

UNDERSTANDING YOUR GRIEF

Ten Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart

PART 3 of 4

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*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.



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