

**Touchstone #4 For Hope and Healing Your Heart; Explore Your Feelings of Loss**  
**Adapted from: Understanding Your Grief by Alan D Wolfelt, PhD**

*"Did you know, dear, how much you took away with you when you left? I was wrong to say the stump was recovering from the pain of the amputation. I was deceived because it has so many ways to hurt me that I discover them only one by one"* C.S. Lewis: "A Grief Observed"

As strange as your emotions may seem, they are a true expression of where you are right now. Rather than deny or feel victimized by your feelings, recognize and learn from them. Naming the feelings and acknowledging them are the first steps to dealing with them and helping you heal.

**Shock, Numbness, Denial and Disbelief**

*"At other times it feels like being mildly drunk or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says".* C.S. Lewis

"It feels like a dream" people in early grief often say. "I feel like I might wake up and none of this will have happened". Other words mourners use to describe their initial grief experience are *dazed* and *stunned*. These feelings are nature's way of temporarily protecting you from the full reality of the death. They help insulate you psychologically until you are more able to tolerate what you don't want to believe.

In the beginning of your grief journey, your emotions need time to catch up with what your mind has been told. On one level you know the person is dead, but on another, deeper level, you are not yet able or willing to truly believe it. This mixture of shock, numbness and disbelief acts as an anesthetic. The pain exists, but you may not experience it fully yet. During this time, you may find yourself hysterically crying, fainting, having angry outbursts or even laughing. These are all normal and necessary responses that help you survive right now.

Even after you have moved beyond the shock, numbness and disbelief, don't be surprised if these feelings resurface. Birthdays, anniversaries and other special occasions that may be known only to you often trigger shock. You may suddenly realize that this person you loved so much is no longer there to share these days.

**Disorganisation, Confusion, Searching, Yearning**

*"It doesn't seem worth starting anything. I can't settle down".* C.S. Lewis

Perhaps the most isolating and frightening part of the grief journey is the sense of disorganization, confusion, searching and yearning that often comes with the loss. These feelings frequently arise when you begin to be confronted with the reality of the death. A mourner once said *"I felt as if I were a lonely traveler with no companion and worse yet, no destination. I couldn't find myself or anybody else"*.

This aspect of grief may give rise to the "going crazy" syndrome. Mourners often say "I think I'm going crazy" because in grief, thoughts and behaviours are so different from what you normally experience. You are not going crazy – you are grieving.

After the death of someone you loved, you may feel a sense of restlessness, agitation, impatience and ongoing confusion. Disconnected thoughts race through your mind and strong emotions may be overwhelming.

You may also experience a restless searching for the person who has died. Yearning and preoccupation with memories can leave you feeling drained. Other people may begin to look like the person who died; you may think you see him or her across a street or in a shopping mall; you might think you hear the

garage door open and the person entering the house, as they had done so many times before. This is all normal – you are not going crazy!

You may also dream about the person who died. Dreams can be an unconscious means of searching for this person. Try not to over-interpret your dreams. If they are pleasant, embrace them; if they are disturbing, find someone who will understand to talk to about them.

Other common experiences at this time include difficulties with eating and sleeping. You may experience a loss of appetite, or find yourself overeating. You may have trouble falling asleep or wake up in the early hours of the morning.

Keep in mind that disorganization following loss always comes before any kind of re-organisation. While they may seem strange and frightening, feelings of disorganization, confusion, searching and yearning are actually stepping stones on your path toward healing.

### **Anxiety, panic, fear**

*"No one ever told me that grief felt so much like fear". C.S. Lewis*

Feelings of anxiety, panic and fear may also be a part of your grief experience. You may ask yourself "Am I going to be OK?" "Will I survive this?" "Will my life have any purpose without him/her?" These questions are natural. Your sense of security has been threatened, so you are naturally anxious.

As your head and heart miss the person who was a part of your life, panic may set in. Feelings of anxiety and fear often elicit thoughts about "going crazy". If you think you are "abnormal" your level of fear may also increase. You may be afraid of what the future holds, or that other people in your life will die soon. You may become more aware of your own mortality, which can be scary. You may feel vulnerable, even unable to survive, without the person who died.

While feelings of anxiety, panic and fear are often normal in grief, the good news is that expressing them can help make them feel more tolerable. Also knowing that they are temporary may help you during this trying time.

### **Explosive emotions**

Anger, hate, blame, terror, resentment, rage and jealousy are explosive emotions that may be a volatile, yet natural, part of your grief journey. It helps to understand that fundamentally these feelings are a form of protest. "How could this happen?" "This isn't fair!" "I hate this!" You may find yourself directing these emotions at the person who died, family members, doctors, people who haven't experienced loss, or even God. Unfortunately society doesn't always understand how normal and necessary these feelings can be. The implicit message from others is often "keep it together". You must learn to give yourself permission to feel whatever you feel and to express these feelings – preferably in a safe and supportive atmosphere.

The good news is that these explosive emotions will lessen in intensity and duration as you do the work of mourning.

### **Guilt and regret**

Guilt, regret and self-blame are common and natural feelings after the death of a loved one. You may have a case of the "if-onlys" ("if only we had found another doctor...." "if only I had been with her that night...." "if only I hadn't said....."). If you are experiencing this, be compassionate with yourself. You

are not to blame. It's impossible to go through life in close relationships with other people without doing or saying something you later wish you could change.

Some other aspects of guilt and regret after a death include:

❖ <i>Survivor guilt</i>	Sometimes being alive when someone you love has died can cause what is termed "survivor guilt". You may have found yourself thinking "How come he (or she) died and I survived?" This is a natural question and may be a part your grief experience.
❖ <i>Relief-guilt</i>	You may naturally feel relief if someone you love dies after a long period of illness and suffering – but these feelings can also make you feel guilty. Again, these feelings are quite normal.
❖ <i>Joy-guilt</i>	Like relief-guilt, joy-guilt is about thinking that happy feelings are bad at a time of loss. Experiencing any kind of joy after a death can make you feel guilty. One day you might find yourself smiling or laughing at something, only to chastise yourself later for feeling this way for a minute. You may begin to feel disloyal to the person who has died. As you work through your grief, your natural healing journey will allow you to start experiencing more and more joy and less and less pain. If you continue to feel guilty about the joy, find someone to talk to about it.

As you express yourself, remember, you are not perfect. No one is. Something has happened that you wish had not. Someone you cared about has died. At times you will naturally go back and review if you could have said or done anything to change this difficult reality. Allow yourself this review time, but as you do so, be compassionate with yourself. Continue to remind yourself that there are some things in life you cannot change.

### **Sadness and depression**

*"The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.....*

*When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.*

*When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight." Khalil Gibran. "The Prophet"*

Sadness can be the most hurtful feeling on your journey through grief. We do not want to be sad, but sadness is a natural, authentic emotion after the death of someone loved. Something precious in your life is now gone. Of course you are sad. Of course you feel great sorrow. Allowing yourself to feel your sadness is in large part what your journey towards healing is all about. You have every right to feel sad!

Weeks, or sometimes months, will pass before you are fully confronted by the depth of your sorrow. The slow-growing nature of this awareness is good – you could not and should not try to tolerate all of your sadness at once. Your body, mind and spirit need time to work together to embrace the depth of your loss. Be patient with yourself. Try to surround yourself with loving people who will understand and not judge you.

Your sadness is a symptom of your wound. Just as physical wounds require attention and time to heal, so do emotional wounds. Paradoxically, the only way to lessen your pain is to move toward it, not away from it. This is not easy to do. People around you will be saying things like "Oh, don't be sad", or "Just think what you have to be thankful for". Comments like these hinder, not help, your healing. If your heart and soul are prevented from feeling the sadness, odds are your body may be harmed in the

process. You have been emotionally, physically and spiritually injured. Now you must attend to your injury.

Thoughts of suicide may also occur during your grief journey. Grieving people will often say "I wouldn't mind if I didn't wake up tomorrow". It's natural to experience these passive and passing suicidal thoughts. It is not natural to want to or make plans to take your own life when someone in your life dies. If this occurs, you should seek professional help.

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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