief is most often not a linear process that ends with acceptance or compartmentalization of a loved one's memory when they die. Instead, the continuing bonds theory suggests that people can find ways to adjust and redefine their relationship with the deceased, allowing for a continued bond that endures throughout their lives in different ways and to varying degrees.

This need not indicate an unhealthy response or a failure to grieve properly. Continuing bonds can be a normal and healthy part of the grieving process that acknowledges the importance of maintaining a connection with loved ones after death. This theory recognizes that natural human attachment continues even after someone passes away, rather than assuming detachment as a typical grief response.

What do we still have to hold onto when all feels lost? This is what we must continue to seek every day—to hold onto all that is lost, but to remember what we still have: each other. The friends and family that are still here. The beautiful memories that we created along the way; the ones that can never leave us or be forgotten.

And always, the special events and holidays continue to exist, year after year, even if the ones we loved aren't here to celebrate with us anymore. We can still find ways to bring them with us into the family occasions that we celebrate. Baking their favorite treats, using their decorations, singing the songs they taught us, or being with the people they loved. These are all ways we continue to not just survive, but to live.

When it comes to continuing bonds with a loved one who has passed away, there are many healthy and helpful ways to keep their memory alive. These methods will always be a part of your life, and that's perfectly okay. From ongoing rituals to honor and remember them, to contemplating what advice they would have given you, to living in a way that would make them proud - there are countless normal and meaningful ways to maintain your connection with them. Embracing these ways can bring comfort and compassion during the grieving process.

(Ideas for this document include thoughts inspired by *Continuing Bonds in Bereavement: New Directions for Research and Practice*, Klass, Steffen, et.al., and posts from www.whatsyourgrief.com.)