

Touchstone #3 For Hope and Healing Your Heart; Embrace the Uniqueness of Your Grief
Adapted from: Understanding Your Grief by Alan D Wolfelt, PhD

In life, everyone grieves, but their grief journeys are never precisely the same. Despite what you may hear, you will do the work of mourning in your own special way. Be careful about comparing your experience with that of other people. Do not adopt assumptions about how long your grief should last. Just consider taking a "one day at a time" approach. Doing so allows you to mourn at your own pace.

What makes your grief journey unique:

1. Your relationship with the person who died
Your relationship with the person who died was different than that person's relationship with anyone else. The stronger your attachment to the person who died, the more difficult the grief journey will be. Ambivalent relationships can also be particularly difficult to integrate after a death. You may feel a strong sense of "unfinished business" – things you wanted to say but never did, conflicts you wanted to resolve but couldn't or didn't. Whatever the circumstances, you are the best person to describe and work toward understanding your relationship with the person who died.
2. The circumstances of the death
How, why and when the person died can have a definite impact on your journey into grief. For example, was the death sudden or anticipated? Even if the death was anticipated, it still comes as a shock when it actually happens. How old was the person who died? The death of a child, or a young person, is often more difficult to understand than the death of an elderly person, whom we may feel has had a "full" life. Do you feel you might have been able to prevent the death - "If only we had gone to the doctor sooner.....". "If only's" are common and natural for you to explore, even if there is no logical way in which you are responsible for the death. What you are really feeling is a lack of control over what happened, and accepting that we have little control over the lives of those we love is a difficult thing indeed.
3. The people in your life
Healing requires an environment of empathy, caring and gentle encouragement. Some people may think you have a support system, when in fact you don't. Even when you have a solid support system in place, you may find you are unwilling and unable to accept the support being offered. This can lead to isolation from the very people who would most like to walk with you in your journey through the wilderness of your grief.
4. Your unique personality
Whatever your unique personality, rest assured that it will be reflected in your grief. For example, if you are quiet by nature, you may express your grief quietly; if you are outgoing, you may be more expressive with your grief.
5. The unique personality of the person who died
"After (her) death I began to see her as she had really been. It was less like losing someone than discovering someone" Nancy Halle
Just as your own personality is reflected in your grief journey, so too is the unique personality of the person who died. What were they like? What role(s) did he or she play in your life?
Whatever your feelings about the personality of the person who died, talk about them openly with someone you can trust who will listen without judgment.
6. Your gender
Your gender may not only influence your grief, it can also influence the ways in which others relate to you at this time. Typically, men have more difficulty in allowing themselves to move toward painful

feeling than women do. Women sometimes have a hard time expressing feelings of anger. However, sometimes too much is made of the differences between genders and not enough is made of the capacity to grieve and mourn. Willingness to mourn often transcends gender.

7. Your cultural background

Culture includes the values, rules (spoken and unspoken) and traditions that guide you and your family. This is your way of being in the world and can greatly influence the way you grieve.

8. Your religion or spiritual background

Your personal belief system can have a tremendous impact on your journey into grief. You may discover that your religious or spiritual life is deepened as a result of your loss, or you may well find yourself questioning your beliefs as part of your work of mourning. Some people mistakenly believe that with faith there is no need to mourn. Having faith does not mean you do not need to mourn. Having faith does mean having the courage to allow yourself to mourn.

Often following the death of a loved one comes a "search for meaning". You may find yourself re-evaluating your life based on this loss. It is important to find someone who is willing to listen to you as you explore your religious and/or spiritual values, question your attitude toward life and renew your resources for living.

9. Other crises or stresses in your life right now

What else is going on in your life right now? You probably wish the world would come to a halt while you go through the mourning process, but of course it does not. You may still have to work and manage finances. You may have children or elderly parents to care for. Other people in your life may be sick. Whatever your specific situation, grief will not be the only stress in your life right now. The more intense and numerous the stresses in your life, the more overwhelming your grief experience may be.

10. Your experiences with death and loss in the past

You are the sum total of all that you have experienced in your life so far. Before this death, you may have experienced other significant losses in your life. Did anyone close to you die before? How did that affect you? Did it influence your expectations for future deaths in your life? Have you found those expectations to be true this time?

Other non-death losses in your past may also influence your grief journey. Divorce, job loss, financial downturns, severed relationships –all these can affect your worldview as well as your capacity to mourn.

11. Your physical health

How you feel physically has a significant effect on your grief. If you are tired and eating poorly, your coping skills will be diminished. If you are sick, your physical symptoms may be as pressing as your emotional and spiritual ones. Bear in mind that taking care of yourself physically is one of the best things you can do to lay the foundation for healthy mourning.

In recognizing your own unique way of grieving, remember to be attuned to what your thoughts and feelings are. What are you feeling today? What have you been thinking about for the last day or two? A big part of healing in grief is learning to listen and attend to your inner voice and give expression to those thoughts and feelings as you experience them.

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:

Peggy Moore

Coordinator of Bereavement & Spiritual Care

Heart House Hospice

(905) 712-8119 x232

mmoore@hearthousehospice.com