

Helping Yourself Heal When Someone Dies *by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.*

Someone You Love Has Died

You are now faced with the difficult, but important, need to mourn. Mourning is the open expression of your thoughts and feelings regarding the death and the person who has died. It is an essential part of healing. You are beginning a journey that is often frightening, painful, overwhelming, and sometimes lonely. This article provides practical suggestions to help you move toward healing in your personal grief experience.

Realize Your Grief is Unique

Your grief is unique. No one will grieve in exactly the same way. Your experience will be influenced by a variety of factors: the relationship you had with the person who died; the circumstances surrounding the death; your emotional support system; and your cultural and religious background. As a result of these factors, you will grieve in your own special way. Don't try to compare your experience with that of other people or to adopt assumptions about just how long your grief should last. Consider taking a "one-day-at-a-time" approach that allows you to grieve at your own pace.

Talk About Your Grief

Express your grief openly. By sharing your grief outside yourself, healing occurs. Ignoring your grief won't make it go away; talking about it often makes you feel better. Allow yourself to speak from your heart, not just your head. Doing so doesn't mean you are losing control, or going "crazy." It is a normal part of your grief journey.

Find caring friends and relatives who will listen without judging. Seek out those persons who will walk with, not in front of, or behind you in your journey through grief. Avoid persons who are critical or who try to steal your grief from you. They may tell you, "keep your chin up," or "carry on," or "be happy." While these comments may be well-intended, you do not have to accept them. You have a right to express your grief; no one has the right to take it away.

Expect to Feel a Multitude of Emotions

Experiencing loss affects your head, heart, and spirit. So you may experience a variety of emotions as part of your grief work. Confusion, disorganization, fear, guilt, relief, or explosive emotions are just a few of the emotions you may feel. Sometimes these emotions will follow each other within a short period of time. Or they may occur simultaneously.

As strange as some of these emotions may seem they are normal and healthy. Allow yourself to learn from these feelings. And don't be surprised if out of nowhere you suddenly experience surges of grief, even at the most unexpected times. These grief attacks can be frightening and leave you feeling overwhelmed. They are, however, a natural response to the death of someone loved. Find someone who understands your feelings and will allow you to talk about them.

Allow for Numbness

Feeling dazed or numb when someone dies is often part of your early grief experience. This numbness serves a valuable purpose: it gives your emotions time to catch up with what your mind has told you. This feeling helps create insulation from the reality of the death until you are more able to tolerate what you don't want to believe.

Be Tolerant of Your Physical and Emotional Limits

Your feelings of loss and sadness will probably leave you fatigued. Your ability to think clearly and make decisions may be impaired. And your low-energy level may naturally slow you down. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. Nurture yourself. Get daily rest. Eat balanced meals. Lighten your schedule as much as possible. Caring for yourself doesn't mean feeling sorry for yourself it means you are using survival skills.

Develop a Support System

Reaching out to others and accepting support is often difficult, particularly when you hurt so much. But the most compassionate self-action you can do at this difficult time is to find a support system of caring friends and relatives who will provide the understanding you need. Find those people who encourage you to be yourself and acknowledge your feelings -- both happy and sad.

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. Most importantly, the funeral is a way for you to express your grief outside yourself. If you eliminate this ritual, you often set yourself up to repress your feelings, and you cheat everyone who cares of a chance to pay tribute to someone who was, and always will be, loved.

Embrace Your Spirituality

If faith is 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 are angry at God because of the death of someone you loved, realize this feeling as a normal part of your grief work. Find someone to talk with who won't be critical of your feelings of hurt and abandonment.

Allow a Search for Meaning

You may find yourself asking, "Why did he die? Why this way? Why now?" This search for meaning is often another normal part of the healing process. Some questions have answers. Some do not. Actually, the healing occurs in the opportunity to pose the questions, not necessarily in answering them. Find a supportive friend who will listen responsively as you search for meaning.

Treasure Your Memories

Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after someone loved dies. Treasure them. Share them with your family and friends. Recognize that your memories may make you laugh or cry. In either case, they are a lasting part of the relationship that you had with a very special person in your life.

Move Toward Your Grief and Heal

The capacity to love requires the necessity to grieve when someone loved dies. You cannot heal unless you openly express your grief. Denying your grief will only make it become more confusing and overwhelming. Embrace 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. Never forget that the death of someone loved changes your life forever. It's not that you won't be happy again. It's simply that you will never be exactly the same as you were before the death.

The experience of grief is powerful. So, too, is your ability to help yourself heal. In doing the work of grieving, you are moving toward a renewed sense of meaning and purpose in your life.