

Bereaved Families Of Cape Breton

Nurture Yourself **Alan D. Wolfelt**

“There is nothing in nature that can’t be taken as a sign of both mortality and invigoration.”

Gretel Ehrlich

Over many years of walking with people in grief, I have discovered that most of us are hard on ourselves when we are mourning. We judge ourselves and we shame ourselves and we take care of ourselves last. But good self-care is essential to your survival. To practice good self-care doesn't mean you are feeling sorry for yourself 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.

Nurturing Yourself in Five Important Realms

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

▪ **The Physical Realm**

Among the most common physical responses to loss are troubles with sleeping and low energy. You may have difficulty getting to sleep. Perhaps even more commonly, you may wake up early in the morning and have trouble getting back to sleep. During your grief journey, your body needs more rest than usual. You may also find yourself getting tired more quickly—sometimes even at the start of the day.

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, queasiness, nausea, headaches, increased allergic reactions, changes in appetite, weight loss or gain, agitation and generalized tension—these are all ways your body may react to the loss of someone loved.

Good self-care is important at this time and you should be certain to “talk out” your grief. Many grieving people have taught me that if they avoid or repress talking about the death, their bodies will begin to express their grief for them.

▪ **Caring For Your Emotional Self**

Reach out and touch.

For many people, physical contact with another human being is healing. It has been recognized since Ancient times as having transformative, healing

powers. Have you hugged anyone lately? Hug someone you feel safe with. Kiss your children or a friend's baby. You might also appreciate massage therapy. Try a session and see how it feels for you.

Listen to the music.

Music can soothe the spirit and nurture the heart. All types of music can be healing—rock n' roll, classical, blues, folk. Do you plan an instrument or sing? Allow yourself the time to try these activities again soon.

Draw a "grief map."

Make a large circle at the center of your map and label it Grief. This circle represents your thoughts and feelings since the death. Now draw lines radiating out of the circle and label each line with a thought or feeling that has contributed to your grief. For example, you might write Anger in the bubble at the end of one line. Next to your word anger, jot down notes about why you feel mad. When you're finished, explain it to someone who cares about you.

Schedule something that gives you pleasure each and every day.

Often mourners need something to look forward to. It's hard to look forward to each day when you know you'll be experiencing pain and sadness. Each and every day plan—in advance—something you enjoy.

**Music can be very healing to mourners because it helps us assess our feelings, both happy and sad.

▪ **Caring For Your Cognitive Self**

Following are just a few ideas to help you care for your cognitive self during your journey through grief. What ideas can you think of?

Ask yourself two questions: What do I want? What is wanted of me?

First, now that the person you loved is gone, what do you want? What do you want to do with your time? Where do you want to live? With whom do you want to socialize? Whom do you want to be near?

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? While considering what you want is important, that alone does not make a complete life.

Make a list of goals.

While you should not set a particular time and course for your healing, it may help you to have made other life goals for the coming year. Make a list of short-term and long-term goals. Be realistic and compassionate with yourself.

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 to boldly ahead. Sometimes 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 as well as creating staggering new headaches.

Avoid making drastic changes for at least two years after the death.

▪ **Caring For Your Social Health**

Recognize that your friendships will probably change.

Mourners often tell me how surprised and hurt they feel when all friends fall away after the death. “I found out who my friends really are,” they say. The best way for you to respond in the face of a faltering friendship is to be proactive and honest. Though you’re the one who’s grieving, you may need to phone your friends and keep in touch. When you talk to them, be honest. Tell them how you’re really and truly feeling and that you appreciate their support. If certain friends can’t handle your “grief talk,” stick to lighter topics with them and lean more heavily on the friends who can.

Find a grief “buddy.”

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

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

At times your appropriately inward focus will make you feel alone in your grief. But you’re not alone. There are probably many other people who loved and miss the person who died. Is there someone outside of the primary “circle of mourners” who may be struggling with the death? Perhaps you could call her and offer your condolences.

▪ **Caring For Your Spiritual Health**

Creating a sacred mourning space.

Whether it is indoors or outside; give yourself a place for spiritual contemplation. Think of your space, if only a simple room, as a place dedicated exclusively to the needs of the soul. Retreat to your space several times a week and honor your journey through grief.

Start each new day with a meditation or prayer.

Set the tone for your day by meditating or praying. Repeat a simple phrase or prayer to yourself, such as: “Today I will live and love fully.” “Today I appreciate my life.” You might also offer words of gratitude: “Thank you, God, for giving me this day. Help me to appreciate it and to make it count.”

Organize a tree planting.

A specially planted and located tree can honor the person who died and serve as a perennial memorial. You might write a short ceremony for the tree planting. Consider a personalized metal marker or sign, too.

Imagine the person who died in heaven.

If you believe in an afterlife, you may feel like you can still have a kind of spiritual relationship with the person who has died. You may still talk to her in hopes that she can still somehow hear you. There is nothing wrong with trying to communicate with this person now and always—as long as your focus on this continued relationship doesn't prevent you from interacting with and loving people who are still alive.

If you believe in heaven, close your eyes and imagine what it might be like. Imagine the person who died strong and smiling. Imagine her waving to you. Imagine your reunion with her, when, one day, you come to join her.