

To those who are grieving:

If you find yourself reading these words, it is probably because a loved one has died. My hope in creating this guide is that it will help you as you move through the pain and as you search for a sense of balance and peace.

You often hear people make comments like, “you just need to get over it.” My belief is that you do not “get over” grief. You move through it. You learn how to live with it. You learn, over time, how to re-engage in life. Each person’s journey is unique to them. It takes the time it takes for you as an individual.

This is not a complete guide. There are many, many resources available as you move through grief. This is meant to be just a starting point. If you are reading this guide hoping to find information on how to help somebody else who is grieving, please consider visiting this website for “Ways to Help Someone Who is Grieving” -

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/ways-to-support-someone-who-is-grieving>.

With warmest regards,

Debra Disney, MEd, LCPC

What is grief?

Grief is a reaction to a loss. It can be any kind of loss – loss of a job or loss of a marriage. Here, we are talking specifically about the loss after a death. The reaction to loss is multi-faceted - emotional, physical, and spiritual. *Emotionally*, you may be experiencing many feelings including, but not limited to, sadness, loneliness, anger, and regret. *Physically*, you may be having difficulty eating and sleeping. You may be feeling tightness in your chest, churning in your stomach, or even bone-deep weariness. *Spiritually*, you may be questioning your life-long held beliefs about the nature of God. Grief is a complex experience through which it takes time to move.

Sometimes a picture can help us to understand new territory. Here is a description of a picture that might describe grief:

You were standing on the bank of a river. Your feet were on solid ground, and you felt safe. You had created the landscape around you to include items that felt right to you – your health, your job, your relationships, your finances, your daily habits, your hopes and dreams for the future.

Then, your loved one died. The emotional impact has pushed you into the river. For a period of time, there is nothing to do but flail about, treading water, trying to keep your head above water so you can breathe, so you can live. You don't know how deep the water is. You don't know how long you will be forced to stay in the water. You don't even know what to do to get out of the threatening situation. It doesn't even feel real; it doesn't feel like this could be happening.

Slowly, you come to realize that this is very real. It really is happening. Perhaps you have three choices:

1. You can keep looking longingly over your shoulder at the bank from which you were pushed – longing for life to be the way it used to be. This will never happen. Life will never be the same again. Period. Life has forever changed, and if you keep trying to get back to where you were, you will invite a great deal of “optional” suffering in addition to the “inevitable” suffering that comes after a loss.
2. You can stay where you are, treading water as fast as you can, in crisis mode, just trying to breathe. This option works for awhile, but you will eventually tire.
3. You can take stock of your situation and decide how to get to the other side. There is a bank on the other side of the river. Parts of the landscape are the same. Parts of the landscape are vastly different from life as you knew it. There will be a “new normal.” It can be a life with meaning and peace.

When you decide to move toward the other side of the river, you will start to construct a bridge to get you there. This bridge is unique to each person. For some it will include reaching out for support, through family, friends, or support groups. Others will choose to travel the bridge alone. There is no right or wrong way to travel this path. There is YOUR way. Be aware that this bridge is traveled one step at a time. It is a PROCESS. It takes

the time it takes for you. Don't let anyone rush you or slow you down. Just take the next step that is YOUR next step.

In the following pages, I hope you will find some resources that will help you to construct the bridge that is right for you as an individual.

FIRST REMINDER: Quiet your anxious mind by quieting your anxious body

BREATHE

You are more likely to find the energy you need to move through this path if your body and emotions do not remain in crisis mode. There is a strong connection between the breath and emotions. You might notice that when you are feeling anxious, your body has responded with quick and shallow breaths. You can, in fact, make yourself feel anxious when you are otherwise calm, just by breathing quickly and shallowly. By intentionally breathing slowly and deeply, in other words, by calming your body, it helps your mind to calm.

- Slow and deep “belly breaths” with the out-breath being slightly longer than the in-breath can help calm the mind.

By breathing slowly and deeply, you engage your body's natural relaxation response. It can lead to the following:

- decrease your heart rate
- lower your blood pressure
- decrease the stress hormone in the blood
- which all results in decreasing the anxiety you feel and helps your brain to process this new and difficult world.

GROUND YOURSELF in the PRESENT MOMENT as much as possible

Certainly it can bring comfort to recall wonderful moments spent with your loved one. It can be healing to laugh and share those memories with your family and friends. However, sometimes after a death, we also find our thoughts wandering into the regrets of the past or the fears and “what-if’s” of the future. If you find yourself excessively dwelling on regrets and/or fears, consider giving yourself a short reprieve from that suffering by grounding your attention on “mindful breathing.”

Grief is hard. There is no way around it. But we do not have to choose between grief OR peace of mind. We can find moments of grief AND peace of mind. A few minutes of mindful breathing can enhance peace of mind. We will never get perfect at achieving this goal, but perfection is not the goal. With practice, we simply get better at “thought-stopping” so that instead of dwelling in the fears for hours, we might only dwell in the fears for minutes. Eventually, we will be able to observe that our thoughts have wandered into the territory of fear and pain; stop; take a deep breath; and bring the thoughts back to mindful breathing in the present moment.

The best tool I have found to practice having peace even DURING difficult emotions is to experience a few minutes of mindful breathing. I have a 5-minute mindful breathing track that I can email to you. Just email me at ddisney@uic.edu. You can also find a number of resources about mindfulness meditation or mindful breathing on the internet.

MOVE

Remember the teaching in physics class? A body in motion tends to stay in motion, and a body at rest tends to stay at rest. If you want your body to thrive, you will move it. At the very least, please incorporate walking, in short spurts, throughout the day, to send a message to your cells that you intend to *thrive!*

SECOND REMINDER: Build your individual bridge toward healing

HELPFUL BOOKS

Some of my favorite books include the following:

- Understanding Your Grief, by Dr. Alan Wolfelt
- Finding the Center Within: The Healing Way of Mindfulness Meditation, by Thomas Bien, PhD & Beverly Bien
- When Things Fall Apart, by Pema Chodron

HELPFUL WEBSITES

- www.griefnet.org GreifNet has email support groups.
- www.centerforloss.com Dr. Alan Wolfelt’s site

Local Grief Groups

Area hospice organizations tend to have grief groups that you can attend even if the deceased was not a hospice patient. There are some area churches and organizations that periodically run grief groups. If you are interested in a grief support group, please contact me for a list.

SOME FINAL REMINDERS: Take some tips from others

Some great suggestions come from people who have traveled the path you are on. Some tips have come from books. Some of those tips are seen below.

From the book, Picking Up the Pieces, by Sherri Magee and Kathy Scalzo

It can be helpful to write in a journal every day. If you can't think of anything to write, then consider answering the "Five Question Check-in." The answers do not even have to be complete sentences or have correct grammar.

1. What's happening with my body?
2. How am I feeling emotionally?
3. When I let my thoughts wander, what do I find myself thinking about?
4. Who did I connect with today?
5. What gave me a sense of peace?

Some "words to live by" I have gathered from other people who have mourned

- "HERMAN " which stands for

Humor,
Exercise,
Religion,
Meditation,
Attitude,
Niceness

- The four "H's" - Hugs, Humor, Hobbies, Hope.
- The "F's" to get through tough times – Friends, Faith, Family.
- A version of the serenity prayer

Change what I can, accept what I can't, wisdom to know the difference.

I hope there has been a piece of information that has been helpful to you. Please remember that moving through grief is a journey. For some people, the journey back to a feeling of normalcy is brief, and for others that journey is long. There is no right or wrong way to move through this journey. It takes the time that it takes. Every person's relationship with the deceased was unique to them, so every person is unique in what they will need to heal. You don't "get over" grief. You move through it. You don't get "closure;" you grow more accustomed to how to live life without that special person. Grief is hard work. Sadness is nature's way of forcing us to slow down our lives to create a margin of time to allow our emotions to heal. Be patient and kind to yourself. Stay connected with your loved ones. Allow the happy memories to comfort you.

If you are reading this guide hoping to find information on how to help somebody else who is grieving, please consider visiting one of the following websites:

- Ways to Help Someone Who is Grieving

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/ways-to-support-someone-who-is-grieving>

- Dr. Alan Wolfelt's website on companioning

<https://www.centerforloss.com/trainings/#companioning>

With warmest regards,

Debra Disney, MEd, LCPC
(309) 495-1671
ddisney@uic.edu