FOR THE LOVED ONES OF THOSE WHO SERVED & DIED

The Six Needs of Mourning ★ How Art Helps Us Heal
Making New Summer Memories ★ Personal Stories of Hope and Resilience
The Seesaw of Resilience and Vulnerability

It’s this back-and-forth of grief that provides momentum for the journey.

By Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D.

“To share your weakness is to make yourself vulnerable; to make yourself vulnerable is to show your strength.”—Criss Jami

As you journey through your naturally complicated and painful grief, you are probably being buoyed by—and perhaps also dismayed by—your resilience. After all, here you are. You may not have thought it possible at first, but you have indeed survived.

Military families are trained to be resilient. After all, military service is unpredictable. You may have had to pick up and move several times in the past, forcing you to leave old friends and make new ones and reestablish community connections. Deployments are also unpredictable, and before the death you may have been separated from your loved one for long stretches of time. Through all this, and because of the military’s resilience-focused culture, military families typically learn to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

It’s true that your resilience training may have helped you and your family in your grief. The most profound change you could ever experience has happened, and now, as always, you’ve picked yourself up, dusted yourself off, and kept putting one foot in front of the other. Perhaps your resilience helped you with practical matters such as relocating.

You may have felt dismay sometimes at your own resilience, too. Maybe the fact that life goes on has made you feel distressed or anxious now and then.

Pay attention to those inklings of distress. When it comes to grief, it’s wise to beware of your learned resilience. Why? Because it may tell you to “suck it up,” “let go,” and put your loss behind you. It may suggest that you need to be strong and in control. Yet what all griever actually need is to embrace their normal and necessary thoughts and feelings and give them the time and attention they deserve. What griever need to do is relinquish control of their grief.

Allowing yourself to be vulnerable is just as important as cultivating resilience. Think of them as the two sides of a seesaw. You want the seesaw to balance sometimes, yes, but you also want it to go up and down. On some days you will need to open yourself to your naturally painful grief. The vulnerable side of the seesaw will tilt down. On other days you will marshal your resilience to help you navigate...
new challenges and approach life openly as it moves toward you. The resilient side of the seesaw will tilt down.

Both vulnerability and resilience are required for you to mourn. Mourning is the work of grief. It is expressing your inner grief outside yourself. Mourning is talking about your grief and the person who died. It’s crying. It’s participating in a support group. It’s journaling. It’s volunteering and walking alongside other grievers. It’s actively participating in whatever means of expression feel right to you in the moment and suit you best. It is through mourning that you will continue to heal and find renewed meaning in life and living.

Mourning requires you to be vulnerable to your deepest pain and your most challenging thoughts and feelings. It asks you to encounter them fully and express whatever they bring up for you. It asks you not to suppress or deny or distract but instead to immerse. This immersion is necessary because it is the truth.

But here comes resilience! And resilience asks you to dose yourself with your grief and mourning. It says, “Yes, encounter your necessary grief for a while, then let’s go engage in life for a while. We’ll keep going like that, back and forth, back and forth.”

It’s this back-and-forth of grief, in fact, that provides momentum for the journey. I call it “evade-encounter.” Your loss always lives inside you, but it’s healthy to take part in non-grief-focused activities part of the time. It’s healthy to evade your grief sometimes. Then it’s also healthy, and necessary, to return to encounter your grief sometimes.

Earlier I asked you to picture a seesaw representing resilience and vulnerability. Now I want you to imagine one of those old-fashioned handcars that railroad workers used in the 17th and 18th centuries to traverse train tracks. Two people would stand on either side of the handcar’s small platform, and by taking turns pumping the seesaw-like lever back and forth, they could quickly convey themselves down the track with their own muscle power.

The handcar metaphor captures the reciprocating power of evade-encounter as well as vulnerability and resilience do. When you consciously activate and rely on both as you journey through grief, and you work to keep them in healthy balance, you create divine momentum toward healing. If, however, you neglect one side or the other, you get stuck and go nowhere.

The Wikipedia entry on handcars says, “While depictions on TV and in movies might suggest that being a member of a handcar crew was a joyride, in fact pumping a traditional handcar... could be very hard work.” Likewise, the back-and-forth of resilience and vulnerability in grief is very hard work. Remind yourself that there are no rewards for speed. If your handcar moves at a snail’s pace, so be it. If it goes backward sometimes, so be it. As long as it’s moving, you’re on the right track.

And don’t forget to take good care of yourself every day. You won’t have the energy to muster the back-and-forth of vulnerability and resilience if you’re not getting ample rest, nutrition, hydration, exercise, and health care. You will also need help pumping the handcar sometimes. Healing in grief is not a solo activity. Vulnerability and resilience in grief require seeking out and accepting the support of friends, family members, neighbors, and others along the way.

I’ve been a grief counselor for four decades now, and I’ve been privileged to bear witness to the power and momentum created by vulnerability and resilience hundreds of times. So I wish you vulnerability and resilience both. Godspeed.*

A longtime TAPS supporter and advisory board member, Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D., serves as director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and has written many books that help people mourn, including Healing Your Grieving Heart After a Military Death (co-authored with TAPS President Bonnie Carroll). To learn more about grief and to order Dr. Wolfelt’s books, visit centerforloss.com.
The Six Needs of Mourning
Accepting these universal truths can help you heal.

By Bonnie Carroll and Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Need 1:
Acknowledge the reality of the death.

“Believe in the wonderment of life, the magic of love, and the reality of death.”—Carroll Bryant

• Your first need of mourning is to gently confront the difficult reality that someone you love is dead and will never physically be present to you again.
• Even when a death is anticipated, acknowledging the full reality of that loss may take weeks or months. Accepting the reality of sudden and violent deaths usually takes longer.
• You will first come to acknowledge the reality of the loss with your head. Only over time will you come to acknowledge it with your heart. As Stephen Levine has noted, “There are pains that cannot be contained in the mind, only in the heart.”
• At times you may push away the reality of the death. This is normal. You will come to integrate the reality in doses as you are ready.
• You may be saying to yourself, “I feel like I’m dreaming, I keep hoping I’ll wake up and none of this will have happened.” We hear this often from trauma survivors. Your shock protects you from being overwhelmed by the loss. You need and deserve time to reconstitute yourself after this traumatic death. You need time to become accustomed to thinking and feeling in your new reality. Go slow. There are no rewards for speed.

CARPE DIEM: Tell someone about the death today. Talking about it will help you work on this important need.

Need 2:
Embrace the pain of the loss.

“The cure for pain is in the pain.”—Rumi

• 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 push away the pain of grief than it is to confront it.
• It is in embracing your grief, however, that you will learn to reconcile yourself to it.
• You will need to slowly—ever so slowly—“dose” yourself in embracing your pain. If you were to allow in all the pain at once, you could not survive.
• People with chronic physical pain are taught not to tighten around the pain but to relax and allow the pain to be present. When pain is resisted, it intensifies. You don’t want to fight with your pain; you want to allow it into your soul in small doses so that eventually you can move from darkness into light.

CARPE DIEM: If you feel up to it, allow yourself some time for embracing pain today. Dedicate 15 minutes to doing nothing but thinking about and feeling the loss. Reach out to someone who doesn’t try to take your pain away and share your thoughts and feelings with him.

Need 3:
Remember the person who died.

“Your silent tents of green We deck with fragrant flowers; Yours has the suffering been, The memory shall be ours.”
—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

• When loved ones die, they live on in us through memory.
• To heal, you need to actively remember the person who died and commemorate the life that was lived.
• Never let anyone take your memories away in a misguided attempt to save you from pain. It’s good for you to continue to display photos of the person who died. It’s good to talk about him. It’s good to save belongings and memories of his life.
• Remembering the past makes hoping for the future possible. As Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard noted, “Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.”

PHOTO: BRANDY MEBIA
**CARPE DIEM**: Brainstorm a list of characteristics or memories of the person who died. Write as fast as you can for 10 minutes (or more), then put away your list for later reflection.

**Need 4:**
**Develop a new self-identity.**

“She stood in the storm, and when the wind did not blow her away—and it surely has not—she adjusted her sails.”—Elizabeth Edwards

- Part of your self-identity was formed by the relationship you had with the person who died.
- You may have gone from being a “wife” to a “widow” or from a “parent” to a “bereaved parent.” The way you thought of yourself and the way society thinks of you has changed.
- The part of your identity that was shaped by your military status or affiliation is also morphing. The military is very good at creating a strong culture—regulations and processes and ways of talking and thinking that bind military members and their families together. This culture may have given you a sense of belonging. But now that your military ties may be dissolving, what does that mean for the part of you that identified as a military family member?
- You need to re-anchor yourself, to reconstruct your self-identity. This is arduous and painful work. One of your biggest challenges may be to re-create yourself in the face of the loss of who you once were. Let us assure you that you can and will do this.
- Many mourners discover that as they work on this need, they ultimately discover some positive changes to their self-identities, such as becoming more caring or less judgmental.

**CARPE DIEM**: Write out a response to this prompt: I used to be __________. Now that __________ died, I am __________. This makes me feel __________. Keep writing as long as you want.

**Need 5:**
**Search for meaning.**

“Why? Parents all over the earth who lost sons in the war have felt this kind of question, and sought an answer. To me, it means loving life more, being more aware of life, of one’s fellow human beings, of the earth.”—Frances Gunther

- When someone loved dies, we naturally question the meaning and purpose of life and death. It’s hard—maybe even impossible—to make sense of a death that can seem so senseless. While some people find profound meaning in the idea of sacrifice to country, others struggle with what can seem like the squandering of a precious life. And it’s not uncommon for survivors to feel a little of both! Regardless of your feelings about the circumstances of the death, it is normal and necessary to struggle with the “why” and try to find meaning.
- “Why?” questions often precede “How” questions. “Why did this happen?” comes before “How will I go on living?”
- You will probably question your philosophy of life and explore religious and spiritual values as you work on this need. You may also find yourself questioning the military’s rationale or decision-making that contributed to your loved one’s death. After someone you love is taken from you, it’s normal to question.
- Remember that having faith or spirituality does not negate your need to mourn. “Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.”
- Some people may tell you that asking “Why?” doesn’t do you any good. These people are usually unfamiliar with the experience of traumatic grief. Try to reach out to people who can create a supportive atmosphere for you right now.

**CARPE DIEM**: Write down a list of “why” questions that have surfaced for you since the death. Find a friend or counselor who will explore these questions with you without thinking she has to give you answers.
One of the touchstones of grief is that each and every one of us as humans are connected by loss. As you experience the physical separation from someone you love, you are connected to every single person who has experienced or ever will experience a similar loss. Part of the TAPS motto encourages us to “share the journey.”

Need 6: Receive ongoing support from others.

“Gracious acceptance is an art—an art which most never bother to cultivate. We think that we have to learn how to give, but we forget about accepting things, which can be much harder than giving... Accepting another person’s gift is allowing him to express his feelings for you.”
—Alexander McCall Smith

- As mourners, we need the love and understanding of others if we are to heal.
- Don’t feel ashamed by your dependence on others right now. Instead, revel in the knowledge that others care about you.
- Unfortunately, our society places too much value on “carrying on” and “doing well” after a death. Because of this, many mourners are abandoned by their friends and family soon after the death. It has been said that grief rewrites your address book.
  - One of the touchstones of grief is that each and every one of us as humans are connected by loss. As you experience the physical separation from someone you love, you are connected to every single person who has experienced or ever will experience a similar loss. Part of the TAPS motto encourages us to “share the journey.”
  - When others offer to help, tell them something practical they can do, such as babysit, grocery shop, or mow the lawn.
  - Grief is a process, not an event, and you will need the continued support of your friends and family for weeks, months, and years.

CARPE DIEM: Sometimes your friends and family want to support you but don’t know how. Ask. Call your closest friend right now and tell him you need his help through the coming weeks and months.*

This article was excerpted from Healing Your Grieving Heart After a Military Death: 100 Practical Ideas for Families and Friends by Bonnie Carroll and Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D. ( Companion Press). The book is available at the TAPS online store (taps.org/shop).