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Continuing the Journey through Grief

*Based on the Work of *Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.*

Your grief journey will not be quick and easy. Often it will feel like you are moving backwards, not ahead. But to reconcile your grief, you must ultimately continue walking forward. Following are six of the central needs bereaved people must meet if they are to reconcile their grief. You will probably jump around in random fashion while working on these six needs. Sometimes you will be working on more than one at a time. The important thing is to realize that in one fashion or another, you must be making progress in meeting these needs if you are to heal.

1. Acknowledge the reality of death.

Whether the death was sudden or anticipated, acknowledging the full reality of the loss may take weeks or months. You may move back and forth between protesting and encountering the reality of the death. You may discover yourself replaying events surrounding the death and confronting memories, both good and bad. It's as if each time you talk it out, the event is a little more real.

2. Move toward 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.

Unfortunately, our culture tends to encourage the denial of pain. If you openly express your feelings of grief, misinformed friends may advise you to "carry on" or "keep your chin up." If, on the other hand, you remain "strong" and "in control," you may be congratulated for "doing well" with your grief. Actually, doing well with your grief means becoming well acquainted with your pain.

3. Continue the relationship with the person who died through memory.

Embracing your memories—both happy and sad—can be a very slow and, at times, painful process that occurs in small steps. But remembering the past makes hoping for the future possible.

4. Develop a new self-identity.

Part of your self-identity comes from the relationships you have created with other people. When someone with whom you have a relationship with dies, your self-identity naturally changes. Many people discover that as they move forward in their grief journey, they ultimately find that some aspects of their self-identities have been positively changed. You may feel more confident, for example, or more open to life's challenges.

5. Search for meaning.

When someone loved dies, you naturally question the meaning and purpose of life. Coming to terms with those questions is another need you must meet if you are to progress in your grief journey. Move at your own pace as you recognize that allowing yourself to hurt and find ongoing meaning in your life will bend into each other, with the former overtaking the latter as healing occurs.

6. Continue to receive support from others.

You will never stop needing the love and support of others because you never "get over" your grief. As you learn to reconcile your grief, however, you will need help less intensely and less often. So, while you probably won't need to see a counselor forever, you will always need your friends and family members to listen and support you in your continuing grief journey. Support groups can be another helpful resource.

Author, educator, and grief counselor Dr. Alan Wolfelt is known across North America for his inspirational teaching gifts. His compassionate messages about healing in grief—based on his own personal losses as well as his professional experience supporting children, teens, adults, and families over the last three decades—speak not only to the intellect but to the hearts of all who hear him. Perhaps best known for his model of "companioning" versus "treating" mourners, Dr. Wolfelt is committed to helping people mourn well so they can live well and love well. Founder and Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition, Dr. Wolfelt presents numerous educational workshops each year for hospices, hospitals, schools, universities, funeral homes, community groups, and a variety of other organizations.