

# 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

**I**n 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.

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.



## 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







## 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.

