

Touchstone #2 For Hope and Healing Your Heart; Dispel the Misconceptions About Grief **Adapted from: Understanding Your Grief by Alan D Wolfelt, PhD**

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference”. Robert Frost

As you journey through the wilderness of your grief, if you mourn openly and authentically, you will come to find a path that feels right for you. That is your path to healing. But beware – others will try to pull you off this path. They will try to make you believe that the path you have chosen is wrong – even “crazy” and that their way is better.

Many people have internalized some common misconceptions about grief and mourning. These misconceptions can deny you your right to hurt and authentically express your grief. They often cause unrealistic expectations about the grief experience.

Misconception 1: Grief and mourning are the same thing

People often use the words “grieving” and “mourning” interchangeably. There is, however, an important distinction. We, as humans, move toward integrating loss into our lives not just by grieving, but by mourning. You will move towards “reconciliation” not just by grieving, but by active and intentional mourning.

Grief is the constellation of internal thoughts and feelings we have when someone we love dies. Think of grief as the container – it holds all your thoughts, feelings and images of your experience when you are bereaved.

Mourning is when you take the grief you have on the inside and express it outside of yourself. Another way of defining mourning is “grief gone public” – or the outward expression of grief. Talking about the person who died, crying, expressing your thoughts and feelings through art or music and celebrating special anniversary dates that held meaning for the person who died are just a few examples of mourning.

After someone you love dies, your friends may encourage you to keep your grief to yourself. If you were to take this message to heart, the disastrous result would be that all of your thoughts and feelings would stay bottled up inside you. A catalyst for healing can only be created when you develop the courage to mourn publicly, in the presence of understanding, compassionate people who will not judge you. At times, of course, you will grieve alone, but expressing your grief outside of yourself is necessary if you are to slowly and gently move forward in your grief journey.

When you do not honour a death loss by acknowledging it, first to yourself and then to those around you, the grief will accumulate. Then the denied losses come flowing out in all sorts of potentially damaging ways (e.g. deep depression, physical complaints, difficulty in relationships, addictive behaviours) compounding the pain of your loss.

Misconception 2: Grief and mourning progress in predictable orderly stages

You may have heard people talk about the “stages of grief”. This type of thinking about dying, grief and mourning is appealing, but inaccurate. If we believe that everyone grieves by going through the same stages, then death and grief become much less fearsome and mysterious. If only it were so simple!

As a grieving person you will probably encounter others who have adopted a rigid system of beliefs about what you should experience in your grief journey. If you have internalized this myth, you may

also find yourself trying to prescribe your grief experience as well. In other words, instead of allowing yourself to be where you are in your grief, you may try to force yourself to be in another "stage".

For example, the responses of disorganization, fear, guilt and explosive emotions may or may not occur during your unique grief journey. Or relief may occur anywhere along the way and invariably overlap another part of your response. Sometimes your emotions may follow each other within a short period of time; or at other times, two or more emotions may be present simultaneously. Remember: do not try to determine where you "should" be. Just allow yourself to be naturally where you are in the process.

Everyone mourns in different ways. Personal experience is your best teacher about where you are in your grief journey.

Misconception 3: You should move away from grief, not toward it

Our society often encourages prematurely moving away from grief instead of towards it. The result is that too many mourners either grieve in isolation, or attempt to run away from their grief through various means.

Mourners who continue to express grief outwardly are often viewed as "weak", "crazy", or "self-pitying". The subtle message is "shape up and get on with your life". The reality is disturbing: Far too many people view grief as something to be overcome rather than experienced. These messages, unfortunately, encourage you to repress your thoughts and feelings about the death. By doing so, you may refuse to cry – and refusing to allow tears, suffering in silence and "being strong" are often wrongly considered admirable behaviours.

After the death of someone you love, you may also respond to the question "How are you?" with the benign response "I'm fine." In essence you are saying to the world: "I'm not mourning." Friends, family and co-workers may encourage this stance. Why? Because they don't want to talk about death. So if you demonstrate an absence of mourning behaviour, it tends to be more socially acceptable.

This collaborative pretense about mourning, however, does not meet your needs in grief. When your grief is ignored or minimized, you will feel further isolated in your journey. Masking or moving away from your grief creates anxiety, confusion and depression. If you receive little or no recognition related to your pain, you will probably begin to fear that your thoughts and feelings are abnormal.

Remember – society will often encourage you to prematurely move away from your grief. You must continually remind yourself that leaning toward, not away from, the pain will facilitate the eventual healing.

Misconception 4: Tears of grief are only a sign of weakness

Tears of grief are often associated with personal inadequacy and weakness. The worst thing you can do, however, is to allow this judgment to prevent you from crying. While your tears may result in a feeling of helplessness for your friends, family and caregivers, you must not let others stifle your need to mourn openly. You may hear comments like "Tears won't bring him back" or "She wouldn't want you to cry". Yet crying is nature's way of releasing internal tension in your body and it allows you to communicate a need to be comforted.

The capacity to express tears appears to allow for genuine healing. Not only do people feel better after they have cried, they also seem to look better. Tension and agitation seem to flow out of their bodies.

Tears are not a sign of weakness or inadequacy. In fact, your capacity to share tears is an indication of your willingness to do the work of mourning.

Misconception 5: Being upset and openly mourning means you are being "weak" in your faith

Mourning is a spiritual journey of the heart and soul. If faith or spirituality are a part of your life, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you. For example, if you are mad at God, be mad at God. Similarly, if you need a time-out from regular worship, don't feel ashamed. Going into "exile" for a period of time often assists in your healing. Don't let people try and drag you to a place of worship if you don't feel like attending. Go when – and if – you are ready. You may also be open to less conventional ways of expressing your faith, such as meditating or spending time alone.

Remember, don't let people take your grief away from you in the name of faith. Continue to do what feels right for you, when it feels right for you.

Misconception 6: When someone you love dies, you only grieve and mourn for the physical loss of the person

When someone you love dies, you don't just lose the presence of that person. As a result of the death, you may lose many other connections to yourself and the world around you. These are often called "secondary losses" and can include the following:

Loss of self:

Self	("I feel like part of me died when he died")
Identity	(You may have to rethink your role as husband or wife, mother or father, son or daughter, friend etc)
Self-confidence	(Some grievors experience lowered self esteem. Naturally - you may have lost one of the people in your life who gave you confidence)
Health	(Physical symptoms of mourning)
Personality	("I just don't feel like myself.....")

Loss of security:

Emotional security	(Emotional source of support is now gone, causing emotional upheaval)
Physical security	(You may not feel as safe living in your home as you did before)
Fiscal security	(You may have financial concerns or have to learn to manage finances in ways you didn't before)
Lifestyle	(Your lifestyle has changed and no longer feels as safe)

Loss of meaning:

Goals and dreams	(Hopes and dreams for the future are shattered)
Faith	(You may question your faith)
Will/desire to live	(You may have questions related to future meaning in your life. You may ask "Why go on.....")
Joy	(Life's most precious emotion, happiness, is naturally compromised by the death of someone we love)

Allowing yourself to acknowledge the many levels of loss the death has brought to your life will help you to continue to "stay open" to your unique journey.

Misconception 7: You should try not to think about the person who died on holidays, anniversaries and birthdays

As with all things in grief, trying not to think about something that your heart and soul are nudging you to think about is a bad idea. On special occasions, such as holidays, anniversaries, birthdays and the date the person died, it is natural for your grief to well up inside you and spill over – even long after the death itself.

It may seem logical that if you can only avoid thinking about the person who died on these special days, then maybe you can avoid the heartache. But the heartache doesn't disappear – it simply bides its time waiting to reappear.

No doubt you have some family and friends who may attempt to perpetuate this misconception. Actually, they are really trying to protect themselves in the name of protecting you.

While you may feel particularly sad and vulnerable during these times, remember, these feelings are honest expressions of the real you. Whatever you do, don't overextend yourself during these times.

Instead of avoiding these days, you may want to commemorate the life of the person who died by doing something he or she would have appreciated. On his birthday, what could you do to honour his special passions? On the anniversary of her death, what could you do to remember her life? You might want to spend these times in the company of people who help you feel safe and cared for.

Misconception 8: After someone you love dies, the goal should be to "get over" your grief as soon as possible.

You may already have heard the question, "Are you over it yet?" Or even worse, be told, "Well, you should be over it by now!" To think that as a human you "get over" your grief is ludicrous! You don't get over it, you learn to live with it. You learn to integrate it into your life and into the fabric of your being. (We will talk in more detail about this at one of our later meetings).

Unfortunately, when people around you think you have to "get over" your grief, they set you up to fail.

Misconception 9: Nobody can help you with your grief

"There is no path so dark, nor road so steep, nor hill so slippery that other people have not been there before me and survived. May my dark times teach me to help the people I love on similar journeys"
Maggie Bedrosian.

We have all heard people say "Nobody can help you but yourself". Or you may have been told since childhood "If you really want something done right, do it yourself". Yet, in reality, perhaps the most compassionate thing you can do for yourself at this difficult time is to reach out for help from others.

Think of it this way: Grieving and mourning may be the hardest work you have ever done. And hard work is less burdensome when others lend a hand. Some of life's greatest challenges – getting through school, raising children, pursuing a career – are in many ways a team effort. So it should be with mourning.

Sharing your pain with others won't make it disappear, but it will, over time, make it more bearable. By definition, mourning requires that you get support from sources outside of yourself. Reaching out for help also connects you to other people and strengthens the bonds of love that make it seem worth living again.

Misconception 10: When grief and mourning are finally reconciled, they never come up again

If only this were so! As your experience has probably already taught you, grief comes in and out like waves from the ocean. Sometimes when you least expect it, a huge wave comes along and pulls your feet right out from under you.

Sometimes heightened periods of sadness overwhelm us when we are in grief – even years after the death. These times can seem to come out of nowhere and can be frightening and painful. Something as simple as a sound, a smell or phrase can bring on these bursts of grief (“griefbursts”). Allow yourself to experience these bursts without shame or self-judgment, no matter where or when they occur. Sooner or later, one will probably happen when you’re surrounded by other people, maybe even strangers. If you would feel more comfortable, retreat to somewhere more private or go see someone you know who will understand when these strong feelings surface.

You will always, for the rest of your life, feel some grief over this death. It will no longer dominate your life, but it will always be there, in the background, reminding you of the love you had for the person who died.

These misconceptions about grief and mourning are by no means all inclusive. You may have come across others of your own.

When surrounded by people who believe these misconceptions, you will probably feel a heightened sense of isolation. If the people who are closest to you are unable to emotionally and spiritually support you without judging you, seek out others who can, such as in this support group. When you are surrounded by people who can distinguish the misconceptions of grief from the realities, you can and will experience the healing you deserve.

Realistic Expectations for Grief and Mourning

- ❖ You will naturally grieve, but you will probably have to make a conscious effort to mourn.
- ❖ Your grief and mourning will involve a wide variety of different thoughts and feelings
- ❖ Your grief and mourning will impact you in all five realms of experience: physical, emotional, social, cognitive and spiritual.
- ❖ You need to feel it to heal it.
- ❖ Your grief will probably hurt more before it hurts less.
- ❖ Your grief will be unpredictable and will not likely progress in an orderly fashion.
- ❖ You don’t need to “get over” grief; you learn to live with it.
- ❖ You need other people to help you through your grief.
- ❖ You will not always feel this bad.

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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