

*Understanding Your Grief:
Touchstones for Hope and Healing*



brought to you by

Turner & Porter

FUNERAL DIRECTORS

featuring

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Author — Educator — Grief Counselor



Common Myths About Grief

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., C.T., www.centerforloss.com

Our society continues to perpetuate a number of myths about grief and mourning. These myths may seem harmless, but I have found that they can quickly become hurdles to healing. This article describes five of the most common myths about grief. I hope that this information will help you overcome these myths and better understand how to help yourself or others heal.



Myth #1: Grief and mourning are the same experience.

Most people tend to use the words grief and mourning interchangeably. However, there is an important distinction between them. We have learned that people move toward healing not by just grieving, but through mourning. Simply stated, grief describes the internal thoughts and feelings we experience when someone we love dies. Mourning, on the other hand, is taking the internal experience of grief and expressing it outside ourselves.

In reality, many people in our culture grieve, but they do not mourn. Instead of being encouraged to express their grief outwardly, they are often greeted with messages such as “carry on,” “keep your chin up,” and “keep busy.” So, they end up grieving within themselves in isolation, instead of mourning outside of themselves in the presence of loving companions.



Myth #2: There is a predictable and orderly progression to the experience of grief.

Stage-like thinking about both dying and grief has become an appealing idea to many people. Somehow the “stages of grief” have helped people make sense out of an experience that isn’t as orderly and predictable as we would like it to be. If only it were so simple!

The concept of “stages” was popularized in 1969 with the publication of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’ landmark text *On Death and Dying*. Dr. Kubler-Ross never intended for people to interpret her five “stages of dying” literally. However, many people have done just that, not only with the process of dying, but with the processes of bereavement, grief, and mourning as well.

One such consequence is when the people who are around the grieving person believe that he or she should be in “stage 2” or “stage 4” by now. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Each person’s grief is uniquely his or her own. It is neither predictable nor orderly. Nor can its different dimensions be so easily categorized. We only get ourselves in trouble when we try to prescribe what the grief and mourning experiences of others should be, or when we try to fit our own grief into neat little boxes.



Myth #3: It is best to move away from grief and mourning instead of toward it.

Many grievers do not give themselves permission or receive permission from others to mourn. We live in a society that often encourages people to prematurely move away from their grief instead of toward it. Many people view grief as something to overcome rather than experience. The result is that many of us either grieve in isolation or attempt to run away from our grief.

People who continue to express their grief outwardly “to mourn” are often viewed as “weak,” “crazy,” or “self-pitying.” The common message is “shape up and get on with your life.” Refusing to allow tears, suffering in silence, and “being strong” are thought to be admirable behaviors.

Hope for a continued life emerges as we are able to make commitments to the future, realizing that the person who died will never be forgotten, yet knowing that one's own life can and will move forward.

Many people in grief have internalized society's message that mourning should be done quietly, quickly, and efficiently.

Such messages encourage the repression of the griever's thoughts and feelings. The problem is that attempting to mask or move away from grief results in internal anxiety and confusion. With little, if any, social recognition of the normal pain of grief, people begin to think their thoughts and feelings are abnormal. "I think I'm going crazy," they often tell me.

They're not crazy, just grieving. And in order to heal, they must move toward their grief through continued mourning, not away from it through repression and denial.

Four **Myth #4: Tears expressing grief are only a sign of weakness.**
Unfortunately, many people associate tears of grief with personal inadequacy and weakness. Crying on the part of the mourner often generates feelings of helplessness in friends, family, and caregivers. Out of a wish to protect mourners from pain, friends and family may try to stop the tears. Comments such as, "Tears won't bring him back" and "He wouldn't want you to cry" discourage the expression of tears.

Yet crying is nature's way of releasing internal tension in the body and allows the mourner to communicate a need to be comforted. Crying makes people feel better, emotionally and physically. Tears are not a sign of weakness. In fact, crying is an indication of the griever's willingness to do the "work of mourning."



Myth #5: The goal is to "get over" your grief.

We have all heard people ask, "Are you over it yet?" To think that we as human beings "get over" grief is ridiculous! We never "get over" our grief but instead become reconciled to it.

We do not resolve or recover from our grief. These terms suggest a total return to "normalcy" and yet in my personal, as well as professional, experience we are all forever changed by the experience of grief. For the mourner to assume that life will be exactly as it was prior to the death is unrealistic and potentially damaging. Those people who think the goal is to "resolve" grief become destructive to the healing process.

Mourners do, however, learn to reconcile their grief. We learn to integrate the new reality of moving forward in life without the physical presence of the person who has died. With reconciliation comes a renewed sense of energy and confidence, an ability to fully acknowledge the reality of the death, and the capacity to become reinvolved with the activities of the living. We also come to acknowledge that pain and grief are difficult, yet necessary, parts of life and living.

As the experience of reconciliation unfolds, we recognize that life will be different without the presence of the person who has died. At first we realize this with our heads, and later we come to realize it with our hearts. We also realize that reconciliation is a process, not an event. The sense of loss does not completely disappear yet it softens, and the intense pangs of grief become less frequent. Hope for a continued life emerges as we are able to make commitments to the future, realizing that the person who died will never be forgotten, yet knowing that one's own life can and will move forward.

Exploring the “*Whys*” of Grief

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., C.T., www.centerforloss.com

“At bottom, every man knows well enough that he is a unique human being, only once on this earth; and by no extraordinary chance will such a marvelously picturesque piece of diversity in unity as he is ever be put together a second time.”

~ Nietzsche

The wilderness of your grief is your wilderness—it is a creation of your unique self, the unique person who died, and the unique circumstances of your life. Your wilderness may be rockier or more level. Your path may be revealed in a straight line, or (more likely) it may be full of twists and turns. In your wilderness, you will encounter places that are only meaningful to you and you will experience the topography in your own way.

In life, everyone grieves, but their grief journeys are never precisely the same. Despite what you may hear, you will do the “work of mourning” in your own special way. Be careful about comparing your experience with that of other people. Do not adopt assumptions about how long your grief should last. Just consider taking a “one-day-at-a-time” approach. Doing so allows you to mourn at your own pace.

This touchstone invites you to explore some of the unique reasons your grief is what it is—the “whys” of your journey through the wilderness. Of course, the whys that follow are not all the whys in the world—just some of the most common.

Why #1: YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PERSON WHO DIED

Your relationship with the person who died was different than that person’s relationship with anyone else. For example, you may have been extremely close, or “best friends,” as well as husband or wife. Perhaps you loved the person who died, but you had frequent disagreements or divisive conflicts. Or maybe you were separated by physical distance, so you weren’t as close emotionally as you would have liked.

The stronger your attachment to the person who died, the more difficult your grief journey will be. It only

makes sense that the closer you felt to the person who died, the more torn apart you will feel after the death. Ambivalent relationships can also be particularly hard to process after a death. You may feel a strong sense of “unfinished business”—things you wanted to say but never did, conflicts you wanted to resolve but didn’t.

Whatever the circumstances, you are the best person to describe and work toward understanding your relationship with the person who died.

Why #2: THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE DEATH

How, why, and when the person died can have a definite impact on your journey into grief. For example, was the death sudden or anticipated? How old was the person who died? Do you feel you might have been able to prevent the death?

A sudden, unexpected death obviously does not allow you any opportunity to prepare yourself. But are you ever “ready” for that moment at all? After a death due to terminal illness, friends and family members often tell me that they were still, in a sense, shocked by the death. I know this was my experience when my dad died. However, I did feel fortunate that I was able to share special time with him before he died and that we had ample opportunity to tell one another how we felt.

The age of the person who died also affects your acceptance of the death. Within the order of the world, we usually anticipate that parents will die before their children do. But when a child dies, this order of the world is turned upside-down. Or your grief might be heightened when a “middle-aged” person dies in what was thought to be the “prime of life.” Basically, we often find our grief easier when we feel that the

person who died had a chance to live a full life. When we believe that the life was cut too short, our innate sense of injustice colors our grief.

You may also be asking yourself if you could have done anything to prevent the death. “If only I had gotten him to the doctor sooner,” you may be thinking; or, “If only I had driven instead of her.” The “if-onlys” are natural for you to explore, even if there is no logical way in which you could be held responsible for the death. What you’re really feeling is a lack of control over what happened. And accepting that we have little control over the lives of those we love is a difficult thing indeed.

Why #3: THE RITUAL OR FUNERAL EXPERIENCE

Decisions you make relating to the funeral can either help or hinder your personal grief experience. There is no single, right way to have a funeral. We do know, however, that creating a meaningful ritual for survivors can aid in the social, emotional, and spiritual healing after a death.

The funeral is a time and a place to express your feelings about the death, thus legitimizing them. The funeral also can serve as a time to honor the person who has died, bring you closer to others who can give you needed support, affirm that life goes on even in the face of death, and give you a context of meaning that is in keeping with your own religious, spiritual, or philosophical background.

If you were unable to attend the funeral of the person who died, or if the funeral was somehow minimized or distorted, you may find that this complicates your healing process. Be assured, however, that it is never too late after the death for you to plan and implement a ritual (even a second or third ceremony) that will help meet your needs. For example, you might choose to have a tree planting ceremony in the spring in honor of the person who died. Or you might elect to hold a memorial service on the anniversary of the death. The power of ceremony is that it helps people heal. You deserve it, and so does the person who died.

Why #4: THE PEOPLE IN YOUR LIFE

Mourning requires the outside support of other human beings in order for you to heal. Without a stabilizing support system of at least one other person,

the odds are that you will have difficulty in doing this work of mourning. Healing requires an environment of empathy, caring, and gentle encouragement.

Sometimes other people may think that you have a support system when, in fact, you don’t. For example, you may have family members or friends who live near you, but you discover that they have little compassion or patience for you and your grief. If so, a vital ingredient to healing is missing.

Or you also may have some friends and relatives who are supportive right after the death but who stop supporting you soon after. Again, for healing to occur, social support must be ongoing.

Even when you have a solid support system in place, do you find that you are willing and able to accept the support? If you are ashamed of your need to mourn, you may end up isolating yourself from the very people who would most like to walk with you in your journey through the wilderness of your grief.

Why #5: YOUR UNIQUE PERSONALITY

What words would you use to describe yourself? What words would other people use to describe you? Are you serious? Silly? Friendly? Shy?

Whatever your unique personality, rest assured that it will be reflected in your grief. For example, if you are quiet by nature, you may express your grief quietly. If you are outgoing, you may be more expressive with your grief.

How you have responded to other losses or crises in your life will likely also be consistent with how you respond to this death. If you tend to remain distant or run away from crisis, you may do the same thing now. But if you have always confronted crises head on and openly expressed your thoughts and feelings, you may follow that pattern of behavior.

Other aspects of your personality, such as your self-esteem, values, and beliefs, also impact your response to the death. In addition, any long-term problems with depression or anxiety will probably influence your grief.

Why #6: THE UNIQUE PERSONALITY OF THE PERSON WHO DIED

Just as your own personality is reflected in your grief journey, so, too, is the unique personality of the person who died. What was the person who died like? What role(s) did he or she play in your life? Was he the funny one? Or was she the responsible one?

Really, personality is the sum total of all the characteristics that made this person who he or she was. The way she talked, the way he smiled, the way she ate her food, the way he worked—all these and so many more little things are gone all at once.

Whatever you loved most about the person who died, that is what you are now likely to miss the most. And, paradoxically, whatever you liked least about the person who died is what may trouble you the most now. If, for example, your father was a cold, uncaring person, after his death you may find yourself struggling even more with his apparent lack of love. You may have always wished you could change this aspect of his personality, but now that he is gone, you know with finality that you can't.

Whatever your feelings are about the personality of the person who died, talk about them openly. The key is finding someone you can trust who will listen to you without judging.

Why #7: YOUR GENDER

Your gender may not only influence your grief, but also the ways in which others relate to you at this time. While this is certainly not always true, men are often encouraged and expected to “be strong” and restrained. Typically, men have more difficulty in allowing themselves to move toward painful feelings than women do.

Women sometimes have a hard time expressing feelings of anger. By contrast, men tend to be quicker to respond with explosive emotions. And because men are conditioned to be self-sufficient, they often resist accepting outside support.

We must be careful about generalizations, however. Sometimes too much is made of the differences between genders and not enough is made of the essence of the capacity to grieve and mourn. Willingness to mourn often transcends gender.

Why #8: YOUR CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Your cultural background is an important part of how you experience and express your grief. Sometimes it's hard for modern-day North Americans to articulate what their cultural background is. “My mother is half Irish, a quarter Mexican, and a quarter I don't know what,” you might say. “And my father comes from a strong Italian family.” So what does that make you? And how does this mixture influence your grief?

When I say culture, I mean the values, rules (spoken and unspoken), and traditions that guide you and your family. Often these values, rules, and traditions have been handed down generation after generation and are shaped by the countries or areas of the world your family originally came from. Your cultural background is also shaped by education and political beliefs (religion, too, but we'll get to that in a minute). Basically, your culture is your way of being in the world.

Why #9: YOUR RELIGIOUS OR SPIRITUAL BACKGROUND

Your personal belief system can have a tremendous impact on your journey into grief. You may discover that your religious or spiritual life is deepened, renewed, or changed as a result of your loss. Or you may well find yourself questioning your beliefs as part of your work of mourning.

When someone loved dies, some people may feel very close to God or a Higher Power, while others may feel more distant and hostile. You may find yourself asking questions such as, “Why has this happened to me?” or “What is the meaning of this?” You may, however, not find the answers to all of your questions about faith or spirituality.

The word “faith” means to believe in something for which there is no proof. For some people, faith means believing in and following a set of religious rules. For others, faith is a belief in God or a spirit or a force that is greater than we are.

Mistakenly, people may think that with faith, there is no need to mourn. If you buy into this misconception, you will set yourself up to grieve internally but not mourn externally. Having faith does not mean you do not need to mourn. It does mean having the courage to allow yourself to mourn.

With the death of someone you love comes a “search for meaning.” You may find yourself re-evaluating your life based on this loss. You will need someone who is willing to listen to you as you explore your religious or spiritual values, question your attitude toward life, and renew your resources for living. This process takes time, and it can lead to possible changes in your values, beliefs, and lifestyle.

Why #10: OTHER CRISES OR STRESSES IN YOUR LIFE RIGHT NOW

What else is going on in your life right now? Although we often think it shouldn't, the world does keep turning after the death of someone loved. You may still have to work and manage finance. Other people in your life may be sick or in need of help of some kind. You may have children or elderly parents to care for (or both!). You may have too many commitments and too little time and energy to complete them.

Whatever your specific situation, I'm sure that your grief is not the only stress in your life right now. And the more intense and numerous the stresses in life, the more overwhelming your grief experience may be.

Take steps to de-stress your life for the time being, if at all possible. Now is the time to concentrate on mourning and healing in grief.

Why #11: YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH LOSS AND DEATH IN THE PAST

One way to think about yourself is that you are the sum total of all that you have experienced in your life so far. Your consciousness is in large part a creation of what you do and what happens to you. Before this death, you may have experienced other significant losses in your life. Did anyone close to you die before? What was that death and subsequent grief journey like for you? How did it affect your expectations for future deaths in your life? Have you found those expectations to be true this time?

The more “experienced” you are with death, the less shocked you may feel this time around. Often people find that the more deaths they mourn, and the older they get, the more natural the cycle of life seems to them. This not to say that they aren't sad and don't need to mourn, for they are and they do. But it is to

say that they begin to integrate death and loss more seamlessly into living.

Other non-death losses in your past may also influence your grief journey. Divorce, job loss, financial downturns, severed relationships—all these can affect your worldviews as well as your capacity to cope now.

Why #12: YOUR PHYSICAL HEALTH

How you feel physically has significant effect on your grief. If you are tired and eating poorly, your coping skills will be diminished. If you are sick, your bodily symptoms may be as, or more, pressing than your emotional and spiritual ones. Bear in mind that taking care of yourself physically is one of the best things you can do to lay the foundation for healthy mourning.



MOVING FROM WHYS TO WHATS

What else has shaped your unique grief journey? There are probably other factors, large and small, that are influencing your grief right now. What are they?

What is even more fundamental for you to be attuned to is what your thoughts and feelings are. What are your feelings today? What have you been thinking about for the last day or two? A big part of healing in grief is learning to listen and attend to your inner voice and to give those thoughts and feelings play as you experience them.

The Journey Through Grief

The Mourner's Six Reconciliation Needs

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., C.T., www.centerforloss.com

The death of someone loved changes our lives forever. And the movement from “before” to “after” is almost always a long, painful journey. From my own experiences with loss as well as those of the thousands of grieving people I have worked with over the years, I have learned that if we are to heal we cannot skirt the outside edges of our grief. Instead, we must journey all through it, sometimes meandering the side roads, sometimes plowing directly into its raw center.

I have also learned that the journey requires mourning. There is an important difference, you see. Grief is what you think and feel on the inside after someone you love dies. Mourning is the outward expression of those thoughts and feelings. To mourn is to be an active participant in our grief journey. We all grieve when someone we love dies, but if we are to heal, we must also mourn.

There are six “yield signs” you are likely to encounter on your journey through grief—what I call the “reconciliation needs of mourning.” For while your grief journey will be an intensely personal, unique experience, all mourners must yield to this set of basic needs if they are to heal.



Need 1. Acknowledging the reality of the death.

This first need of mourning involves gently confronting the reality that someone you care about will never physically come back into your life again.

Whether the death was sudden or anticipated, acknowledging the full reality of the loss may occur over weeks and months. To survive, you may try to push away the reality of the death at times. You may discover yourself replaying events surrounding the death and confronting memories, both good and bad. This replay is a vital part of this need of mourning. It's as if each time you talk it out, the event is a little more real.

Remember—this first need of mourning, like the other five that follow, may intermittently require your attention for months. Be patient and compassionate with yourself as you work on each of them.

Need 2. Embracing the pain of the loss.

This need of mourning requires us to embrace the pain of our loss—something we naturally don't want to do. It is easier to avoid, repress, or deny the pain of grief than it is to confront it, yet it is in confronting our pain that we learn to reconcile ourselves to it.

You will probably discover that you need to “dose” yourself in embracing your pain. In other words, you cannot (nor should you try to) overload yourself with the hurt all at one time. Sometimes you may need to distract yourself from the pain of death, while at other times you will need to create a safe place to move toward it.

Unfortunately, our culture tends to encourage the denial of pain. If you openly express your feelings of grief, misinformed friends may advise you to “carry on” or “keep your chin up.” If, on the other hand, you remain “strong” and “in control,” you may be congratulated for “doing well” with your grief. Actually, doing well with your grief means becoming well acquainted with your pain.

Need 3. Remembering the person who died.

Do you have any kind of relationship with someone when they die? Of course. You have a relationship of memory. Precious memories, dreams reflecting the significance of the relationship, and objects that link you to the person who died

(such as photos, souvenirs, etc.) are examples of some of the things that give testimony to a different form of a continued relationship. This need of mourning involves allowing and encouraging yourself to pursue this relationship.

But some people may try to take your memories away. Trying to be helpful, they encourage you to take down all the photos of the person who died. They tell you to keep busy or even to move out of your house. But in my experience, remembering the past makes hoping for the future possible. Your future will become open to new experiences only to the extent that you embrace the past.

Need 4. Developing a new self-identity.

Part of your self-identity comes from the relationships you have with other people. When someone with whom you have a relationship dies, your self-identity, or the way you see yourself, naturally changes.

You may have gone from being a “wife” or “husband” to a “widow” or “widower.” You may have gone from being a “parent” to a “bereaved parent.” The way you define yourself and the way society defines you is changed.

A death often requires you to take on new roles that had been filled by the person who died. After all, someone still has to take out the garbage, someone still has to buy the groceries. You confront your changed identity every time you do something that used to be done by the person who died. This can be very hard work and can leave you feeling very drained.

You may occasionally feel child-like as you struggle with your changing identity. You may feel a temporarily heightened dependence on others as well as feelings of helplessness, frustration, inadequacy, and fear.

Need 5. Searching for meaning.

When someone you love dies, you naturally question the meaning and purpose of life. You probably will question your philosophy of life and explore religious and spiritual values as you work on this need. You may discover yourself searching for meaning in your continued living as you ask “How?” and “Why?” questions.

“How could God let this happen?” “Why did this happen now, in this way?” The death reminds you of your lack of control. It can leave you feeling powerless.

The person who died was a part of you. This death means you mourn a loss not only outside of yourself, but inside of yourself as well. At times, overwhelming sadness and loneliness may be your constant companions. You may feel that when this person died, part of you died with him or her. And now you are faced with finding some meaning in going on with your life even though you may often feel so empty.

This death also calls for you to confront your own spirituality. You may doubt your faith and have spiritual conflicts and questions racing through your head and heart. This is normal and part of your journey toward renewed living.

Need 6. Receiving ongoing support from others.

The quality and quantity of understanding support you get during your grief journey will have a major influence on your capacity to heal. You cannot—nor should you try to—do this alone. Drawing on the experiences and encouragement of friends, fellow mourners or professional counselors is not a weakness but a healthy human need. And because mourning is a process that takes place over time, this support must be available months and even years after the death of someone in your life.

Unfortunately, because our society places so much value on the ability to “carry on,” “keep your chin up,” and “keep busy,” many mourners are abandoned shortly after the event of the death. “It’s over and done with” and “It’s time to get on with your life” are the types of messages directed at mourners that still dominate. Obviously, these messages encourage you to deny or repress your grief rather than express it.

To be truly helpful, the people in your support system must appreciate the impact this death has had on you. They must understand that in order to heal, you must be allowed—even encouraged—to mourn long after the death. And they must encourage you to see mourning not as an enemy to be vanquished but as a necessity to be experienced as a result of having loved.

Reconciling Your Grief

You may have heard—indeed you may believe—that your grief journey’s end will come when you resolve, or recover from, your grief. But your journey will never end. People do not “get over” grief.

Reconciliation is a term I find more appropriate for what occurs as the mourner works to integrate the new reality of moving forward in life without the physical presence of the person who died. With reconciliation comes a renewed sense of energy and confidence, an ability to fully acknowledge the reality of death and a capacity to become reinvolved in the activities of living.

In reconciliation, the sharp, ever present pain of grief gives rise to a renewed sense of meaning and purpose. Your feelings of loss will not completely disappear, yet they will soften, and the intense pangs of grief will become less frequent. Hope for a continued life will emerge as you are able to make commitments to the future, realizing that the person who died will never be forgotten, yet knowing that your life can and will move forward.



The Mourner's Bill of Rights

Though you should reach out to others as you do the work of mourning, you should not feel obligated to accept the unhelpful responses you may receive from some people. You are the one who is grieving, and as such, you have certain “rights” no one should try to take away from you.

The following list is intended both to empower you to heal and to decide how others can and cannot help. This is not to discourage you from reaching out to others for help, but rather to assist you in distinguishing useful responses from hurtful ones.

1. You have the right to experience your own unique grief. No one else will grieve in the exact same way you do. So, when you turn to others for help, don't allow them to tell you what you should or should not be feeling.
2. You have the right to talk about your grief. Talking about your grief will help you heal. Seek out others who will allow you to talk as much as you want about your grief. If at times you do not feel like talking, you also have the right to be silent.
3. You have the right to feel a multitude of emotions. Confusion, disorientation, fear, guilt, and relief are just a few of the emotions you might feel as part of your grief journey. Others may try to tell you that feeling angry, for example, is wrong. Don't take these judgmental responses to heart. Instead, find listeners who will accept your feelings without conditions.
4. You have the right to be tolerant of your physical and emotional limits. Your feelings of loss and sadness will probably leave you feeling fatigued. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. Get daily rest. Eat balanced meals. And don't allow others to push you into doing things you don't feel ready to do.
5. You have the right to experience “griefbursts”. Sometimes, out of nowhere, a powerful surge of grief may overcome you. This can be frightening, but it is normal and natural. Find someone who understands and will let you talk it out.
6. You have the right to make use of ritual. The funeral ritual does more than acknowledge the death of someone loved. It helps provide you with the support of caring people. More importantly, the funeral is a way for you to mourn. If others tell you the funeral or other healing rituals such as these are silly or unnecessary, don't listen.
7. You have the right to embrace your spirituality. If faith is a part of your life, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you. Allow yourself to be around people who understand and support your religious beliefs. If you feel angry at God, find someone to talk with who won't be critical of your feelings of hurt and abandonment.
8. You have the right to search for meaning. You may find yourself asking, “Why did he or she die? Why this way? Why now?” Some of your questions may have answers, but some may not. And watch out for the clichéd responses some people may give you. Comments like, “It was God's will” or “Think of what you have to be thankful for” are not helpful and you do not have to accept them.
9. You have the right to treasure your memories. Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after the death of someone loved. You will always remember. Instead of ignoring your memories, find others with whom you can share them.
10. You have the right to move toward your grief and heal. Reconciling your grief will not happen quickly. Remember, grief is a process, not an event. Be patient and tolerant with yourself and avoid people who are impatient and intolerant with you. Neither you nor those around you must forget that the death of someone loved changes your life forever.

Seek Reconciliation, NOT Resolution

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., C.T., www.centerforloss.com

How do you ever find your way out of the wilderness of your grief? You don't have time to dwell there forever, do you? The good news is that no, you don't have to dwell there forever. If you follow the trail markers on your journey through the wilderness, you will find your way out. But just as with any significant experience in your life, the wilderness will always live inside of you and be a part of who you are.

A number of psychological models describing grief refer to "resolution," "recovery," "reestablishment," or "reorganization" as being the destination of your grief journey. You may have heard—indeed you may believe—that your grief journey's end will come when you resolve, or recover from, your grief.

But you may also be coming to understand one of the fundamental truths of grief: Your journey will never truly end. People do not "get over" grief. My personal and professional experience tells me that a total return to "normalcy" after the death of someone loved is not possible; we are all forever changed by the experience of grief.

Reconciliation is a term I find more appropriate for what occurs as you work to integrate the new reality of moving forward in life without the physical presence of the person who died. With reconciliation comes a renewed sense of energy and confidence, an ability to fully acknowledge the reality of the death and a capacity to become re-involved in the activities of the living. There is also an acknowledgement that pain and grief are difficult, yet necessary, parts of life.

As the experience of reconciliation unfolds, you will recognize that life is, and will continue to be, different without the presence of the person who died. Changing the relationship with the person who died from one of presence to one of memory and redirecting one's energy and initiative toward the future often takes longer—and involves more hard work—than most people are aware.

Mourning never really ends. Only, as time goes on, it erupts less frequently.

We, as human beings, never resolve our grief, but instead become reconciled to it.

We come to reconciliation in our grief journey when the full reality of the death becomes a part of us. Beyond an intellectual working through the death, there is also an emotional and spiritual working through. What had been understood at the "head" level is now understood at the "heart" level.

Keep in mind that reconciliation doesn't just happen. You reach it through deliberate mourning, by

- talking it out.
- writing it out.
- crying it out.
- thinking it out.
- playing it out.
- painting (or sculpting, etc.) it out.
- dancing it out.
- etcetera!

To experience reconciliation requires that you descend, not transcend. You don't get to go around or above your grief. You must go through it. And while you are going through it, you must express it if you are to reconcile yourself to it.

You will find that as you achieve reconciliation, the sharp, ever-present pain of grief will give rise to a renewed sense of meaning and purpose. Your feelings of loss will not completely disappear, yet they will soften, and the intense pangs of grief will become less frequent. Hope for a continued life will emerge as you are able to make commitments to the future, realizing that the person you have given love to and received love from will never be forgotten. The unfolding of this journey is not intended to create a return to an "old normal" but the discovery of a "new normal."

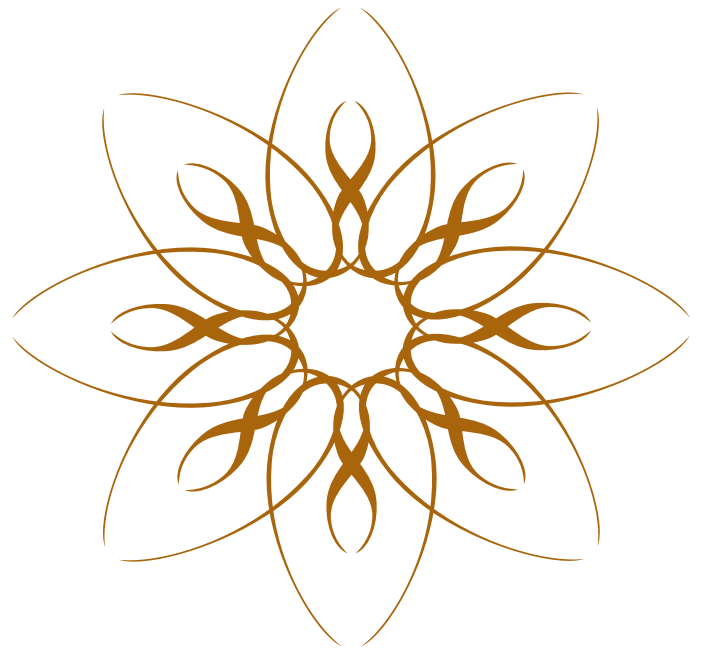
To help explore where you are in your movement toward reconciliation, the following criteria that suggest healing may be helpful. You don't have to meet each of these criteria for healing to be taking place. Again, remember that reconciliation is an ongoing process. If you are early in the work of mourning, you may not meet any of these criteria, but this list will give you a way to monitor your movement toward healing.

As you embrace your grief and do the work of mourning, you can and will be able to demonstrate the majority of the following:

- A recognition of the reality and finality of the death.
- A return to stable eating and sleeping patterns.
- A renewed sense of release from the person who has died. You will have thoughts about the person, but you will not be preoccupied by these thoughts.
- The capacity to enjoy experiences in life that are normally enjoyable.
- The establishment of new and healthy relationships.
- The capacity to live a full life without feelings of guilt or lack of self-respect.
- The drive to organize and plan your life toward the future.
- The serenity to become comfortable with the way things are rather than attempting to make things as they were.
- The versatility to welcome more change in your life.
- The awareness that you have allowed yourself to fully grieve and you have survived.
- The awareness that you do not “get over” your grief; instead, you have a new reality, meaning, and purpose in your life.
- The acquaintance of new parts of yourself that you have discovered in your grief journey.
- The adjustment to new role changes that have resulted from the loss of the relationship.
- The acknowledgement that the pain of loss is an inherent part of life resulting from the ability to give and receive love.

Reconciliation emerges much in the way grass grows. Usually we don't check our lawns daily to see if the grass is growing, but it does grow and soon we come to realize it's time to mow the grass again. Likewise, we don't look at ourselves each day as mourners to see how we are healing. Yet we do come to realize, over the course of months and years, that we have come a long way. We have taken some important steps toward reconciliation.

Usually there is not one great moment of “arrival,” but subtle changes and small advancements. It's helpful to have gratitude for even very small advancements. If you



are beginning to taste your food again, be thankful. If you mustered the energy to meet your friend for lunch, be grateful. If you finally got a good night's sleep, rejoice.

One of my greatest teachers, C.S. Lewis, wrote in *A Grief Observed* about his grief symptoms as they eased in this journey to reconciliation:

“There was no sudden, striking, and emotional transition. Like the warming of a room or the coming of daylight, when you first notice them they have already been going on for some time.”

Of course, you will take some steps backward from time to time, but that is to be expected. Keep believing in yourself. Set your intention to reconcile your grief and have hope that you can and will come to live and love again.

Movement toward your healing can be very draining and exhausting. As different as it might be, seek out people who give you hope for your healing. Permitting yourself to have hope is central to achieving reconciliation.

Realistically, even though you have hope for your healing, you should not expect it to happen overnight. Many grieving people think that it should and, as a result, experience a loss of self-confidence and self-esteem that leaves them questioning their capacity to heal. If this is the situation for you, keep in mind that you are not alone.

You may find that a helpful procedure is to take inventory of your own timetable expectations for reconciliation. Ask yourself questions like, “Am I expecting myself to

heal more quickly than is humanly possible? Have I mistakenly given myself a specific deadline for when I should be ‘over’ my grief?” Recognize that you may be hindering your own healing by expecting too much of yourself. Take your healing one day at a time. It will ultimately allow you to move toward and rediscover continued meaning in your life.

One valuable way to embrace your healing is to journal. Write down your thoughts and feelings and you will be amazed at how it helps you embrace your grief. Having your experiences to reflect on in writing can also help you see the changes that are taking place in you as you do the work of mourning.

You can’t control death or ignore your human need to mourn when it impacts your life. You do have, however, the choice to help yourself heal. Embracing the pain of your grief is probably one of the hardest jobs you will ever do. As you do this work, surround yourself with compassionate, loving people who are willing to “walk with” you.

The hope that comes from the journey through grief is life. The most important word in the previous sentence is *through*. As you do the work of mourning, you do not remain where you are.

I think about the man I was honored to companion following the tragic death of his seven-year-old son, Adam, in a car accident. He was heartbroken. His soul was darkened. He had to come to know the deepest despair. Yet, he discovered that if he were to ever live again, he would have to work through his grief. So,

he adopted the mantra, “Work on!” In his process of conscious intention-setting, he decided to believe that even the most heart-wrenching loss can be survived. Perhaps refusing to give in to despair is the greatest act of hope and faith.

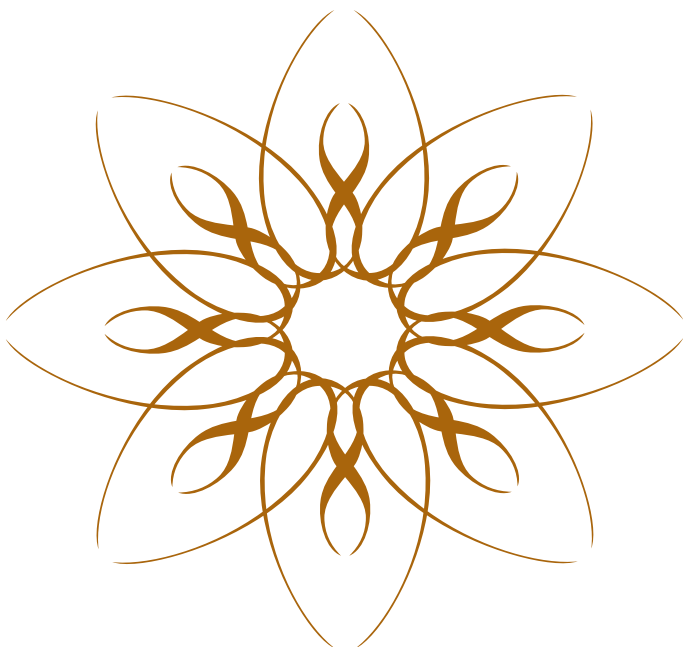
Yes, you go to the wilderness, you cry out in the depths of your despair. Darkness may seem to surround you. But rising up within you is the profound awareness that the pain of the grief is a sign of having given and received love. And where the capacity to love and be loved has been before, it can be again. Choose life!

Living in the present moment of your grief is living with anticipation that you can and will go on to discover a continued life that has meaning and purpose. If you are in any way like me, maybe sometimes you lost hope and need to fall back on your faith.

Sometimes in my own grief journey, when hope seems absent, I open my heart—my well of reception—and find that it is faith that sustains me. Faith that is inspired by moments when I’m able to find what is good, what is sweet, what is tender in life, despite the deep, overwhelming wounds of my grief. It is the courage of the human spirit that chooses to live until we die that gives me faith. Life will continue and it will bring me back to hope. If you lose hope along your journey, I invite you to join me in falling back on faith.

Reflect on this: Living with hope is living in anticipation of what can be. Sometimes when you are in the wilderness of your grief, it’s easy to question your hope for the future. But living with faith is embracing what cannot be changed by our will, and knowing that life in all of its fullness is still good. Choose life!

In the religious traditions of Christianity and Judaism, hope is much more than “an expectation of a good that is yet to be.” Hope is confidence that God will be with you in your grief and, most importantly, that life continues after death. Hope is trust in God even when everything seems hopeless. Hope is the assurance that God has the last word, and that that word is LIFE—even as you confront the realities of the death of someone you have loved. Choose life!





The Critical Importance of Seeking Support: *Learning From The Geese*

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., C.T., www.centerforloss.com

If there is ever a time in life when we need others to support and nurture us, it's when someone we love dies. In many ways, "grief work" is the most difficult work we will ever do. And hard work is less burdensome when others lend a hand.

Sharing the devastation that results from the death of someone precious won't make the hurt go away, but it does make it more bearable. In reflecting on this need to support each other during times of grief, we might be well served to observe the five natural instincts for support and companionship demonstrated by wild geese.

Observation One: When the flock is on a journey, the flapping of the wings of each individual goose results in an uplift for the bird that follows. By flying in a "V" formation, the entire flock achieves 71 percent greater flying range than if each bird flew alone.

Implication: When we are grieving the death of someone loved, we too are on a journey. Others who are grieving are on a similar journey, and we can all be uplifted by journeying together. No, you need not travel alone, nor should you try!

Observation Two: Whenever a goose falls out of formation, it experiences the drag and resistance of trying to fly alone. The goose then realizes it needs to get back into formation to take advantage of the collective lifting power of the flock.

Implication: Just as geese are well served to stay in formation with those on a similar journey, we as humans are better off if we accept the lifting power of those who go before us. We are grace-filled when we open ourselves to the support of our fellow travelers.

Observation Three: If any one goose has a problem, two other geese will always drop out of formation and follow the wayward goose to help support and protect it. They stay present to the goose that has special needs until it is able to continue the journey on its own.

Implication: If we humans can learn from the wisdom of geese, we will always companion each other in difficult times. Receiving help from others strengthens the bonds of compassion and love that help us survive when we are devastated by loss.

Observation Four: When the goose leading the flock gets tired and overwhelmed, it rotates back into the formation, and another goose flies at the point position.

Implication: No one person on a grief journey can lead the way all the time. At times, it is wise to acknowledge that you are tired and need others to care for you and protect you from the headwinds.

Observation Five: While flying in formation, the geese honk to each other as a form of encouragement and mutual support.

Implication: There are times in life when we all need encouragement from those around us to remind us of our interconnectedness. We must allow ourselves to rely on each other, otherwise, when we are in grief, we end up feeling totally alone and completely isolated.

Where To Turn For Help

"There is strength in numbers," one saying goes. Another echoes, "United we stand, divided we fall." This is a time in your life when you need to let other people in. You needn't let everyone in all the time, but I encourage you to make room for those you trust the most. Carefully chosen friends and family members whom you feel safe with can often be at the center of your support system.

Seek out people who encourage you to be yourself and who acknowledge your many thoughts and feelings. Open your broken heart a little at a time to those people in your life who are compassionate and loving listeners. In an ideal world, this is your family and friends. If this is not true for you, my hope is that you will seek out other sources of support.

The darkness that grief brings into your life is a place from which you might be tempted to judge others, particularly their motivations. True, they cannot feel your profound loss the way you do, so don't expect them to be able to. Except in cases where there is evidence that you can't trust someone's intentions, try to be open to letting others be of support to you. Remember—you are doing the best you can, from moment to moment, from day to day.

You may also find comfort in talking to a minister or other religious leader. When someone loved dies, it is natural for you to feel ambivalent about your faith and question the very meaning of life. A clergy member who responds with empathy to all of your feelings can be a valuable resource. Just be certain the clergyperson you look to for support is a good match for your unique needs.

A professional grief counselor may also be a very helpful addition to your support system. In fact, a good counselor can be something friends and family members can't be: an objective listener. A counselor's office can be a place of sanctuary where you are able to give voice to those feelings you may be afraid to express elsewhere. As with everything else in this overwhelming grief journey, counseling is an intensely personal choice. However, when you find the right counselor, you may well have found a safe haven in which to experience the terrifying jumble of feelings impacting you.

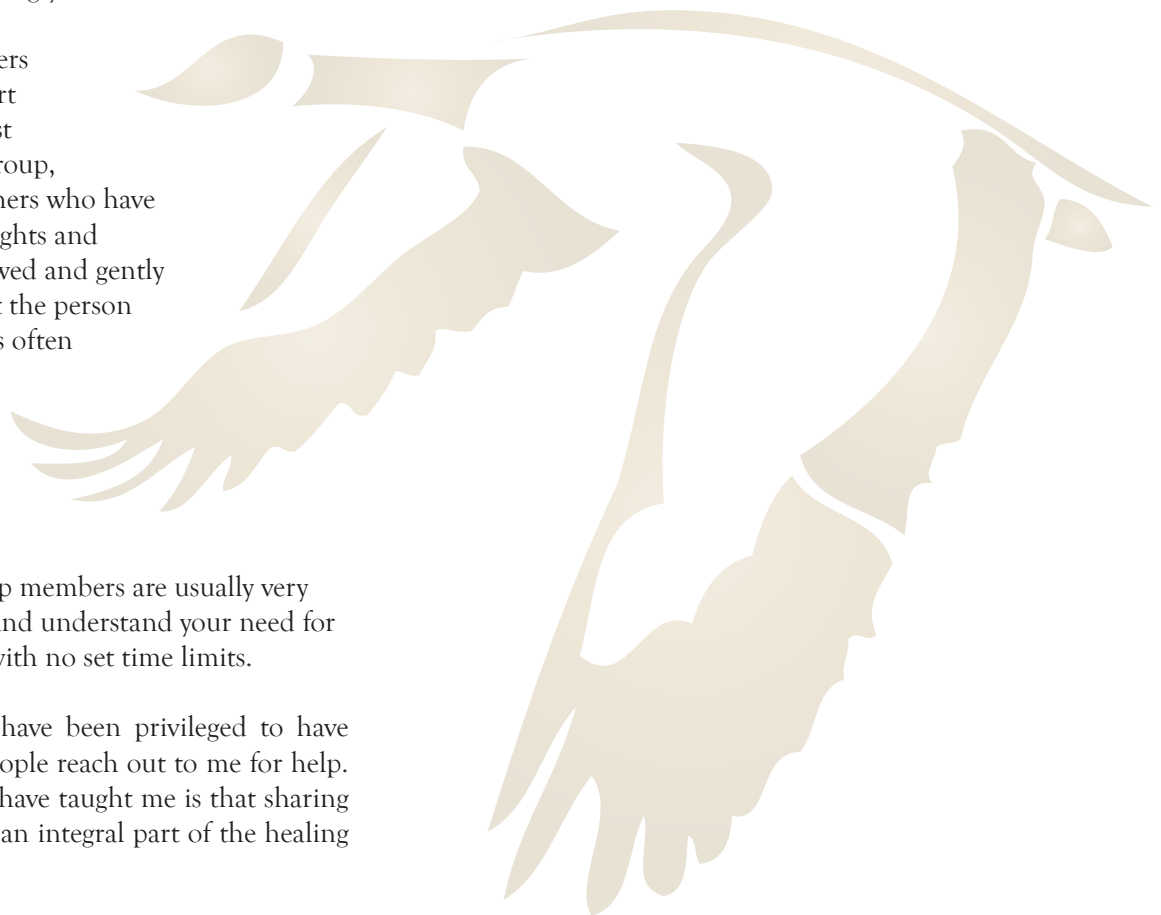
Not all but many mourners discover that grief support groups are one of the best helping resources. In a group, you can connect with others who have experienced similar thoughts and feelings. You will be allowed and gently encouraged to talk about the person who died as much and as often as you like. In these groups, each person can share his or her unique grief experience in a nonthreatening, safe atmosphere. Fellow group members are usually very patient with each other and understand your need for compassionate support with no set time limits.

As a grief counselor, I have been privileged to have thousands of grieving people reach out to me for help. Among the lessons they have taught me is that sharing their grief with others is an integral part of the healing

process. Perhaps it is helpful to remember that, by definition, mourning means “the shared response to loss.”

Remember, help comes in different forms for different people. The trick is to find the combination that works best for you and then make use of it. I hope this article has helped you understand the importance of reaching out for help during this time in your life. Please don't try to confront your grief alone. Wrap your arms around yourself, but also open your arms to the loving support that wants to embrace you. You need and deserve companions—friends, relatives, counselors, and others who have experienced similar losses—who will walk with you as you make the difficult journey through grief.

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is a respected author and educator on the topic of healing in grief. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School's Department of Family Medicine. Dr. Wolfelt has written many compassionate, bestselling books designed to help people mourn well so they can continue to love well and live well, including “Understanding Your Grief,” “The Mourner's Book of Hope,” and “Healing Your Traumatized Heart.” Visit www.centerforloss.com to learn more about the natural and necessary process of grief and mourning and to order Dr. Wolfelt's books.



The Writings of Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., C.T.

Resources For the Adult Mourner

Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential

Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart

Understanding Your Grief Journal

Understanding Your Suicide Grief: Ten Essential

Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart

Understanding Your Suicide Grief Journal

Living in the Shadow of the Ghosts of Grief:

Step into the Light

Eight Critical Questions for Mourners... And

the Answers That Will Help You Heal

The Wilderness of Grief: Finding Your Way (Also available in audiobook)

The Wilderness of Suicide Grief: Finding Your Way

The Journey Through Grief: Reflections on Healing

Loving from the Outside In, Mourning from the Inside Out

The Mourner's Book of Hope

The Mourner's Book of Courage

The Mourner's Book of Faith

Grief One Day at a Time: 365 Meditations to Help You Heal After Loss

One Mindful Day at a Time: 365 Meditations for Living in the Now

When Your Soulmate Dies: A Guide Through Heroic Mourning

The Paradoxes of Mourning: Healing Your Grief with Three Forgotten Truths

Healing Your Grieving Heart

Healing Your Grieving Soul

Healing Your Grieving Body

Healing A Friend's Grieving Heart

Healing A Grandparent's Grieving Heart

Healing A Spouse's Grieving Heart

Healing A Parent's Grieving Heart

Healing The Adult Child's Grieving Heart

Healing Your Grieving Heart After Miscarriage

Healing Your Grieving Heart After Stillbirth

Healing Your Traumatized Heart

Healing the Adult Sibling's Grieving Heart

Healing Your Grieving Heart After Stillbirth

Healing Your Grief About Aging

Healing Your Grieving Heart After a Military Death

Creating Meaningful Funeral Ceremonies: A Guide for Families

Transcending Divorce

Transcending Divorce Journal

The Wilderness of Divorce: Finding Your Way

Resources For & About Grieving Children and Teens

Healing a Child's Grieving Heart: 100 Practical

Ideas for Families, Friends & Caregivers

Healing Your Grieving Heart For Kids: 100

Practical Ideas

A Child's View of Grief (book or DVD available)

How I Feel - A Coloring Book for Grieving Children

How I Feel – A Coloring Book for Kids During and After Divorce

Sarah's Journey

Jeremy Goes to Camp Good Grief

Finding the Words: How to Talk with Children & Teens

Companioning the Grieving Child: A Soulful Guide for Caregivers

Companioning the Grieving Child Curriculum Book

Healing a Teen's Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends & Caregivers

Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens: 100 Practical Ideas

The Healing Your Grieving Heart Journal for Teens

A Teen's View of Grief (DVD)

Healing After Divorce: 100 Practical Ideas for Kids

Healing A Child's Heart After Divorce: 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends and

Caregivers

The Writings of Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., C.T.

Resources For Bereavement Caregivers

When Grief is Complicated: A Model for Therapists to Understand, Identify, and Companion Grievers Lost in the Wilderness of Complicated Grief
Reframing PTSD as Traumatic Grief: How Caregivers Can Companion Traumatized Grievers Through Catch-Up Mourning
Companioning You! A Soulful Guide to Caring for Yourself While You Care for the Dying and the Bereaved
Creating Meaningful Funeral Experiences: A Guide for Caregivers
Educating the Families You Serve About the "WHY" of the Funeral Workbook
Why We Have Had Funerals Since the Beginning of Time Brochures and Posters
Funeral Home Customer Service A-Z: Creating Exceptional Experiences for Today's Families

The Pocket Consultant for Funeral Service: Customer Service A-Z
A Tale of Two Funerals
Companioning the Bereaved: A Soulful Guide for Caregivers
Companioning the Dying: A Soulful Guide for Caregivers
Companioning at a Time of Perinatal Loss
The Handbook for Companioning the Mourner: Eleven Essential Principles
Understanding Your Grief Support Group Guide
Understanding Your Suicide Grief Support Group Guide
Transcending Divorce Support Group Guide
Helping People with Developmental Disabilities Mourn
Caring For Donor Families: Before, During & After

Other Resources

When Your Pet Dies
Healing the Empty Nester's Grieving Heart
Healing a Friend or Loved One's Grieving Heart After a Cancer Diagnosis
Healing Your Grieving Heart After a Cancer Diagnosis
Healing After Job Loss: 100 Practical Ideas
Healing Your Holiday Grief: 100 Practical Ideas for Blending Mourning and Celebration During the Holiday Season
Healing Your Grief When Disaster Strikes
Healing Your Grieving Heart When Someone You Know has Alzheimer's
Healing Grief at Work: 100 Practical Ideas After Your Workplace is Touched by Loss

Wolfelt's Grief Gardening Model Poster
The Depression of Grief: Coping with Your Sadness & Knowing When to Get Help
Afterwords... Helping You Heal (Available in English and Spanish)
Helping Series Brochures (37 Titles Available)
Wallet Cards: The Pet Lover's Code, The Mourner's Bill of Rights (English & Spanish,) My Grief Rights (Poster also available,) The Bereavement Caregiver's Self-Care Manifesto, Ten Freedoms for Creating Meaningful Funeral Ceremonies
Under Reconstruction Pin
Empathy Cards

Training Resources

The Center for Loss & Life Transition works towards its mission of "Helping People Help Others" by providing bereavement caregivers quality training in a four-day educational seminar format taught by Dr. Wolfelt. These courses have evolved out of a demand for concise yet comprehensive training in the growing field of death education and counseling. If you want to learn practical skills to "companion" people in grief or continue to enhance your bereavement skills, our educational seminars are perfect for you. These courses are held in Fort Collins, CO or Scottsdale, AZ.

Request a free Companion Press Publications or Center for Loss Educational Seminars catalog or order publications online:

(970) 226-6050 info@centerforloss.com www.centerforloss.com

Workshop Evaluation

Title:

Importance of the information presented:

1	2	3
not important	somewhat important	very important

Overall, the workshop was:

1	2	3
not important	somewhat important	very important

The most valuable aspect of this workshop for me was:

The least valuable aspect of this workshop for me was:

How did you learn about this workshop?

Comments:

Please return this form to: