

The Spiral of Grief Part 2:

The Journey of Grief



The Journey of Grief

Grief is the process of discovering what it means to live without someone who has been woven into our lives.

Grief doesn't disappear on its own. In fact, it doesn't "disappear" at all. We who have experienced a close family member's (or friend's) death can't "just get back to normal." We can, however, discover and build our *new normal*.

To move on in life, to build this new normal, grief must be faced and experienced.

"You just feel so secluded. Stuck, isolated and secluded. It's like a new life where we had to pick up everything and then try to learn how to do everything, with just the two of us. That was hard to adjust to."

—Brooke, 13
whose father, brother and sister died in a car accident

We need to accept our grief—the hole that is there inside us—as we grow into a new life, acknowledging the grief as a part of this new life.

When we identify and talk about issues of grief, we become freed up to build our new life out of our new circumstances.

The process does involve facing the pain that is there. But the only way out of the pain is to go through the pain. Or, as an ancient African proverb puts it, "There is no way out of the desert except through it." And the only way through the pain is to experience the pain.

The feelings of grief are painful. But they can also be productive. They must be experienced in order for healing to occur.

These feelings are honest responses to loss. Sitting with those feelings, allowing them to be

expressed—feeling our feelings, in other words—allows us to move toward healing.

The way to manage the grief and move toward healing is to become reconciled to grief's presence in our lives, to become reconciled to the loss, and to become reconciled to the new reality of life without the one we love.

Reconciliation to the grief and loss is made up of several strands, according to Dr. Alan Wolfelt, a nationally renowned grief expert:

1. Acknowledge the reality of the death.
2. Move toward the pain of the loss.
3. Convert the relationship with the person who has died from one of presence to one of memory.
4. Develop a new self-identity based on a life without the person who died.
5. Relate the experience of the death to a context of meaning.
6. (And for children), experience a continuing supportive adult presence in future years.

It is through feeling the intensity of the feelings of grief that we begin to experience the reality of the loss. Weaving these strands of reconciliation into our lives allows us to see, to face, to accept the new reality, to make it part of us.

Out of these strands we construct our road toward healing. And following this road, we finally get to a place where we can again feel connected to life, to the fullness of life, to the meaning of life.



What Is Lost, What Is Left, What Is Possible

Just as a community must do in the aftermath of a natural disaster, the grieving person must make the same assessments—in both cases, as psychologist Dr. John Schneider has said, we need to figure out *what is lost, what is left, and what is possible.*

In other words, we need to assess the damage, we need to figure out what still remains and we need to discover how we can make a new life out of the mess confronting us.

It is tempting to try to short-circuit this process, maybe by avoiding the entire thing, or by attempting to get to the end point as soon as possible.

“I tried to just get on with life, but even seven years after my wife died, I found there were things I had to attend to. But life goes on, and those things lie there and hold you back from really celebrating life.”

—Paul
father of two whose wife died

But we can't discover what is possible in building a new life without first finding out what is left in our old life to build on. And we can't see what's left until we sift through the wreckage and come to realize what's missing.

In one way, it's obvious to see what's missing—the person we love is missing, of course. What's not so immediately obvious are the many ways in which their absence has created so many other holes in our life, has wrecked so many plans, has broken so many routines.

Everywhere we turn, we stumble across another place where they are not and will never be again. We find that a large part of us is missing. And a large part of our world is missing as well. And as we continue on this journey of grief, we'll continue stumbling on new gaps, new holes, new places that show where something is missing.

As these discoveries of what has been lost continue to be made, we do also begin to discover that some parts of our lives, some parts of our world, remain. Slowly, we make an inventory of what is left—not consciously, maybe, but over time we begin to realize that there are some pieces of the old life that are left to hang on to. It's hard to know what to do with them at first, but these are the building blocks of a new life.

Further along in time, while continuing to stumble upon losses, and finding what's left, we will then begin to discover what possibilities might lie ahead for us. The possibility—the hope—for a new life begins to dawn on us.

There is a freedom in this dawning awareness. But it does not mean that the journey of grief has reached its end. The journey of grief is a lifelong journey. It won't always hurt so much. But it's not a road that we can stop traveling.

“I understand that allowing the full reality of this death to enter my head and heart is a source of necessary hurt. While I do not seek the hurt, I seek the healing. Once I understand that, the pain actually begins to dissolve. Yes, I still hurt, but the depth of the pain will ease over time.”

—Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt
*Director, Center for Loss
and Life Transition*

The Spiral of Grief

Since there is no particular end point where someone can say, “My grief is finished,” we learn to accept the grief, learn to live with the grief, learn to grow through the grief and become reconciled to the loss of our loved one.

We like to say, “Time heals all wounds.” But it isn’t always true. We also like to speak of closure. But there is no final closure in this process—because grief is a process, not a conclusion.

Over the long term, the intense feelings of grief soften somewhat, and we gradually feel reconnected to the life of the world around us. However, this is not a straight road up and out of grief.

The process is not a series of stages that we move through, coming, at some point, to the end where we can get off the ride.

“If you read the books or the magazines, everybody says you go through the phases of grieving, and you almost feel that when you come to a certain point that it should end. You’ve gone through all the steps—boom it’s over, it’s done with. But you come to realize that it’s never over. It’s an ongoing struggle. A lot of days are better than most. Some days are worse than others. It’s like you’re continually blazing a new trail.”

—Shannon
mother of three whose husband died

The grief doesn’t disappear, because the loss itself doesn’t disappear—that hole remains inside.

Rather than a straight line, or a series of steps, grief most often feels more like a circle. Just when you feel like you’ve finished with a particular “stage” of grief, here it comes again.

In the days and weeks after the death, we can cycle quickly back and forth between intense pain and exhaustion or numbness.

After months and years, larger patterns emerge, cycles of days or weeks or months.

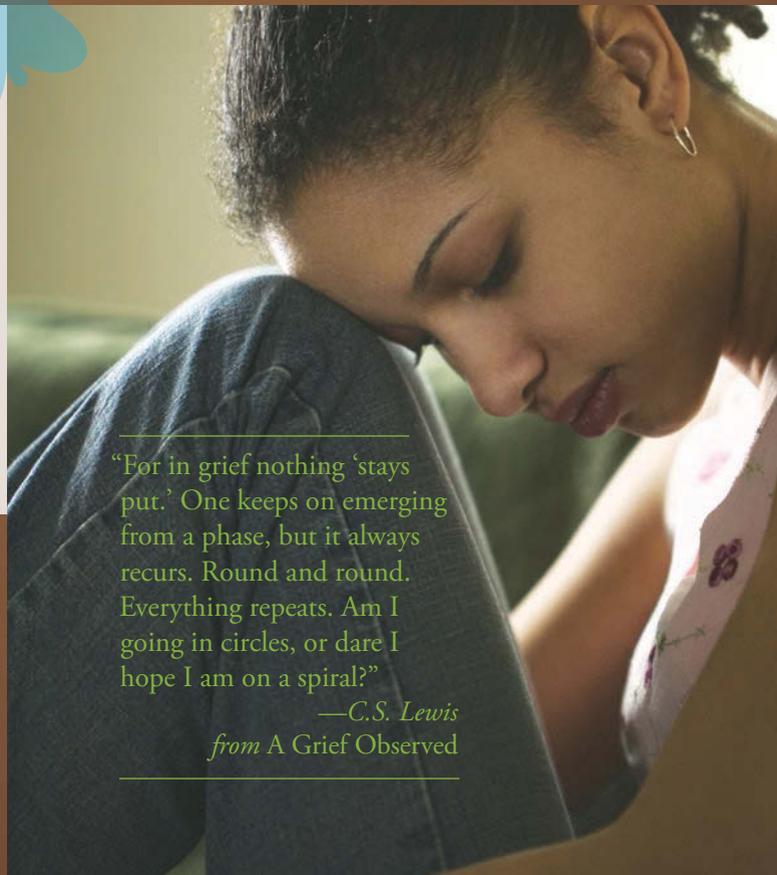
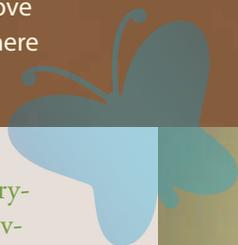
However, although it may feel as if we’re simply going around and around, repeating the same things over and over, getting nowhere, there is a change. There is an improvement.

Grief follows a much more SPIRAL path than that of a simple circle, endlessly recurring. We spiral around an upward path that does show progress over time.

The feelings of grief are productive. Feeling our feelings allows healing to occur. That sickening jolt of discovering yet another piece missing from our old life can, if we attend to the feelings that come up, help us to move forward, help us to eventually become reconnected to life.

“For in grief nothing ‘stays put.’ One keeps on emerging from a phase, but it always recurs. Round and round. Everything repeats. Am I going in circles, or dare I hope I am on a spiral?”

—C.S. Lewis
from *A Grief Observed*



Triggers of Grief

Even when we know we're on a spiral, we can still be surprised when the intense feelings seem to come out of nowhere and hit us again.

Our confusion can be that much greater if we're expecting to "graduate" from the "stages of grief," while we find instead that our reactions to the grief seem to occur over and over again at different times and at different intensities.

Many things can trigger a return to the intense part of the spiral:

- A birthday
- A holiday
- The anniversary of the loved one's death
- Seeing special clothing
- Hearing an old song
- A special smell
- The death of a pet, or of another relative or friend

"The first year after Roger died, I was lost in the flood of my grief, and I thought it would never get any better. Then, over time, I realized that it was a little better. It didn't hurt as much. So I thought I was finally over it—over the worst of it anyway. And then Roger's birthday came around again. And here I am right back in the flood. I don't know what's happening. Nothing makes sense."

—Jennifer
whose husband died

Developmental issues can also return those in grief, especially children, to the front of the spiral:

- A girl's first date without her mom
- A boy turning sixteen without his dad to teach him how to drive
- A child reaching adolescence

Any or all of the feelings of grief can come pouring back into our lives years after the death occurred, sometimes with an intensity that's frightening.

When we experience an especially large trigger, sometimes the avalanche that occurs not only brings us back to the front of the spiral, but it seems to plummet us back to the bottom, where we feel that we have to start our whole grief journey over again.

The ways we learned to manage our grief at the beginning come back into play now as we again face feelings that we thought we had left far behind us.

"I wanted to keep busy so I wouldn't dwell on it as much. I thought I could handle it. But on any day, any part of the day, something would come up to bring it right in front of my face again. So I found that I couldn't run away from it. I had to stand and deal with it."

—Denise
mother of five whose husband died



Saying “Yes” to Yourself

Understanding the process of grief as a spiral journey can help us to anticipate what might be coming, and to understand the changes that occur. It can allow us to begin to manage our grief, and to organize our experiences.

Instead of convincing ourselves that we’re getting over our grief at the first sign of movement toward the milder back of the spiral, we can realize that this softening of intensity is not forever.

And when we spiral back around to the fiery front, we don’t need to be frightened that we’re right back at the beginning, that we haven’t learned anything in managing our grief. Realizing that the grief will follow a cyclical path can lessen our anxiety. And coming around to the front again doesn’t need to devastate us, because we can have some anticipation of it.

So the two motions are interconnected—as we move toward the front of the spiral, allowing ourselves to feel our honest responses to the loss, we are also allowing these feelings to work in us to create the strands of reconciliation toward the loss.

Feeling the feelings, expressing the feelings, allowing the feelings—all this is saying “yes” to yourself. It is validating yourself.

Missing Someone Is Not Weakness—It Is Love

Learning to live on the spiral of grief in a way that allows us to continue to engage in life in a meaningful way is an important part of the grieving process. This allows us to integrate where we were, where we are, and where we are going.

The first important step in the process is to understand the spiral nature of grief so we aren’t caught off guard when the same feelings are re-experienced.

The second important step is finding or building a community of listeners who support us and allow us to be who we are, wherever we are at any point in time. It is also, therefore, important to allow ourselves to be open to the support of others so that we can be nurtured physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Finally, we need to be kind to ourselves. We can allow ourselves time to grieve when we need it, whether it is days, weeks, months or years after the death.

Missing someone who has died, even long after they are gone, is not a sign of weakness. It is, rather, a testament to our love for them.



About the Highmark Caring Place

The Highmark Caring Place is dedicated to making a difference in the lives of grieving children.

It is the Mission of the Highmark Caring Place:

- To raise awareness of the needs of grieving children
- To provide programs to address those needs
- To equip the community to support those children who have experienced the death of a loved one



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