

Understanding Your Grief: TEN TOUCHSTONES FOR FINDING HOPE AND HEALING YOUR HEART

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

PART 1 OF 4

INTRODUCTION

As you well know, grief is as old as humankind. Yet, every time we as humans lose someone we love or suffer any significant loss, it is a freshly painful, singular experience. By engaging with your grief when you're hurting, you're taking one small but oh-so-important step toward integrating the loss into your life. I often say that grief waits on welcome, not on time.

So here's a good rule of thumb: Whenever you're feeling your grief, I suggest you take a few seconds or minutes to tend to it in some way. I say this because your grief will keep trying to get your attention until you give it the attention it deserves. Your grief needs you right now. And as difficult as it is, you need your grief — because it is now an essential part of your life and who you are.

The Ten Touchstones

In this article series, I will review ten “touchstones” that are essential physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual signs for you to seek out in your journey through grief:

TOUCHSTONE ONE
TOUCHSTONE TWO
TOUCHSTONE THREE
TOUCHSTONE FOUR
TOUCHSTONE FIVE
TOUCHSTONE SIX
TOUCHSTONE SEVEN
TOUCHSTONE EIGHT
TOUCHSTONE NINE
TOUCHSTONE TEN

Open to the presence of your loss
Dispel misconceptions about grief
Embrace the uniqueness of your grief
Explore your feelings of loss
Understand the six needs of mourning
Recognize you are not crazy
Nurture yourself
Reach out for help
Seek reconciliation, not resolution
Appreciate your transformation

Perhaps you can think of your grief as a wilderness — a vast, mountainous, inhospitable forest. You are in the wilderness now. You are in the midst of unfamiliar and often brutal surroundings. You are cold and tired. Yet you must journey through this wilderness. To find your way out, you must become acquainted with its terrain and learn to follow the sometimes hard-to-find trail that leads to healing.

In this wilderness of your grief, the touchstones are your trail markers. They are the signs that let you know you are on the right path. If you strive to follow these ten touchstones, I believe you can and will find your way out of the wilderness of your grief, and you will learn to make the most of the rest of your precious days here on earth.

Finding Hope

What is hope? Hope is an expectation of a good that is yet to be. It's an expression of the present alive with a sense of the possible. It's a future-looking expectation felt in the present moment. In grief, hope is a belief that healing can and will unfold, and that despite the loss, there will surely be many meaningful, engaging, fun, happy, and even joyful times to come. In honoring the ten touchstones, you are making an effort to find hope for your continued life.

The Path of Your Heart

Perhaps the most central truth I have learned over the years is that integrating grief into your life is heart-based, not head-based. Did you know that the word “courage” comes from the Old French word for heart (coeur)? Your courage grows for those things in life that impact you deeply. In many ways the path of the heart is an individual exploration into the wilderness, along unmarked and unlit paths. I hope this article series will shine some light along your path.



A Word About Faith and Spirituality

I believe that grief is first and foremost a spiritual journey because it forces us to examine our most fundamental beliefs and feelings about why we are here and what life means. To me, spirituality means engaging with these big questions and the deepest, most meaningful stirrings of your heart in whatever ways you choose. Whether you are deeply religious, agnostic, or atheist, pondering the meaning of life and love and the possibilities of the mysteries we do not and cannot fully understand is an essential part of your journey. Regularly spending time on spiritual practices — whatever that means to you — will help you embrace your grief and come out of the dark and into the light.

TOUCHSTONE ONE OPEN TO THE PRESENCE OF YOUR LOSS

From my own experiences with loss, as well as those of the many grieving people I have companioned over the years, I have learned that the pain of grief is both normal and necessary.

In opening to the presence of the pain of your loss, in acknowledging the inevitability and appropriateness of the pain, in being willing to gently embrace

the pain, you in effect honor the pain. Yes, as crazy as it may sound, your pain is the key that opens your heart and ushers you on your way to healing. Simply put, the capacity to love requires the necessity to mourn.

You have perhaps been taught that pain, in general, is an indication that something is wrong and that it's your job to find ways to alleviate the pain. You may also think of pain and feelings of loss as experiences to avoid, suppress, or deny. But over time you will learn that the pain of your grief will keep trying to get your attention until you have the courage to gently, and in small doses, open to its presence. You will also learn that the alternative — denying or suppressing your pain — is in fact more harmful in the long run.

What is Healing in Grief?

To heal in grief is to become whole again, to integrate your grief into yourself and to learn to continue your changed life with fullness and meaning. Healing is a holistic concept that embraces the physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual realms. Note that healing is not the same as “curing,” which is a medical term that means “remedying” or “correcting.” You cannot remedy your grief, but you can reconcile it. You cannot correct your grief, but you can heal it.

Dosing Your Pain

You cannot embrace the pain of your grief in one sitting. If you were to feel it all at once, you could not survive. Instead, you must invite yourself to “dose” your pain — to feel it in small waves and then allow it to retreat until you're ready for the next wave. In other words, I encourage you to remember to embrace your pain a little bit at a time, then set it aside and give yourself a break, allowing time for you to restore yourself and rebuild your energy to attend to your grief again. Of course, you won't be able to completely escape your pain; even when you're not giving it your full attention, it will always be there, in the background.

Setting Your Intention to Heal

When you set your intention to heal, you make a true commitment to positively influence the course of your journey. You choose between being what I call a “passive witness” or an “active participant” in your grief. I'm sure you have heard this tired cliché: Time heals all wounds. Yet time alone has little to do with healing. To heal, you must be willing to learn about the mystery of the grief journey. It can't be fixed or “resolved,” it can only be soothed and reconciled through actively engaging with and expressing your many thoughts and feelings.

No Rewards for Speed

Reconciling your grief does not happen quickly or efficiently. “Grief work” may be some of the hardest work you ever do. Because mourning is work, it calls on your physical, cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual reserves. And it takes time. A long time. And there are no rewards for speed. Consequently, you must be patient with yourself. When you come to trust that the most intense pain will not last forever, it naturally becomes more tolerable.

The Importance of Presence

To be present is to notice and give your attention to whatever is happening around and inside you in each moment. It is to honor and mindfully experience the now. Especially in the early parts of your journey, your grief needs your mindful attention. In addition to being an always-there, background reality in your life, your grief will sometimes strongly tug at you and ask for your attention. For example, on any given day you may feel especially sad. It is in such moments that your grief requires your presence. It is asking for your full attention and self-compassion. It would also benefit from a good dose of expression, as well.

TOUCHSTONE TWO DISPEL MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT GRIEF

A misconception is a mistaken notion you have about something — in other words, something you believe to be true but isn’t. Misconceptions about grief are common in our culture because we tend not to openly mourn or validate or talk about grief and mourning.

The misconceptions, in essence, deny you your right to hurt and authentically express your grief. They often cause unrealistic expectations about the grief experience, and they may make you doubt or judge yourself unfairly.

Following are just a few of the most common grief misconceptions:

Misconception: Grief and mourning are the same thing

Grief is the constellation of internal thoughts and feelings we have when someone we love dies. In other words, grief is everything we naturally think and feel on the inside after a loss. Mourning, on the other hand, is when we take our inner grief and express it outside of ourselves in some way.

Talking about the person who died, crying, expressing our thoughts and feelings through art or music, and celebrating special dates that held meaning for the person who died are just a few examples of mourning. Grief comes naturally, but mourning usually takes intentional effort and commitment. It’s worth it, though, because the only way to move toward fully integrating loss into our lives and eventually healing is not just by grieving, but by mourning.

Misconception: Grief and mourning progress in predictable, orderly stages

You have probably heard of the “stages of grief.” The world latched onto this concept because it’s appealing to feel like there’s a knowable structure to such a difficult life experience and to have some sense of control over it. If only it were so simple! The truth is that grief is typically not orderly or predictable. Do not try to determine where you “should” be in your grief. Just allow yourself to be naturally where you are and present to whatever you’re experiencing in each moment.

Everyone mourns in different ways. Personal experience is your best teacher, and you and only you are the expert of your own grief. Don’t think your goal is to move through prescribed stages. Your journey through the wilderness will be totally unique to you.

Misconception: The goal should be to “get over” your grief as soon as possible

You may already have heard the question, “Are you over it yet?” Or, even worse, “Well, you should be over it by now!” To think that as a human being you ever “get over” your grief is a misnomer. You don’t “get over” grief, you learn to live with it. You learn to integrate it into your life and the fabric of your being.

No, you will never “get over” your grief. As you actively engage with your grief, however, and do the work of your mourning, you can and will become reconciled to it. Unfortunately,

if people around you expect you to “get over” your grief, they set you up to fail.

Misconception: Nobody can help you with your grief

We have all heard people say, “Nobody can help you but yourself.” Or you may have been told since childhood, “If you want something done right, do it yourself.” Yet, the truth is that the most self-compassionate thing you can do for yourself at this naturally difficult time is to reach out for help from others.

Sharing your pain with others won’t make it disappear, but it will, over time, make it more bearable. By definition, mourning (i.e., the outward expression of grief) requires that you get support from sources outside of yourself. Grieving may be a solo activity, but mourning is often not. Reaching out for help also connects you to other people and strengthens the bonds of love that make life seem worth living.

A longtime TAPS supporter, Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D. serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and has written many books that help people mourn, including *Healing Your Grieving Heart After a Military Death* (coauthored with TAPS President Bonnie Carroll), *Understanding Your Grief*, and *The Understanding Your Grief Journal*. Visit centerforloss.com to learn more about grief and to order Dr. Wolfelt’s books.

Editor’s note: This four-part series is excerpted and condensed from the second edition of Dr. Wolfelt’s classic *Understanding Your Grief*, first published thirty years ago. The new edition, just published in September 2021, retains the original bestseller’s compassionate content but adds concise passages on more topics, ranging from vulnerability, soulmate grief, and complicated grief to mindfulness, the power of ritual, and more. It also features a fresh, updated look. This book is accompanied by a journal, a support group facilitator’s guide, and a daily reader version. For more information go to centerforloss.com

UNDERSTANDING YOUR GRIEF

Ten Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart

PART 2 of 4

Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D. ★ TAPS Advisory Board



Honor Wall at the 2021 TAPS National Military Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp in Dallas, Texas.

*This article is the second part of a four-part series excerpted and greatly condensed from the second edition of Dr. Wolfelt's classic book, **Understanding Your Grief**, first published in 1992. In this series, Dr. Wolfelt covers his **Ten Touchstones**—essential physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual signs for mourners to seek out on their journey through grief.*

THE TEN ESSENTIAL TOUCHSTONES:

1. Open to the Presence of Your Loss
2. Dispel Misconceptions about Grief
3. Embrace the Uniqueness of Your Grief
4. Explore Your Feelings of Loss
5. Understand the Six Needs of Mourning
6. Recognize You Are Not Crazy
7. Nurture Yourself
8. Reach Out for Help
9. Seek Reconciliation, Not Resolution
10. Appreciate Your Transformation

TOUCHSTONE THREE EMBRACE THE UNIQUENESS OF YOUR GRIEF

In the course of human life, everyone experiences loss and grieves. But our grief journeys are never precisely the same. Despite what you may hear about grief stages or what you should or should not be thinking, feeling, or doing, you will grieve and do the work of mourning in your own way. This touchstone invites you to explore some of the unique reasons your grief is what it is— the “whys” of your particular journey through the wilderness.

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. In general,

the stronger your attachment to the person who died, the more difficult your grief journey will be. Ambivalent, rocky relationships can also be particularly hard to process after a death, however.

WHY 2: The Circumstances of the Death

How, why, and when the person you love died can significantly impact your journey into grief. Military deaths are often sudden and unexpected, and they may be violent. Such circumstances do not allow you to prepare and can give rise to traumatic grief. The age of the person who died also affects your feelings about the death. When we feel that a life was cut short, our innate sense of injustice colors our grief.

WHY 3: The People in Your Life

Mourning is the outward expression of grief. Part of the benefit of mourning involves continuously moving your grief



from the inside to the outside. Mourning also signals the people in your life that you're hurting and need their empathy and support to heal. Healing requires an environment of caring and gentle encouragement. Without a stabilizing support system of at least one other person, odds are you will have difficulty reconciling your grief.

WHY 4: Your Unique Personality

Whatever your unique personality, rest assured, your grief will reflect it. How you have responded to other losses or crises in your life will likely also be consistent with how you react to death. Other aspects of your personality—such as your self-esteem, values, and beliefs will also impact your response to death. Any preexisting mental health issues will probably influence your grief as well.

WHY 5: The Unique Personality of the Person Who Died

Just as your grief journey reflects your personality, so is the unique personality of the person who died. Personality is the total of all the characteristics that made this person the way they were. 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 go into creating personality. It's no wonder there's so much to miss when all these mannerisms are gone all at once.

WHY 6: Your Cultural Background

An important part of how you experience and express your grief is your cultural background. I mean your family's guiding values, rules (spoken and unspoken), and traditions when I say culture. Your family's ethnicity and origins often shape this. Commonly passed down from generation to generation, education and political beliefs also shape your cultural background. Your culture is your way of being in the world.

WHY 7: Your Religious or Spiritual Background

Your belief system can tremendously impact 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.

WHY 8: Other Crises or Stresses in Your Life Right Now

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 other current ones are in your life, the more overwhelming your grief journey may be.

WHY 9: Your Experiences with Loss and Death in the Past

One way to think about yourself is that you are the total of all that you have experienced in your life so far. The more "experienced" you are with death, the less shocked you may feel this time around. Conversely, you may find that even if you have a lot of experience with loss, this death hit you harder. You might feel surprised by the intensity of your grief. Rest assured, grief can be unpredictable, so work toward accepting your grief as it comes.

WHY 10: Your Physical and Mental Health

How you feel physically and mentally significantly affects your grief. If you were dealing with physical or mental wellness issues before the death, your symptoms might now be worse. If you are tired and eating poorly, your coping skills may diminish.

WHY 11: Your Gender

Your feelings are your feelings, regardless of your sex or gender identification. Gender norms and social constructs may influence your grief and how others relate to you at this time. Our cultural understanding of gender and gender norms is evolving, and grieving people get to be grieving people—as they should. And, I believe all people are born with the instinct to grieve and mourn.



WHY 12: The Ritual or Funeral Experience

Funerals and memorial services for someone you love can help or hinder your personal grief experience. Holding a meaningful ritual for survivors can aid in their social, emotional, and spiritual healing after death. If you were unable to have or attend a funeral or if the funeral was minimized or distorted somehow, you may find that this complicates your healing process. Be assured, however, that it is never too late after death to plan and carry out a ritual (even a second or third ceremony) that will help meet your needs.



TOUCHSTONE FOUR EXPLORE YOUR FEELINGS OF LOSS

So far on the path to healing, we've explored opening to the presence of your loss, dispelling common misconceptions about grief, and embracing the uniqueness of your grief. As strange as your emotions might seem, they are a true expression of where you are in your grief journey at any given moment. How they feel for you is the primary way you experience these touchstones. Rather than deny or feel victimized by your feelings, I want to help you learn to tune into and learn from them.

SHOCK, NUMBNESS, DENIAL, AND DISBELIEF

Thank goodness for shock, numbness, and disbelief! These feelings are nature's way of temporarily protecting you from the full reality of death. A critical point to realize is that you should not prevent yourself from experiencing these feelings. Instead, be compassionate with yourself. Allow for and surrender to this instinctive form of self-protection, especially in the early weeks and months after a death.

DISORGANIZATION, CONFUSION, SEARCHING, AND YEARNING

Perhaps the most isolating and frightening part of your grief journey is the sense of disorganization, confusion, searching, and

yearning that often comes with the loss. You may feel a sense of restlessness, agitation, impatience, and ongoing confusion. You may notice an inability to complete tasks. You might also experience a conscious or subconscious searching for the person who has died. For months (or even much longer), your mind may continue to look for the person – in your home, crowds, or places they used to frequent. You may even dream about the person who died. Yearning is normal, too, which is the intense, near-constant ache of missing the person.

ANXIETY, PANIC, AND FEAR

Feelings of anxiety, panic, and fear are also very typical in grief. You may be afraid of what the future holds or that other people in your life could die soon. You may be more aware of your mortality, which can be scary. You may feel vulnerable, even unable to survive, without the person who died. Financial problems can compound feelings of anxiety.

Under no circumstances will you allow your fears and anxieties to go unexpressed. If you don't talk about them, you may find yourself retreating from other people and the world in general. And if you are experiencing panic attacks, be sure to seek help from your primary care provider and or a therapist.

EXPLOSIVE EMOTIONS

Anger, hate, blame, terror, resentment, rage, and jealousy are explosive emotions that may be a volatile yet natural part of your grief journey. It helps to understand that these feelings are a form of protest. Think of a toddler with a favorite toy. The toddler wants the toy, so when it's yanked out of his hands, his instinctive reaction is to scream, cry, or hit. When someone loved is taken from you, your instinctive reaction may be much the same.

If explosive emotions are part of your journey (and they aren't for everyone), be aware that you have two avenues for expression outward or inward. The outward avenue leads to healing, while the inward one does not. Keeping your explosive emotions inside can cause low self-esteem, depression, guilt, physical complaints, and sometimes even persistent thoughts of suicide.





GUILT AND REGRET

Guilt, regret, and self-blame are common, natural feelings after the death of someone loved. You may have a case of the “if onlys.” You may wonder, “If only I had encouraged him to stay home, if only I had been with her that night, if only I hadn’t said, etc.”

If you find yourself experiencing such regrets, please be compassionate with yourself. When someone you care about dies, it’s normal to think about actions you could or could not have taken before the death – whether to prevent it, to have done everything you could, or to have closed the loop on any unfinished business.

SADNESS AND DEPRESSION

Sadness can be the most hurtful feeling on your journey through grief. We don’t want to be sad; sadness saps pleasure from our lives and makes us feel crummy. But, sadness is a natural, authentic emotion after the death of someone loved. Something precious in your life is now gone, so of course, you are sad. Depression plays an essential role. It forces us to regroup – physically, cognitively, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. The natural depression of grief slows down your body and prevents major organ systems from being damaged. It aids in your healing and provides time to begin reordering your life slowly. These natural feelings can ultimately help you move ahead, assess old ways of being, and make plans for the future.

A FINAL THOUGHT ABOUT THE FEELINGS YOU MAY EXPERIENCE

When you add up all the thoughts and feelings you’ve had since the death of the person you love – as well as all the emotions you’re yet to have in the months to come – we call this experience “grief.” It’s a deceptively small, simple word for such a wide-ranging, challenging assortment of feelings. Your behavior while having these feelings is also part of your grief journey. Mourning – or expressing your emotions outside of yourself – is sometimes, but not always, intentional. Your feelings may come out in strange and unpredictable ways, and this, too, is normal.

I hope you will be kind to yourself as you encounter and befriend all your feelings and behaviors of grief. Patience is paramount, as is self-compassion. You feel what you feel; there are no rights or wrongs. And when you’re struggling with your feelings or need to let them out, I hope you’ll remember to reach out to the people who care about you. Having these feelings is normal and necessary, as is expressing them outside of yourself and having them affirmed by others.

And so, the cycle of experiencing a feeling in grief involves embracing, acknowledging, befriending, sharing, and finally, having others witness and empathize with it. Each time you complete the circle, which you will continue repeating, you take one small step toward healing.

Editor’s Note

The Fall 2021 Issue of the TAPS Magazine published the first article in this series. While this four-part article series will give you a taste of *Understanding Your Grief — 2nd Edition*, you will also find the entire book a helpful companion. The new edition, just published in September 2021, adds brief passages on topics ranging from vulnerability, soulmate grief, complicated grief to mindfulness, the power of ritual, and more to the original bestseller. It is also available in a daily reader version titled *365 Days of Understanding Your Grief*.

About the Author

An internationally noted author, educator, and grief counselor, Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the University of Colorado Medical School Department of Family Medicine faculty. He has written many books that help people mourn, all listed on the Center for Loss and Life Transition website.



UNDERSTANDING YOUR GRIEF

Ten Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart

PART 3 of 4

Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD ★ TAPS Advisory Board

*This article is the third part of a four-part series excerpted and greatly condensed from the second edition of Dr. Wolfelt's classic book, *Understanding Your Grief*, first published in 1992. In this series, Dr. Wolfelt covers his Ten Touchstones—essential physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual signs for mourners to seek out on their journey through grief.*

THE TEN ESSENTIAL TOUCHSTONES:

1. Open to the Presence of Your Loss
2. Dispel Misconceptions About Grief
3. Embrace the Uniqueness of Your Grief
4. Explore Your Feelings of Loss
5. Understand the Six Needs of Mourning
6. Recognize You Are Not Crazy
7. Nurture Yourself
8. Reach Out for Help
9. Seek Reconciliation, Not Resolution
10. Appreciate Your Transformation

TOUCHSTONE FIVE UNDERSTAND THE SIX NEEDS OF MOURNING

When we are in mourning, we share the same basic needs. Unlike the stages of grief you might have heard about, the six needs of mourning aren't orderly or predictable. You will probably jump around randomly as you work on these six needs of mourning. You will address each need when you are ready to do so. And sometimes, you will be working on more than one need at a time.



Recall the important distinction between grief and mourning—grief is what you think and feel on the inside; mourning is when you express those thoughts and feelings outside of yourself. Notice that we do not call the following six needs of mourning, the Six Needs of Grief. Why? While you will naturally experience all of them internally, you will also need to intentionally and proactively engage with them externally to journey toward healing. Your awareness of the following six needs of mourning will help you take a participative, action-oriented approach to heal grief, rather than thinking of grief as something you passively experience.

MOURNING NEED 1: Acknowledge the Reality of the Death

This first need of mourning involves gently confronting the reality that someone you care about will never physically be present in your life again. Whether the death was

sudden or anticipated, acknowledging the full reality of your loss will unfold slowly, over weeks and months. It's normal to move back and forth between evading and encountering this reality. Encountering this reality is, in fact, such a difficult task that it can only be accomplished a little bit at a time, in small doses.

MOURNING NEED 2: Embrace the Pain of the Loss

We must embrace the pain of our grief—something we naturally don't want to do. After all, it's easier to avoid, repress, or deny the pain of grief than to greet it head-on, yet we learn to reconcile ourselves by confronting our pain. Unfortunately, our culture tends to encourage the denial of pain. We misunderstand the role of suffering and believe that doing well with your grief means becoming well-acquainted with your pain. Don't let others deny you this critical mourning need.



MOURNING NEED 3: **Remember the Person Who Died**

Do you have a relationship with someone after 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, clothing, etc.) are examples of some things that give testimony to a different form of a continued relationship. Embracing your memories can be a very slow and, at times, painful process. Go slowly and be patient with yourself. In general, 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.

MOURNING NEED 4: **Develop a New Self-Identity**

Your personal identity, or self-perception, is the result of the ongoing process of establishing a sense of who you are. 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. Remember—do what you need to do to survive for now as you try to re-anchor yourself. Be compassionate with yourself. Reach out for and accept the support of others.

MOURNING NEED 5: **Search for Meaning**

When someone you love dies, it's normal to question the meaning and purpose of life.

You will probably reconsider your life philosophy and explore religious and spiritual values as you work on this need. Be sure to express your search for meaning outside of yourself. When thoughts and feelings about meaning and purpose naturally arise (and they will!), talk to a good listener about them. If you're struggling with practical meaning-of-life issues, such as searching for reasons to get out of bed in the morning, consider seeing a grief counselor or other care provider until you regain your footing.

MOURNING NEED 6: **Let Others Help You – Now and Always**

The quality and quantity of understanding support you get during your work of mourning 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 grievers, and 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.

TOUCHSTONE SIX **RECOGNIZE YOU ARE NOT CRAZY**

In all my years as a grief counselor, the most common question grieving people have asked me is, “Am I going crazy?” The terrain of the journey through grief can be so foreign and disorienting, and our behaviors in that terrain can feel so out of whack, that we often feel like we're going crazy. But rest assured, you're not going crazy—you're grieving. The following are several common thoughts and feelings in grief that cause mourners to feel like they're going crazy.

SELF-FOCUS

Especially early in your grief, you may find yourself being less aware of the needs of others than you usually are. You may not want to listen to other people's problems. You might not have the energy to attend to all the needs of your children, other family members, friends, or colleagues. The compulsion to focus only on your thoughts and feelings doesn't mean you're going crazy— it means that you need to focus on yourself right now.

RETHINKING AND RETELLING YOUR STORY

What has happened to you—the death of someone you love—is so hard to fathom that your mind compels you to revisit it and revisit it and revisit it until you've truly acknowledged and embraced it. Whether you're conscious of this fact, you tell yourself and others the story of the loss to integrate it into your life. Try to surround yourself with people who allow and encourage you to repeat whatever you need to repeat. Support groups are helpful to many grievers because members share a mutual understanding of the need to tell the story and to have others listen.

SUDDEN CHANGES IN MOOD

When someone loved dies, you may feel like you're surviving fairly well one minute and then feel in the depths of despair the next. Sudden mood changes can be a difficult yet normal part of your grief journey. One minute you might be feeling okay, the next lousy. So if you have these ups and downs, don't be hard on yourself. Instead, practice patience. As you do the work of mourning and move toward healing, periods of hopefulness will replace periods of hopelessness more and more.

POWERLESSNESS AND HELPLESSNESS

Your grief can, at times, leave you feeling powerless. Almost paradoxically, by acknowledging and allowing for temporary feelings of helplessness, you help yourself. When you try to “stay strong,” you often get yourself into trouble. Instead, surrender to your vulnerability. Share your feelings with caring people around you. Remember that shared grief diminishes grief, so find someone to talk to who will listen without judging.

GRIEF ATTACKS OR GRIEFBURSTS

Before they come to grief, many people expect grief to be made up mostly of long periods of deep depression. Actually,



after the early weeks, you're more likely to encounter acute and episodic pangs or spasms of grief—I call them “griefbursts”—in-between relative pain-free hours. Griefbursts may feel like “crazybursts,” but they're normal. When and if one strikes you, be compassionate with yourself.

CRYING AND SOBBING

If you're crying and sobbing a lot, you may feel like you're out of control, which can, in turn, trigger you to feel crazy. But sobbing and wailing come from the inner core of your being. They are expressions of true, deep, and strong emotions within you. These emotions need to get out, and sobbing allows for their release.

LINKING OBJECTS

If you like to hold, be near, look at, sleep with, caress, or smell a special belonging of the person who died, you're not crazy. You're simply trying to hold on to a tangible, physical connection to the person. The person's body is no longer physically here, but these special items are. Like the woman who slept with her husband's shirt, you'll probably need your linking objects less and less over time as you integrate the loss into your life. But you may always find these items special, and you may always want to keep them.

DRUG OR ALCOHOL USE

When someone loved dies, quickly quelling your feelings of grief may be tempting. This desire to avoid and mask the pain is understandable. The trouble is that using drugs and alcohol to help you do so only brings temporary relief from a hurt that you must ultimately embrace. Instead of relying on their deceptive comfort, I urge you to turn to your fellow human beings for support. Reconciliation of grief comes through the ongoing expression of thoughts and feelings, not through drug-induced repression.

DREAMS

Dreaming a lot about the person who died can contribute to your feelings of going crazy. Mourners sometimes tell me that they can't stop thinking about the death—even in their sleep! Keep in mind, though, that dreaming is one way the work of mourning takes place. If dreams are part of your trek through the wilderness, use them to understand better where you have been, where you are, and where you are going in your grief journey. Also, find a skilled listener who won't interpret your dreams for you, but will instead listen to you talk about them.

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES

When someone you love dies, you may have experiences that are not always rationally explainable. That doesn't mean you're crazy! Communicating with the person who died is the primary form of mystical experience that grieving people have taught me. These experiences range from sensing a presence to feeling a touch, hearing a voice, seeing a vision,

receiving a sign, and many more. If you count yourself among them, you're not going crazy. You can still be very sane and exceedingly rational while experiencing and embracing mystical encounters at times. Who on earth is to say what's real and what isn't? Certainly not I. Remain open to these experiences and be thankful for any comfort they provide.

ANNIVERSARIES, HOLIDAYS, AND SPECIAL OCCASIONS

Naturally, holidays and special occasions can bring about pangs of grief or full-on griefbursts. If you find yourself having a really tough time on special days, you're not crazy. Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that your feelings are natural. Alert the people who care about you that you'll need their understanding and empathy. Unfortunately, some grieving people will choose not to mention special dates to friends and family members. So as a result, they suffer in silence and their feelings of isolation and craziness increase. Don't let this happen to you. Recognize you will need support, and map out how to get it!

TOUCHSTONE SEVEN NURTURE YOURSELF

Over many years of walking with people in grief, I have discovered that most of us are hard on ourselves when in mourning. We judge and shame ourselves while taking care of ourselves last. But, good self-care is essential to your survival. Practicing good self-care doesn't mean you're feeling sorry for yourself or being self-indulgent; rather, you're creating conditions that allow you to integrate the death of someone loved into your heart and soul.

NURTURING YOURSELF PHYSICALLY

As you journey through grief, your body may let you know that it feels distressed. Trouble sleeping and low energy are among the most common physical responses to loss. You may also feel unwell or experience muscle aches and pains, shortness of breath, feelings of emptiness in your stomach, tightness in your throat and chest, or digestive problems. Sensitivity to noise, heart palpitations, queasiness, nausea, headaches, increased allergic



reactions, changes in appetite, weight loss or gain, agitation, and generalized tension are all other ways your body may react to the death of someone loved.

Good physical self-care is important, and your body is your house. Just as your house requires care and maintenance to protect you from the outside elements, your body requires that you honor and treat it with respect. You may not feel in control of how your body is responding, but keep in mind that it's communicating the stress you're experiencing with you.

NURTURING YOURSELF COGNITIVELY

Thinking normally after the death of someone precious to you would be very unlikely. Don't be surprised if you struggle with short-term memory problems, find it hard to focus or concentrate, have trouble making simple decisions, or think you may be going crazy. Essentially, your mind is in shock, disorientation, and confusion. Your mind needs time to catch up with and process your new reality. In the meantime, don't expect too much of your cognitive powers.

NURTURING YOURSELF EMOTIONALLY

The important thing to remember is that we honor our feelings when we pay attention to them. Whenever a grief feeling arises, I encourage you to notice it and let it absorb your full attention for at least a few minutes. Remember— it's another facet of your love for the person who died, and it's there for a reason. It's trying to teach you something about the story of your loss or your needs moving forward.

NURTURING YOURSELF SOCIALLY

Your link to family, friends, and community is vital for your sense of well-being and belonging. The death of someone you love has probably resulted

in a very real sense of disconnection from the world around you. When you reach out to your family and friends, you begin to reconnect. You open your heart to love again and be loved in return when you reach out to others.

If you don't nurture the warm, kind relationships that still exist in your life, you will probably continue to feel disconnected and isolated. You may even withdraw into your own little cave in the wilderness, continuing to grieve but not mourn. Isolation can become the barrier that keeps you stuck in the wilderness and prevents your grief from softening over time. So, allow your friends and family to nurture you. Let them in, and rejoice in the connection. And if you have to be the one to reach out and strengthen relationships, that's OK, too. You will find that it is worth every bit of the effort.

NURTURING YOURSELF SPIRITUALLY

When you are torn apart by grief, you may have many spiritual questions for which there are no easy answers: Is there a God? Why me? Will life ever be worth living again? This natural human tendency to search for meaning after a death (which is the fifth need of mourning!) is why, if I could, I would encourage all of us griever to put down "Nurture my spirit" at the top of our daily to-do lists.

However, I recognize that for some people, contemplating a spiritual life amid the pain of grief can be difficult. But grief is first and primarily a spiritual journey through the wilderness. Attending to, embracing, and expressing your grief is a spiritual practice— even when you've lost your faith or struggled to regain meaning and purpose.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOURSELF TODAY?

Of course, good self-care is always important, but it's even more essential when you're in grief. If you're not taking extra-tender care of yourself physically, cognitively, emotionally, socially, and spiritually, you won't have the energy or resources to work on the six needs of mourning, the essential aspects of self-care in grief.

So whenever possible, I hope you will stop whatever you're busy with and take a moment to ask yourself, "What am I doing today to take good care of myself?" If you can devote even a few minutes every day to each aspect of self-care, you will be equipping yourself with the basic supplies you need for the journey.

Editor's Note

*This article is the third part of a four-part series excerpted and greatly condensed from the second edition of Dr. Wolfelt's classic book, *Understanding Your Grief*, first published in 1992. Recently published in September 2021, *Understanding Your Grief - Second Edition* adds brief passages on topics ranging from vulnerability, soulmate grief, and complicated grief to mindfulness, the power of ritual, and more to the original bestseller.*

Visit taps.org/magazine to access Part One of this series in the 2021 TAPS Fall Magazine and Part Two in the 2022 TAPS Spring Magazine. While this article series will give you a taste of *Understanding Your Grief - Second Edition*, you will find the entire book a helpful companion at centerforloss.com. It is also available in a daily reader version titled, *365 Days of Understanding Your Grief*.

About the Author

An internationally noted author, educator, grief counselor, and TAPS Advisory Board Member, Dr. Wolfelt serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the University of Colorado Medical School Department of Family Medicine faculty. He has written many books that help people mourn. Visit centerforloss.com to learn more about grief and find Dr. Wolfelt's books.



taps.org/magazine



centerforloss.com

UNDERSTANDING YOUR GRIEF

Ten Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart

PART 4 of 4

Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD ★ TAPS Advisory Board

*This article is the fourth installment of a four-part series excerpted and greatly condensed from Dr. Wolfelt's classic book, *Understanding Your Grief*, first published in 1992. This series covers Dr. Wolfelt's Ten Touchstones: essential physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual signs for mourners to seek out on their journey through grief.*

THE TEN ESSENTIAL TOUCHSTONES:

1. Open to the Presence of Your Loss
2. Dispel Misconceptions about Grief
3. Embrace the Uniqueness of Your Grief
4. Explore Your Feelings of Loss
5. Understand the Six Needs of Mourning
6. Recognize You Are Not Crazy
7. Nurture Yourself
8. Reach Out for Help
9. Seek Reconciliation, Not Resolution
10. Appreciate Your Transformation

TOUCHSTONE EIGHT REACH OUT FOR HELP

I've said that the wilderness of your grief is *your* wilderness and that it's up to you to find your way through it. That's true. But paradoxically, you also need companionship as you journey. You need people who will walk beside you and help provide you with divine momentum. You do not need people who want to walk in front of you and lead you down the path they think is right, nor do you need people who want to walk behind you and not be present to your pain.

It's true that sharing your pain with others won't make it disappear. You have probably



learned that already. But I promise you that it will, over time, make it more bearable. What's more, reaching out for help also connects you to other people and strengthens the bonds of love that make life seem worth living again.

WHERE TO TURN FOR HELP

Friends and family members can often form the core of your support system. Seek out people who encourage you to be yourself and who acknowledge your many thoughts and feelings about the death. What you need most now are caring, nonjudgmental listeners.

You may also find comfort in talking to a **spiritual leader**. If you belong to a faith tradition, you may want to make an appointment with a leader at your

church, temple, mosque, or other place of worship. If your spiritual beliefs are more eclectic or secular, you might find it helpful to talk to a humanist clergyperson or seeker dedicated to spiritual growth and higher consciousness.

For many grieving people, **support groups** are one of the best helping resources. In a group of fellow travelers, you can connect with others who have had similar experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

A **professional grief counselor** may also be a very helpful addition to your support system. In fact, a trained counselor can be something friends and family members often can't — an objective listener. A counselor's office can be that safe haven where you can let go of any feelings you're afraid to express elsewhere. What's more, a



good counselor will then help you constructively channel those emotions.

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.

REACHING OUT WHEN YOUR GRIEF IS COMPLICATED

Complicated grief isn't abnormal or pathological. It's simply normal, necessary grief that has gotten amplified, stuck, or off track somehow. It has encountered barriers or detours of one kind or another, and as a result has become stalled, waylaid, or denied altogether.

You might be at risk for complicated grief depending on:

THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE DEATH

Your grief might naturally be complicated if the person you love died suddenly or unexpectedly, if a younger person died, or if the death was violent, self-inflicted, or ambiguous (such as an uncertain cause of death or an unrecoverable or missing body).

Your personality and mental wellness

If you are carrying unreconciled grief from previous life losses, or if you have a tendency toward depression, anger, or low self-esteem, you may be more susceptible to a complicated grief experience.

Your relationship with the person who died

An intensely close relationship to the person who died can trigger complicated grief, as can ambivalent relationships and relationships marked by dysfunction, abuse, mental-health issues, and separation.

Your use of drugs or alcohol

Drugs or alcohol overuse may suppress your feelings connected with the loss, thus short-circuiting what might otherwise be a normal and healthy grief journey.

If you feel like you're experiencing complicated or traumatic grief, you simply need some extra help encountering the six needs of mourning. I recommend you see a grief therapist for a few sessions, then take it from there. Grief counselors can range from clinical therapists to clergy, hospice caregivers, funeral home aftercare staff, and even laypeople. Grief therapists, on the other hand, have specific clinical training, experience, and interest in grief therapy. For people challenged by complicated grief, I recommend looking for a grief therapist.

TOUCHSTONE NINE SEEK RECONCILIATION, NOT RESOLUTION

"Reconciliation" is the term I find most appropriate for the healing that develops as you work to integrate the loss. We as human

beings don't resolve or recover from our grief but instead become reconciled to it.

With reconciliation comes full acknowledgment of the reality of the death. Beyond a cognitive working through of the death, there is also an emotional and spiritual accommodation. What had been understood at the head level is now understood at the heart level. Energy and confidence are renewed, and the desire to become reinvolved in the activities of living is reawakened. There is also a deepening wisdom about the fact that pain and grief are difficult, yet necessary, parts of life.

But keep in mind that reconciliation doesn't just happen. It's an active, intentional process. You reach it through deliberate mourning, by:

- Talking it out
- Crying it out
- Writing it out
- Thinking it out
- Playing it out
- Painting (or sculpting, etc.) it out
- Dancing it out
- Etcetera!

SIGNS OF RECONCILIATION

- » A recognition of the reality and finality of the death
- » A return to stable eating and sleeping patterns

- » A sense of release from the person who died. You will have thoughts about the person, but you will not be preoccupied by these thoughts
- » The enjoyment of 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 be 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 authentically, fully grieve and mourn — and you have survived
- » The understanding that you do not get over your grief but instead learn to live with the new reality
- » The acquaintance with 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 acknowledgment that the pain of loss is intrinsic to the privilege of giving and receiving love
- » A sense of renewed meaning and purpose

MANAGING YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Movement toward reconciliation in grief is often draining and exhausting. It also can take a very long time. Many grieving people have unrealistic expectations about how readily they should be feeling forward momentum, and when it takes much longer and involves a lot more hard work than they ever imagined, they sometimes experience a loss of self-confidence and self-esteem.



If you're feeling doubtful or hopeless, consider if you've consciously or unconsciously set a timetable for reconciliation. Ask yourself questions like, "Have I mistakenly given myself a deadline for when I should be 'over' my grief? Am I expecting myself to heal more quickly than is possible?" If the answer to such questions is yes, recognize that you could be hindering your own healing by expecting too much of yourself too soon.

CHOOSING HOPE FOR YOUR HEALING

In addition to grief work, permitting yourself to have hope is central to achieving reconciliation. As we've said, hope is trust in a good that is yet to be.

Refusing to give in to despair may be the greatest act of hope there is. Yes, you have gone to the wilderness. Darkness may seem to surround you. But also rising up within you is the profound awareness that the pain of your grief is an inextricable part of the love you shared with the person who died. Your love is still there. You are still here. You have an unknown number of precious days left on this earth to honor that love and find ways to love others—and yourself—even better. And so you choose to hope and to work on.

TOUCHSTONE TEN APPRECIATE YOUR TRANSFORMATION

Especially if you've made it through the early days and are a few months or

more into your grief journey, I'm certain you are discovering that you are being transformed by the experience. Your inner form is changing. You are likely growing in your wisdom, understanding, and compassion.

Don't get me wrong. I understand that any growth you may be experiencing resulted from something you would have preferred to avoid. While I have come to believe that our greatest gifts often do come from our wounds, these are not wounds we masochistically go looking for. I often call it "enforced life learning."

CHANGE IS GROWTH

We as human beings are forever changed by the death of someone important to us. You may discover that you are developing new attitudes. You may be developing new skills. You may be learning to fix your own technology problems or cook a nice meal. You may be arriving at new insights and decisions about how to live your new life. To the extent that you are different, you can say you have grown.

BEFRIENDING IMPERMANENCE IS GROWTH

Life is constant change, which means the circumstances in which we love and are attached to things are also constantly changing. No matter how hard we try to manage risk and control our destinies, things inevitably happen that turn our lives upside-down. The journey through grief is in part a reckoning with the transitory nature of life. The more you come to reconcile yourself to the constancy of change, the more conscious you become.

FINDING A NEW NORMAL IS GROWTH

While your work of mourning will help you regain some sense of normalcy, it is a new normal. Grieving people sometimes remark to me that they never would have predicted their current life. As they set off to find a new normal, they got caught up in new interests and met new people. But even for those griever whose lives look more or less the same from the outside, there is a shift to a new normal inside. There is a new inner balance.



EXPLORING YOUR ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT LIFE IS GROWTH

Your loss experiences have a tendency to transform your values and priorities. What you may have thought of as being important may not matter any longer. You may also find yourself questioning your religious and spiritual values. Exploring these questions is hard but can ultimately make your assumptions about life richer and more life-affirming.

EMBRACING VULNERABILITY IS GROWTH

When we learn to embrace vulnerability in grief, we learn to be OK with expressing our deepest, truest feelings. We learn to openly share our souls with others. We learn to be genuine and authentic. And when all of this happens, miracles unfold. To be vulnerable is to take risks to reach for what we want in life. There is no other way to get where we want to go. And even though we sometimes make mistakes and things don't always unfold as we wish they would, the rewards of wielding vulnerability are ultimately so much greater than the deadening missed opportunities of staying closed-up and safe.

YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO LIVE

Sorrow is an inseparable dimension of our human experience. We suffer after a loss because we are human and we are privileged to love. And in our suffering, we are transformed. While it hurts to suffer the loss of someone we love, the alternative is apathy. Apathy literally means the inability to suffer, and it results in a lifestyle that avoids human relationships to avoid suffering.

Yes, you have to do your work of mourning and discover how you are changed. You have to live not only for yourself but also, I believe, for the precious person in your life who has died — to work on their unfinished work and to realize their unfinished dreams. What if the person who died could return to see what you are doing with your life? What if they are somehow watching you right now? Would they be proud of you? Would they believe that their life and death brought meaning and purpose to your life? Or would they see you dying before you are dead?

No matter how deep your grief or how anguished your soul, bereavement does not free you from your responsibility to live until you die. The gift of life is so precious and ephemeral. Choose life!

DOING THE WORK — TODAY AND TOMORROW

Depending on where you are in your grief journey, you may not be ready to fully engage with or feel inspired and encouraged by the contents of this section on transformation. Yet even if this is the case for you, I believe it can help you hold onto hope for what can and will be if you continue to do the hard work of active, intentional, hopeful mourning.

If you're beginning to experience and embrace glimmers of the transformations we've been discussing in this touchstone, I want you to know I see you and applaud the work you have no doubt done. Either way, you are where you are today, and there is more work to be done tomorrow. The sun will rise again, and with the new day will come new opportunities and miracles.

Editor's Note

This article is the fourth installment of a four-part series excerpted and greatly condensed from the second edition of Dr. Wolfelt's classic *Understanding Your Grief*, first published in 1992. Recently published in September 2021, *Understanding Your Grief — Second Edition* adds brief passages on topics ranging from vulnerability, soulmate grief, and complicated grief to mindfulness, the power of ritual, and more to the original best seller.



Visit taps.org/magazine to visit the first 3 parts of this series:

- Part 1: Fall 2021 Issue
- Part 2: Spring 2022 Issue
- Part 3: Summer 2022 Issue

While this article series will give you a taste of *Understanding Your Grief — Second Edition*, you will find the entire book a helpful companion at centerforloss.com. It is also available in a daily reader version titled *365 Days of Understanding Your Grief*.

About the Author

An internationally noted author, educator, grief counselor, and TAPS Advisory Board Member, Dr. Wolfelt serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the University of Colorado Medical School Department of Family Medicine faculty. He has written many books that help people mourn. Visit centerforloss.com to learn more about grief and to find Dr. Wolfelt's books.

