

Understand the Six Needs of Mourning

“Going to the woods and the wild place has little to do
with recreation and much to do with creation.”
- Wendell Barry

If you are hoping for a map for your journey through grief, none exists. Your wilderness is an undiscovered one and you are its first explorer. But when we are in mourning, we all basically have the same needs. Instead of referring to stages of grief, I say that we as mourners have six central needs. Unlike the stages of grief you might have heard about, the six central needs of mourning, are not orderly or predictable. You will probably jump around in random fashion while working on these six needs of mourning. You will address each need when you are ready to do so. Sometimes you will be working on more than one need at a time. Your awareness of these needs, however, will give you a participative action-oriented approach to healing in grief as opposed to a perception of grief as something you passively experience.

Mourning Need #1: Accepting the Reality of Death

You can know something in your head but not in your heart. This is what often happens when someone you love dies. This first need of mourning involves 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 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 know that someone you love has died is a process, not an event; embracing this painful reality is not quick, easy or efficient.

Mourning Need #2: Letting Yourself Feel the Pain of the Loss

This need of mourning requires us to embrace the pain of our loss – 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 (nor should you try to) overload yourself with the hurt all at one time. Sometimes you may need to distract yourself from the pain of death, while at other times you will need to create a safe place to move toward it.

As you encounter your pain, you will also need to nurture yourself physically, emotionally and spiritually. Eat well, rest often and exercise regularly. Find others with whom you can share your painful thoughts and feelings; friends who listen without judging are your most important helpers as you work on this mourning need. Give yourself permission to question your faith. It's OK to be angry with your God and to struggle with “meaning of life” issues at this time.

Mourning Need #3: Remembering the Person Who Died

Do you have any kind of relationship with someone after they die? Of course you do. You have a relationship of memory. Precious memories, dreams reflecting the significance of the relationship and objects that link you to the person who has died are examples of some of the things that give testimony to a different form of a continued relationship. This need of mourning involves allowing and encouraging yourself to pursue this relationship.

But some people may try to take your memories away. Trying to be helpful, they encourage you take down all the photos of the person who died. They tell you to keep busy or even to move out of your house. You are living in a culture that teaches you that to move away from – instead of toward – your grief is best.

Following are a few examples of things you can do to keep memories alive while embracing the reality that the person has died:

- Talking out or writing out favourite memories
- Giving yourself permission to keep some special keepsakes or “linking objects”

- Displaying photos of the person who has died
- Visiting places of special significance that stimulate memories of times shared together
- Reviewing photo albums at special times such as holidays, birthdays and anniversaries.

Mourning Need #4: Developing a New Self-Identity

Part of your self-identity comes from the relationships you have with other people. When someone with whom you have a relationship dies, your self-identity, or the way to see yourself, naturally changes.

A death often requires you to take on new roles that had been filled by the person who died. After all, someone still has to take out the garbage, someone still has to buy the groceries and someone still has to balance the chequebook. 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, can leave you feeling drained of emotional, physical and spiritual energy.

Many people find 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 continue to feel a sense of loss.

Mourning Need #5: Searching for Meaning

When someone you love dies, you naturally question the meaning and purpose of life. You probably will question your philosophy of life and will 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” and “why” questions. “How could God let this happen?” “Why did this happen now, in this way?” The death reminds you of your lack of control. It can leave you feeling powerless.

You might feel distant from your God or higher power, even questioning the very existence of God. You may rage at your God. Such feelings of doubt are normal. Mourners often find themselves questioning their faith for months before they rediscover meaning in life. But be assured: it can be done, even when you don't have all the answers. Early in your grief, allow yourself to openly mourn without pressuring yourself to have answers to such profound “meaning of life” questions.

Mourning Need #6: Receiving Ongoing Support From Others

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 counselors 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.

Unfortunately, because our society places so much value on the ability to “carry on” “keep your chin up” and “keep busy” many bereaved people are abandoned shortly after the event of the death. Obviously, these messages encourage you to deny or repress your grief rather than to express it.

To be truly helpful, the people in your support system must appreciate the impact that this death has had on you. They must understand that in order to heal, you must be allowed – even encouraged – to mourn long after the death. And 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.

Healing in your grief journey will depend not only on your inner resources, but also on your surrounding support system. Your sense of who you are and where you are with your healing process comes, in part, from the care and responses of people close to you. One of the important sayings of The Compassionate Friends, an international organization of grieving parents, is “You need not walk alone”. I might add “You cannot walk alone”. You will probably discover, if you haven't already, that you can benefit from a connectedness that comes from people who also have had death in their lives. Support groups, where people come together and share the common bond of experience, can be invaluable in helping you and your grief and supporting your need to mourn long after the event of the death.