

Touchstone #1 For Hope and Healing Your Heart; Open to the Presence of Your Loss
Adapted from: Understanding Your Grief by Alan D Wolfelt, PhD

"In every heart, there is an inner room, where we can hold our greatest treasures and our deepest pain".
Marianne Williamson

Someone you love has died. In your heart you have come to know your deepest pain. In opening to the presence of the pain of your loss, in acknowledging the inevitability of the pain, in being willing to gently embrace the pain, you in effect honour the pain. Crazy as it may sound, your pain is the key that opens your heart and ushers you on your way to healing.

To heal in grief is to become whole again, to integrate your grief into your self and to learn to continue your changed life with fullness and meaning. Experiencing a new and changed "wholeness" requires that you engage in the work of mourning. It doesn't happen to you – you must stay open to that which has broken you.

Healing is a holistic concept that embraces the physical, emotional, cognitive, social and spiritual realms. Note that healing is not the same as curing, which is a medical term that means "remedying" and "correcting". You cannot remedy your grief, but you can reconcile it. You cannot correct your grief, but you can heal it.

You will learn over time 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. The alternative – denying or suppressing your pain – is in fact more painful. The pain that surrounds the closed heart of grief is the pain of living against yourself, the pain of denying how the loss changes you, the pain of feeling alone and isolated – unable to openly mourn, unable to love and be loved by those around you. You can choose to remain open to the pain, which, in large part, honours the love you feel for the person who has died.

Setting Your Intention to Heal

You are on a journey that is naturally frightening, painful and often lonely. No words, written or spoken, can take away the pain you feel now. It takes a true commitment to heal in your grief. Yes, you are wounded, but with commitment and intention you can and will become whole again.

When you set your intention to heal, you make a true commitment to positively influence the course of your journey. You choose between being a "passive witness" or an "active participant" in your grief. 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 experiencing the multitude of thoughts and feelings involved.

Making Grief Your Friend

You cannot heal without mourning or expressing your grief outwardly. Denying your grief, running from it, or minimizing it only seems to make it more confusing and overwhelming. To lessen your hurt, you must embrace it. Strange as it may seem, you must make it your friend.

With intention, you are able to feel the absence of your loved one, but also feel their presence. Your love and admiration can continue to grow, undeterred by the loss of the physical presence. You can honour their presence, while acknowledging their absence. While you mourn, you can continue to love.

No Reward For Speed

Reconciling your grief does not happen quickly or efficiently. "Grief work" may be some of the hardest work you ever do. Because grief is work, it calls on your physical, emotional, cognitive, social and spiritual energy. Consequently, you must be patient with yourself. When you come to trust that the pain will not last forever, it becomes tolerable. Deceiving yourself into thinking that the pain does not exist at all makes it intolerable.

Spiritual maturity in your grief work is attained when you embrace a paradox – to live at once in the state of both encounter and surrender. To both "work at" and "surrender" to your grief. As you come to know this paradox, you will slowly discover the soothing of your soul. Resist the need to try to figure everything out with your head and let the paradox embrace you.

"Doing Well" With Your Grief

In his book "A Grief Observed" C.S. Lewis wrote about his experiences after the death of his wife. He said, "an odd by-product of my loss is that I'm aware of being an embarrassment to everyone I meet.....perhaps the bereaved ought to be isolated in special settlements like lepers." As Lewis so eloquently says, society often tends to make those of us in grief feel shame and embarrassment about our feelings of grief.

Shame can be described as the feeling that something you are doing is bad. You may feel that if you mourn, you should be ashamed. If you are perceived as "doing well" with your grief, you are considered "strong" and "under control". The message is that the well-controlled person stays rational at all times.

Combined with this message is another one. Society erroneously implies that if you, as a grieving person, openly express your feelings of grief, you are immature. If your feelings are fairly intense, you may be labeled "over-emotional" or "needy". If your feelings are very intense you may even be referred to as "crazy". Society has it backwards: "Doing well" in your grief is openly expressing it and confronting it. "Not doing well" is avoiding it.

Grief is Not a Disease

To be human means coming to know loss as part of your life. Many losses, or "little griefs" occur along life's path and not all losses are as painful as others. They do not always disconnect you from yourself. The death of a person you have loved is likely to leave you feeling disconnected from both yourself and the outside world.

Yet while grief is a powerful experience, so too is your ability to help in your own healing. In your willingness to openly share your grief and to participate in a support group with fellow grief companions, you are demonstrating your commitment and setting your intention to re-invest in life while never forgetting the one you have loved.

If you would like more information on any of our programs,
or would like to arrange for bereavement support for yourself or a family member, please contact:

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