

The Spiral of Grief: Part 3

Hope and Healing



Hope and Healing

As we travel our journey of grief, it is important to remember that hope and healing are possible.

An important part of the grief work that we need to do is to remember the one we love, the one who died, and to express those memories and our feelings about that person.

We mourn by remembering, and we remember through our stories.

To be able to really express our feelings, thoughts and memories, it is very helpful to have support from friends or family who not only want to listen and share stories about the one who died, but who can also accept us in our pain and our imperfections.

Fred Rogers, the creator and host of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, and the Honorary Chairman of the Caring Place from its inception until his death in 2003, said this about what the Caring Place is:

“The Caring Place provides a safe place where children and adults need not fear their inner truth and can participate in the healthy ritual of grief.”

What all of us in grief need is some safe place where we need not fear that inner truth and where we can truly participate in the healthy ritual of grief and mourning.

Our Feelings Are Valid

It's important to express our feelings, to let the feelings out, whatever they are. We're often encouraged in subtle—and not-so-subtle—ways to “Be strong”, to go on as if nothing had happened.

As one of the teenagers at the Caring Place said, she learned that being strong can have a completely different meaning:

“After I came here I realized that you can be strong and still be able to cry. You can be strong and go through this and be able to talk about it and let your feelings out. That's what helped me, knowing that being strong doesn't mean, ‘Oh don't cry, don't talk about it.’ Being strong means dealing with it and talking about it while you're getting on with your life.

“Thinking I had to keep it all inside didn't let me grow. By letting go of that attitude, I've become a different person and it's great. I don't think I could have lived just being ‘strong’ like that.”

We can feel free to feel. Our feelings are not good, they're not bad—they're ours. We own them. Our feelings are valid. They need to be accepted—by us and by others.



The Importance of Remembering

After the death of a loved one, many people's first impulse—our own, as well as that of our friends or acquaintances—is to help ease the pain of grief by taking away the cause of the pain—our thoughts of the one who died.

What we've seen at the Caring Place, over and over, is that, although the memories can be painful, they are the keys to the door through which we have to go in order to move on in life.

Remembering is one of the most important parts of grief work. People have a natural urge to tell and retell the story of the person who died. This is more than a natural urge—it is a deep-seated need that we have as a way to come to terms with an event that resists a full explanation.

Even the phrase we use—"coming to terms with"—means putting an event into words. Moving along the journey of grief means telling the story, in many different ways, at many different times. The stories and the memories are a major part of the healing that can occur after a death.

"One thing that made me really sad when my baby sister Shelby died was when relatives and other people we knew would tell us, 'You have to keep busy. Move on with your life. Just try not to think about Shelby so much.' But that made me feel really sad, that everyone wanted us to forget her.

"But when we came to the Caring Place, suddenly it was like Shelby was still alive, because no one was afraid to talk to us about her, and ask questions about what she was like. It gave me the best feeling knowing that I could always keep Shelby's memory with me and alive wherever I went."

—Katie, 13
whose little sister Shelby died

Light in a Dark Room

Sharing memories can be done in many ways, from telling stories about the person who died, to sharing photographs, talking about favorite foods, or listening to special songs.

Even simply saying their name or expressing how much we miss the person is a way of remembering.

Memories help keep the relationship, and the person, alive in those who love them still.

Remembering the one who died, and talking about that person, is like lighting a candle in a dark room. Remembering that person is a way of making our hearts a little less dark.

Remembering helps us to know that the people we love, even though we don't see them now, live on in our hearts. When we remember, we shine a light in our hearts. And the remembering brightens the darkness.

"A lot of times, people around you don't want to talk about the person who died. They don't even want to say the person's name, because they think you might cry, or you'll feel bad.

"But we want to talk about Sarah—we want to remember Sarah. People don't realize how that helps keep the person alive.

"Sure, we might cry because we're going to remember some good times that aren't here anymore. But we don't want to ever forget those good times. We don't want to forget Sarah."

—Susan
mother of two whose daughter Sarah died

Mentioning and Managing Our Grief

The Caring Place has these words of Mister Rogers on its walls:

“It is only natural that we and our children find many things hard to talk about.

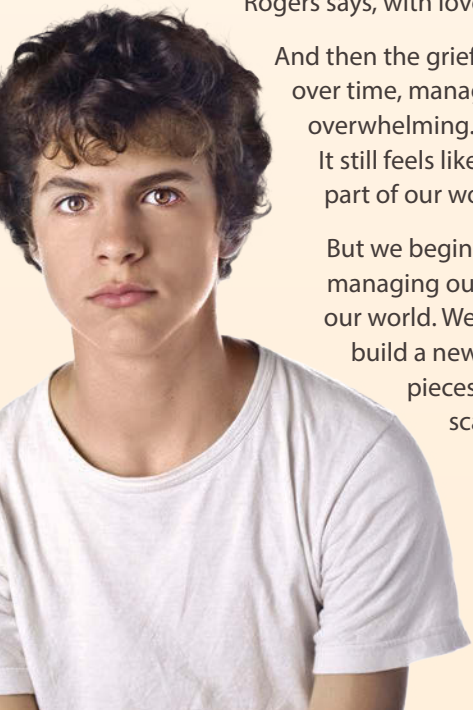
“But anything human is mentionable and anything mentionable can be manageable.

“The mentioning can be difficult, and the managing too, but both can be done if we’re surrounded by love and trust.”

Our grief becomes mentionable through the support of others helping us to come to terms, literally, with our grief. And by their surrounding us, as Mister Rogers says, with love and trust.

And then the grief also becomes, over time, manageable. It is not so overwhelming. It still does hurt. It still feels like part of us is gone, part of our world is gone.

But we begin to grow toward managing our lives, managing our world. We begin to slowly build a new life up out of the pieces of the old one scattered around us.



The Importance of Support

Realizing that we can’t do this on our own, and seeking help, is not a sign of weakness. It’s a sign of strength.

Grief in itself is not a medical problem or a mental health crisis. Grief is the natural human response to the loss of a loved one.

More often than medical intervention, what we need is the support and care of a person or group of people who can accept us right where we are, who can walk with us along this journey of grief, for as long as it takes.

We live in a quick-fix culture, where people have problems, they get them fixed, and then they go on with their lives. That’s how car problems, house problems and physical problems are dealt with.

Unfortunately, that’s how those who have experienced the death of a loved one are expected to behave as well. We’re allowed a few days out of our routine to attend the funeral and “have a good cry.”

Then we’re expected to jump back into that routine and to go on as if nothing happened. Meanwhile, our whole world has crashed down around our heads. Our insides are empty, we’re sad and lonely, lost and overwhelmed.

We need support.

Finding a Safe Harbor

We need support and nurturance to help us cope with the disruption caused by the death.

Those who care for us can provide that support and nurturing when they're available to listen to and empathize with us.

With this support, our normal, natural process of healing and growth can be helped and encouraged.

With this support, we can take the time to tend to ourselves, and to do the work necessary to move back into the life of the world around us.

Our support system can't do this work for us. No one can take away our pain. But those who care for us can be with us in the midst of our pain, as we do this difficult work of grieving.

Those who care for us can provide a safe harbor in which we can find some peace, some understanding, some love and trust. In this safe place, we can walk in our grief.



“It’s Their Presence That Matters”

We don't need anyone else to tell us how we “should” grieve. Everyone's grief is different, unique—including ours. Our grief is our own, and it's valid.

We don't need others pushing us to do things we don't want to do. Especially now, when we have a greater likelihood of feeling physically and emotionally fatigued, it's important for others to be tolerant of our limits.

We don't need anyone to tell us that the rituals or spirituality that are meaningful to us are silly or unnecessary, nor do we need others to suppress our questions and our search for meaning.

The one who can be most helpful to us is the person who is willing to come toward us and who isn't afraid of our grief—the one who offers to walk beside us and to listen with an attentive heart.

It's their presence that matters. They don't have to speak. Love understands love; it needs no words. Allowing us to speak when we want to, and to remain quiet when we need to. Sitting with us, holding our hand. Validating our feelings by accepting them, by accepting us.

Through this support, they will help us to go on living. Not by helping us to forget, but to go on with memories that will never die. Our hearts may be broken, but hope and healing are possible. We find that life is here. We discover that love is here.



“The support of others is a sheltering cove for all of us in the storm that we call grief.”

—Debra, mother of two whose son died

“The best medicine anyone can give is listening; that’s what any grieving person is looking for—someone to listen.”



Thoughts From Caring Place Participants

“It helps knowing I’m not the only one, being with other kids growing up without parents, or brothers or sisters. It helps, seeing other kids have the same fears that I do. It’s not as scary any more.

“I’ve had to rearrange my dreams. I’ve learned that there are other ways to grow up and still have that person who died in your life. He may not be here in person, but in spirit, he is. They live on in each of us.

“You get new hopes, new dreams, new goals, and the person who died is still in them. No one knows what the future holds. But I’m not as afraid to go out, alone, into the real world.

“Because of being with the other kids here, even though I’m scared, I know I’m going to go on.”

“Nine years ago, I had no hope for the future. As time went by I discovered that my life was not over, just drastically different. It has been an extremely difficult journey. But I now have hope that life will continue, things will get better, and I will be successful despite the untimely death of my father.”

“This is a path that none of us would choose to walk. But we weren’t given that choice. Now that we’re on that path, we’re at least there for each other. You know you have to face your grief, but it’s good that you can do it next to somebody.”

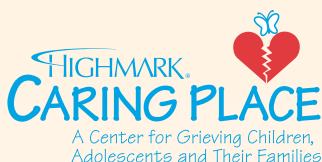
“I’m really glad I got to express myself and not hold it all inside. Like the Caring Place symbol, my heart was still broken, but a butterfly was flying out of it. And that butterfly was free, and I knew how to be a kid again. I knew how to live.”

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



is a program of:



Pittsburgh

620 Stanwix Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15222
(888) 224-4673

Erie

510 Cranberry St., Bldg 2
Erie, PA 16507
(866) 212-4673

Central PA

3 Walnut Street, Suite 200
Lemoyne, PA 17043
(866) 613-4673

Warrendale

200 Warrendale Village Drive
Warrendale, PA 15086
(888) 734-4073



HighmarkCaringPlace.com