

Touchstone #6 For Hope and Healing Your Heart; Understanding the Six Needs of Mourning **Adapted from: Understanding Your Grief by Alan D Wolfelt, PhD**

If you are hoping for a map for your journey through grief, none exists. Your wilderness is an undiscovered wilderness, and you are its first explorer. However, virtually all mourners who have journeyed before you have found that their paths are similar. Previously grief educators have talked about the "Stages of Grief". As we discussed in the session on "Misconceptions about Grief" we learned that we do not go through orderly and predictable stages. There do, however, appear to be some central needs which most people will confront.

1. Accepting the Reality of the Death

*"It's as if the realness of what has happened waits around the corner.
I don't want to make the turn, yet I know I must."*

You can know something in your head, but not in your heart. This is what often happens when someone you love dies. This is the first "need" of mourning – gently confronting the reality that someone you care about will never physically come back into your life again.

Whether the death was sudden or anticipated, acknowledging the full reality of the loss may occur over weeks and months. You may expect him or her to come through the door, to call you on the telephone, or even to touch you. To survive, you may try to push away the reality of the death at times. But to acknowledge that someone you love has died is a process, not an event. Embracing this painful reality is not quick, easy or efficient.

You may move back and forth between protesting and encountering the reality of the death. You may discover yourself replaying the events surrounding the death and confronting memories, both good and bad. This replay is a vital part of this need of mourning. It's as if each time you talk it out, the event becomes a little more real.

One moment the reality of the loss may be tolerable; another moment it may be unbearable. At times you may feel like running away and hiding. At other times you may hope that you will awaken from what seems like a bad dream. As you express what you think and feel outside yourself, you will be working on this important need. Be patient with yourself.

2. "Let Yourself Feel the Pain of the Loss"

Feeling the pain of our loss is something we naturally don't want to do. It is easier to avoid, repress or deny the pain of grief than it is to confront it, yet it is in confronting our pain that we learn to reconcile ourselves to it.

You will probably discover that you need to dose yourself in embracing your pain. In other words, you cannot (or should not try) to overload yourself with the hurt all at one time. Sometimes you may need to distract yourself from the pain of the death, while at other times you will need to create a safe place to move toward it.

As we have discussed before, other people will encourage us to deny our pain. If they see you expressing your grief, they may advise you to "keep your chin up" or to "be strong", and congratulate you on "doing well" when you do not express your grief. Doing well actually means becoming well acquainted with your pain. Don't let others deny you this critical need.

As you encounter your pain, you will also need to nurture yourself physically, emotionally, cognitively, socially and spiritually. Eat well, rest often and exercise. Find others with whom you can share your painful thoughts and feelings.

Never forget that grief is a process, not an event. Your pain will probably ebb and flow for months, even years. Embracing it when it washes over you will require patience, strength and support.

3. Remembering the Person Who Died

Is it possible to have a relationship with someone after they have died? Of course. You have a relationship of memory. Precious memories, dreams reflecting the significance of the relationship and objects that link you to the person who died are examples of some of the things that give testimony to a different form of continued relationship.

The process of beginning to embrace your memories often begins with the funeral. The ritual offers you an opportunity to remember the person who died and helps to affirm the value of the life that was lived. The memories you embrace during the time of the funeral set the tone for the changed nature of the relationship. Even later on, meaningful rituals encourage the expression of cherished memories and allow for both tears and laughter in the company of others who loved the person who died.

Embracing your memories can be a very slow and, at times, painful process that occurs in small steps. Remember – don't try to do all of your work of mourning at once. Go slowly and be patient with yourself.

Some examples of the things you can do to keep memories alive while embracing the reality of the death are:

- Talking out or writing your favourite memories
- Giving yourself permission to keep some special keepsakes
- Displaying photos of the person who died
- Visiting places of special significance that stimulate memories of times shared together
- Reviewing photo albums at special times, such as holidays, birthdays, anniversaries.

It is also important to acknowledge that memories are not always pleasant. To ignore painful or ambivalent memories can prevent you from healing. In these circumstances you will need someone who can non-judgmentally explore any painful memories with you. To repress or deny these memories can mean you run the risk of carrying an underlying sadness or anger into your future.

Remembering the past makes hoping for the future possible. Your future will become open to new experiences only to the extent that you embrace the past.

4. Develop a New Self-Identity

"Now I realize: I knew myself so little. This death has forced me to become reacquainted with myself. I must slow down and listen"

Your personal identity, or self-perception, is the result of the ongoing process of establishing a sense of who you are. Part of your self-identity comes from the relationships you have with other people. When someone you have a relationship with dies, your self-identity, or the way you see yourself, naturally changes.

You may have gone from being a "wife" or "husband" to a "widow" or "widower". You may have gone from being a "parent" to a "bereaved parent". The way you define yourself and the way society defines you is changed.

A death often requires you to take on new roles that had been filled by the person who died. You confront your changed identity every time you do something that used to be done by the person who died. This can be very hard work and at times leave you feeling drained of emotional, spiritual and physical energy.

You may at times feel child-like as you struggle with your changing identity. You may feel a temporarily heightened dependence on others, as well as feelings of helplessness, frustration, inadequacy and fear. These feelings can be overwhelming and scary, but they are actually a natural response to this important need of mourning.

As you address this need, be certain to keep other major changes to a minimum if at all possible. Now is not the time for a major move or addition to the house. Your energy is already depleted. Don't deplete it even more by making significant changes or taking on too many tasks.

Remember – do what you need to do in order to survive, at least for now, as you try to re-anchor yourself. To be dependent on others as you struggle with a changing identity does not make you weak, bad or inferior.

Many people discover that as they work on this need, they ultimately discover some positive aspects of their changed self-identity. You may develop a renewed confidence in yourself for example. You may develop a more caring, kind and sensitive part of yourself. You may develop an assertive part of your identity that empowers you to go on living even though you feel a sense of loss.

5. Search for Meaning

When someone you love dies, you naturally question the meaning and purpose of life. You will probably question your philosophy of life and explore religious and spiritual values as you work on this need. You may discover yourself searching for meaning in your continued living as you ask "How?" or "Why?" or "What was the reason for this?" The death reminds you of your lack of control and can leave you feeling powerless.

The person who died was a part of you. The death means you mourn a loss not only outside of yourself, but inside of yourself too. At times, overwhelming sadness and loneliness may be your constant companions. You may feel that when this person died, part of you died with him or her. And now you are faced with finding some meaning in going on with your life even though you may often feel so empty.

The death may call for you to confront your own spirituality. You may have doubt in your faith and have spiritual conflicts and questions racing through your head and heart. This is normal and part of your journey toward renewed living.

Early in your grief, allow yourself to mourn openly without pressuring yourself to have answers to profound "meaning of life" questions. Move at your own pace as you recognize that allowing yourself to hurt and finding meaning are not mutually exclusive.

6. Let Others Help You – Now and Always

*"I heal, in part, by allowing others to express their love for me.
By choosing to invite others into my journey, I move toward health and healing."*

The quality and quantity of understanding support you get during your work of mourning will have a major influence on your capacity to heal. You cannot - nor should you try - to do this alone. Drawing on the experiences and encouragement of friends, fellow grievers or professional counsellors is not a weakness, but a healthy human need. And because mourning is a process that takes place over time, this support must be available months, and even years after the death of someone in your life.

People who see your mourning as something that should be "overcome" instead of experienced will not help you heal. To be truly helpful, the people in your support system must appreciate the impact this death has had on you. They must understand that in order to heal, you must be allowed and encouraged to mourn long after the death. They must encourage you to see mourning not as an enemy to be vanquished, but as a necessity to be experienced as a result of having 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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