

LIVING AND GRIEVING TOGETHER

PART 6 OF 6

Truly Living

*Supporting families
through the crazy
early days and
weeks after a loved
one's death.*

BY ALAN D. WOLFELT, PH.D.

In the early days following the death of someone dearly loved, grievors often feel raw and torn apart. They can't imagine surviving, let alone returning to any semblance of "normal life." As a funeral director, your early interactions with grievors can and will make a long-term difference in their grief experience. I hope this final installment in this six-part series on supporting families through the crazy early days and weeks of grief will help you model long-term hope for the families you are honored to serve.

Grief Is Forever

People often ask me how long grief lasts. The hard truth is that grief is forever. As long as grievors love the person who died, they will continue to grieve them. Because grief



is love, grief doesn't discretely end.

But, thank goodness, grief does change over time. It softens. The intense early pain grows duller and then eventually settles into the background, especially if the griever has been actively mourning along the way. Like a serious but healed wound on the body, it's always there, but it no longer demands daily (or hourly or minute-by-minute) attention. Nor does it hurt so much.

Love doesn't end. It learns

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to live with the absence. While you may never use these exact words with grievors, you can convey the idea to them that they will feel better. Their life will feel normal again, even though it will be a new normal.

Grief and Truly Living Can Coexist

From your unique perspective as a funeral director, you know that grievors have no choice but to keep living after a significant loss. They live even as they continue to grieve.

True, in the beginning, living is merely surviving – one day at a time, one second at a time. But as grievors begin to integrate the absence of the person who died, over time and through active mourning, their survival mode can start to move toward a truly living mode.

For me, these are signs of truly living:

- *Stepping away from judgment, control, worry and conflict*
- *Listening to your intuition*
- *Experiencing renewal in solitude*
- *Acknowledging the sacredness and privilege of being alive*
- *Being your best self*
- *Enjoying a sense of well-being*
- *Feeling at peace*
- *Giving and receiving love*
- *Feeling gratitude and appreciation*
- *Smiling and laughing*
- *Experiencing playfulness and levity*
- *Feeling a sense of meaning and purpose*
- *Feeling connected with others and the natural world.*

In other words, these are indicators of quality of life.

When you are feeling gratitude and appreciation, for example, you're truly living. When you are giving and receiving love, you're truly living. When you're enjoying a sense of well-being and feeling meaning and purpose, you're truly living.

Truly living means being present to your life in ways that acknowledge the good and the beautiful. It means bringing your awareness to the opportunities for pleasure and joy that are available to you each day. It's an intentional way of embracing the moments – be they hours, days, months or years – that are ahead of you.

I'm sure you agree that love is essential to truly living. The corollary is also true – truly grieving through active, open mourning is also essential.

Everything Belongs

Of course, truly living also means being present to and fully engaging with the difficult experiences in life, including death and grief. Love and attachment are indeed wonderful, but the circumstances of life are impermanent. No matter how devotedly we love and try to safeguard our attachments, things change. People get sick. People age. People die. Pets, too. People betray us. We betray ourselves. Passions ebb and flow. Fortunes rise and fall. And no matter what happens, the world just keeps turning.

Change is actually more of a constant than any stability we may experience.

Even though I do, in fact, think we're born to live and love, we can also get better at acknowledging that loss is also a big and unavoidable

part of human life. Loss isn't really crazy. It's normal, too. Pretending that life is all roses isn't truly living – it's denial.

When bad things happen, there are three paths a person can take. One is denial. Another is permanent, all-pervasive grief and pessimism. And the third is experiencing and mourning the life losses even as you continue to truly live.

The human experience includes joys and hard work and challenges and heartbreaks in a crazy mixture. The third path is the one that acknowledges that everything belongs. Truly living means being open to and acknowledging all of it, while at the same time maintaining the belief that it's a privilege to be on this earth for a short while and continue to live and love every precious day.

Some people come to grief and think their life is over.

For anyone who has experienced great loss, active, authentic mourning is now an inextricable part of truly living.





They are so torn apart and in so much pain that they cannot imagine their life will ever be good again. The grief and darkness take over and for a time there is little more than pain and sorrow.

The ideas in the previous articles in this series help grievors through this period. They help them survive their time of darkness. But eventually, their grief work becomes developing the understanding that grieving and truly living are not mutually exclusive. They can do both at the same time.

Authentic Mourning Is Truly Living

Grief is love, and love is life. I'm sure you agree that love is essential to truly living.

It's not at all crazy for grievors to think that even as they're grieving they can also work on the higher-level experiences of love, meaning and joy.

Well, the corollary is also true. Truly grieving through active, open mourning is also essential to truly living.

In psychology, there is a concept called congruency. It means acting on the outside in alignment with how you feel on the inside. It means speaking and behaving in accordance with your true feel-

ings and values.

Congruency is a really good thing to pay attention to because it helps you feel right with yourself. When you're congruent, you're living your truth. You're being honest with yourself and others. You're in harmony inside and out.

The opposite of congruency is disconnection and disharmony. When you feel one way and act another, it feels wrong. It's like you are two separate people, and the person on the outside isn't doing the right thing. In fact, being incongruent makes a lot of people feel crazy their whole life long.

For grievors, being open and honest on the outside about their inner grief is foundational to truly living. In other words, for anyone who has experienced great loss, active and authentic mourning is now an inextricable part of truly living.

Truly Living Is Seeking More Love, Meaning, Awe and Joy

While in early grief it's nor-

mal and necessary to focus on the foundational-level needs of survival, in the longer run, it's not at all crazy for grievors to think that even as they're grieving, they can also work on the higher-level experiences of love, meaning, awe and joy. And for those of you in funeral service, these are also the ways of blending your challenging profession in with a meaningful personal life.

Nurturing love can be accomplished with little things like:

- *Getting together with a friend for coffee*
- *Sending a handwritten card to someone special*
- *Saying yes when someone invites you to dinner*
- *Surprising someone with a gift*
- *Simply giving a genuine compliment.*

More broadly, connection with others grows with the building blocks of proximity – being in the same room together, repetition – spending time together frequently, and quality time – doing things together that allow you to have fun but also sharing things that matter. For grievors, talking about their loss with their loved ones is a part of nurturing love.

Adding more meaning to life is as simple as asking yourself, "What are some ways of spending time that feel meaningful to me?" Here are some self-care activities that can feel meaningful:

- *Walking outdoors*
- *Gardening*
- *Cooking*

- *Making art*
- *Taking a class*
- *Learning a new skill*
- *Volunteering*
- *Helping a neighbor or family member.*

Some grievors find meaning in certain loss-focused activities such as volunteering for a cause related to the death or reaching out to someone else grieving the same loss – and that counts, too.

Building the feeling of awe and wonder into your routines takes a little more thought, but it's more than worth it. Awe is that expansive feeling you get when you stand near the edge of the Grand Canyon, look at the starry night sky, hold a newborn or listen to an incredible musician. It's almost unbelievable that the world contains such amazing things.

Studies show that awe-filled moments boost your mood, improve your physical health, help you think more critically, foster generosity and help you feel more connected to other people and humanity. So, thinking about what makes you feel awe and adding some awe to your daily routine – even if it's through something as simple as spending time outdoors or watching YouTube nature videos – is a lovely way of improving your quality of life.

Finally, you need and deserve joy. It's not uncommon for grieving people to experience some of what I refer to as the "joy-guilt" syndrome, where you have a moment of joy but then feel a twinge of guilt. "How can I be happy when they're not here?" the griever might think.

However, the real work at hand is allowing themselves to continue to mourn while knowing that experiencing all emotions, including joy, is central to being human and finding continued meaning in life and living.

Eventually, grief work becomes developing the understanding that grieving and truly living are not mutually exclusive.

Closing Thoughts

After the death of someone loved, people aren't crazy – they're grieving. They're understandably shattered, which is crazy in the truest sense of the word.

It's okay to feel crazy in grief. In fact, for grievors, it can be empowering to own their crazy. Yes, it is painful to love and to lose. But at the same time, it's also the greatest privilege I know.

As I was wrapping up this series, I realized that in English, we also use the word "crazy" to mean love. "I'm crazy about you," we say, or "I love you like crazy." In this sense, the people and things

we go crazy for are our passions. They are what give our lives meaning and purpose.

When you're feeling crazy about something, it means you care about it deeply. This kind of crazy is how you know you are alive.

So, as you continue helping grieving families survive early grief and eventually step toward truly living even as they continue to grieve, I urge you to remember that all of us must honor and follow our own "crazy." Grieve like crazy, mourn like crazy, love like crazy, live like crazy.

Thank you for the critical work you do. The world needs you now more than ever. ☸

Alan Wolfelt is recognized as one of North America's leading death educators and grief counselors. His books on grief for both caregivers and grieving people, including You're Not Crazy – You're Grieving, from which this article series is adapted, have sold more than a million copies worldwide and are translated into many languages. Wolfelt is founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and a longtime consultant to funeral service. 970-217-7069; drwolfelt@centerforloss.com; centerforloss.com.

