

## **Touchstone #7 For Hope and Healing Your Heart; Nurture Yourself**

**Adapted from: Understanding Your Grief by Alan D Wolfelt, PhD**

The word "bereaved" means "to be torn apart" and "to have special needs". Perhaps your most important "special need" right now is to be compassionate with yourself. Be kind to yourself as you journey through the wilderness of your grief.

If you were going on a mountain hike, would you dress scantily, carry little water and push yourself until you dropped? Of course not! You would prepare carefully and proceed cautiously. You would take care of yourself, because the consequences of not doing so could be devastating. Not taking care of yourself while you are grieving can have the same consequences.

Many of us are hard on ourselves when we are mourning. We judge ourselves, shame ourselves and put taking care of ourselves last. But good self-care is essential to your survival. Practicing good self-care doesn't mean you are feeling sorry for yourself, being selfish or being self-indulgent. Rather, it means you are creating conditions that allow you to integrate the death of someone loved into your heart and soul. By nurturing ourselves, by allowing ourselves the time and loving attention we need to journey safely and deeply through grief, we can find meaning in our continued living.

Self-care fortifies your long and challenging grief journey – a journey which leaves you profoundly affected and deeply changed. Above all, self-nurturing is about self-acceptance. When we recognize that self-care begins with ourselves, we no longer think of those around us as being totally responsible for our well-being.

Self-nurturing can also be about celebration; about taking time to enjoy the moment; to find hidden treasures everywhere – in a child's smile, a beautiful sunrise, a flower in bloom, a friend's gentle touch. Grief teaches us the importance of living fully in the present, remembering our past and embracing our future.

When we are "torn apart" by grief, one of our most important special needs is to nurture ourselves in five important areas: physically, emotionally, cognitively, socially and spiritually.

### **The Physical Realm**

"No one every told me about the laziness of grief". C.S. Lewis

Your body may be letting you know it feels distressed. You may be shocked by how much your body responds to the impact of your loss.

Among the most common physical responses to loss are troubles with sleeping and low energy. Sleeping normally after a loss would be unusual.

Muscle aches and pains, shortness of breath, feelings of emptiness in your stomach, tightness in your throat or chest, digestive problems, sensitivity to noise, heart palpitations, nausea, headaches, increased allergic reactions, changes in appetite, weight loss or gain, agitation and general tension. These are all ways your body may react to the loss of someone loved.

If you have a chronic existing health problem, it may become worse. The stress of grief can suppress your immune system and make you more susceptible to physical problems.

Right now you may not feel in control of how your body is responding. Your body is communicating with you about the stress you are experiencing! Keep in mind, however, that in the majority of instances, the physical symptoms described above are normal and temporary.

Good self-care is important at this time. Your body is the house you live in. The quality of your life ahead depends on how you take care of your body today. The “lethargy of grief” you are probably experiencing is a natural mechanism intended to slow you down and encourage you to care for your body.

### **The Emotional Realm**

The emotions you might be feeling as part of your grief and mourning reflect that you have special needs that require support from both inside yourself and outside yourself. Becoming familiar with these emotions and practicing self-care can help you authentically mourn and heal in small doses over time. The important thing to remember is that we honour our emotions when we give attention to them. The following are a few ways in which you can care for your emotional self during your journey through grief.

Reach out and touch:	Have you hugged anyone lately? Held someone’s hand? Put your arms around another human being? Touch has long been recognized as having transformative and healing powers. Try hugging someone you feel safe with. Walk arm in arm with a neighbour. Maybe treat yourself to a massage.
Listen to music:	Music can be very healing to mourners because it helps us access our feelings – both happy and sad. What music reminds you of the person who died? At first, listening to this special music may be too painful, but later you may find that playing music reminds you of the person who died and helps you keep the memory alive in your heart.
Schedule something that gives you pleasure each day:	Often mourners need something to look forward to – a reason to get out of bed each morning. It’s hard to look forward to each day when you know you will be experiencing pain and sadness. To counterbalance your normal and necessary mourning, try to plan in advance one thing you enjoy each day – gardening, going for a walk, having lunch with a friend – whatever brings you enjoyment.

### **The Cognitive Realm**

Your mind is the intellectual ability to think, absorb information, make decisions and reason logically. Without doubt, you have special needs in the cognitive realm of your grief experience. Just as your body and emotions let you know you have experienced being “torn apart”, your mind has also, in effect, been torn apart. Thinking normally after the death of someone you love would be very unlikely. Don’t be surprised if you struggle with short-term memory problems, making even simple decisions and think you may be going crazy. Essentially your mind is in a state of disorientation and confusion.

Early in your grief you may find it helpful to allow yourself to “suspend” all thought and purposefulness for a time. Allow yourself just to be. Your mind needs time to catch up with and process your new reality. In the meantime, don’t expect too much of your intellectual powers.

A few ways to help yourself deal with your cognitive self during grief are as follows:

♣ Ask yourself two questions: What do I want? What is wanted of me?  
The answers to these two questions may help you not only survive the coming months and years, but learn to live life again.

First, now that the person you love is gone, what do you want. What do you want to do with your time? Where do you want to live? Whom do you want to be near? These are big questions and may take some time to answer.

Second, what is wanted of you? Who needs you? Who depends on you? What skills and experience can you bring to others? What are you good at?

Asking yourself these questions on a daily basis may help you focus on the here and now. What do I want from my life today? What is wanted of me today? Living in the moment will help you better cope with your grief.

♣ **Make a list of goals**

While you should not set a particular time and course for your healing, it may help you to make other life goals for the coming year. Make a list of short-term goals for the next three months. Maybe some of these goals could be to do with your mourning process (e.g. making a memory book or writing thank-you notes to people who helped you at the time of death).

Also think about making a long-term list of goals for the coming year. Be both realistic and compassionate with yourself as you consider what is feasible and feels good and what will only add too much stress to your life. Keep in mind that you will be over-fatigued while you grieve, so don't over commit yourself, thereby setting yourself up for failure.

♣ **Avoid making any major changes in your life for at least two years**

While it can be helpful to have goals to help you look to a brighter future, it's a mistake to march ahead too quickly. Sometimes, in an effort to obliterate the pain and "move forward" mourners make rash decisions shortly after the death. Some move to a new home or city. Some quit their jobs. Some break ties with people in their life or take on new relationships too quickly. Typically these changes are soon regretted. They often end up compounding feelings of loss and complicating healing.

Sometimes, of course, you may be forced to make a significant change in your life soon after the death. Financial realities may force you to sell your house for example. In these cases, know that you are doing what you must and trust that everything will work out with help and support from those around you.

♣ **Count your blessings**

You may not feel very good about your life right now. You may feel that you are unlucky. You may feel you are destined to be unhappy, or that the universe is conspiring against you. That's OK. Self-doubt is as normal a part of grief as anger or sadness.

Even so, your life still has purpose and meaning even without the presence of the person who died. It will just take you some time to think and feel this through for yourself.

## **The Social Realm**

The death of someone you love has resulted in a very real disconnection from the world around you. When you reach out and connect with your family and friends, you are beginning to reconnect. By being aware of the larger picture, one that includes all the people in your life, you gain some perspective. You recognize you are part of a greater whole, and that recognition can empower you.

If you don't nurture the warm, loving relationships that still exist in your life, you will probably continue to feel disconnected and isolated. You may even withdraw into your own small world and grieve, but not mourn. Isolation can then become a barrier that keeps your grief from softening over time.

❖ **Recognize that your friendships will probably change**

Mourners are often surprised and hurt when friends fall away after a death. "I found out who my friends really are" is a common comment. Know that just as you are, your friends are also doing the best they can. They surely still care about you, but may also be grieving the death. More to the point, they don't know how to be present to you in your pain. Grief is awkward. They may not even be conscious of this reaction, but nonetheless it affects their ability to support you.

The best way for you to respond in the face of faltering friendships is to be proactive and honest. Even though you are the one who is grieving, you may need to be the one to phone your friends to keep in touch. When you talk to them, be honest. Tell them how you're really feeling and that you appreciate their support. If you find some friends cannot handle "grief talk" stick to lighter topics with them and lean more heavily on the friends who can.

Over time you will probably notice a natural attrition among your friends. You will need to grieve these losses too, though you will likely also find that other friendships deepen and new ones emerge.

❖ Find a grief "buddy"

Though no one else will grieve this death just like you, there are often many others who have had similar experiences. We are rarely totally alone on the path of mourning. Even when there is no guide, there are fellow travelers.

Find a grief "buddy" – someone who is also mourning a death, someone you can talk to, someone who also needs a companion in grief right now. Make a pact with your buddy to call each other whenever one of you needs to talk. Promise to listen without judgment. Commit to spending time together.

❖ Remember others who had a special relationship with the person who died

At times your appropriate inward focus will make you feel alone in your grief. But you are not alone. There are probably other people who loved and miss the person who died. Think about others who were affected by the death: friends, neighbours, distant relatives, caregivers. Maybe one of this "outer circle" of mourners is struggling too? Perhaps you could call them, or write a brief supportive note, or stop by for a visit?

## **The Spiritual Realm**

When you are "torn apart" you may have many spiritual questions for which there are no easy answers: "Is there a God?" "Why me?" "Will life ever be worth living again?"

Contemplating a spiritual life in the midst of the pain of grief can be difficult. Yet spirituality can be found in simple things: a sunset, the unexpected kindness of a stranger, the rustle of wind in the trees...

If you have doubts about your capacity to connect with your spirituality and the world around you, try to approach the world with the openness of a child. Embrace the pleasure that comes from the simple sights, sounds and smells that greet your senses. You can and will find yourself rediscovering the essentials within your soul and the spirit of the world around you.

Nurturing a spiritual life invites you to connect with nature and the people around you. Your heart opens and your life takes on renewed meaning and purpose. You are filled with compassion for other people – particularly those who have come to know grief – and you become kinder, more gentle, more forgiving of others as well as yourself.

If you are able to care for yourself in all these five realms, you will find your journey through the wilderness of your grief much more tolerable.

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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