

Mustering the Courage to Mourn

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

“Whatever you do, you need courage.” — Ralph Waldo Emerson

Loss brings uninvited pain into our lives. In opening to the presence of the pain of your loss, in acknowledging the inevitability of the pain, in being willing to gently embrace the pain, you demonstrate the courage to honor the pain.

Honoring means “recognizing the value of” and “respecting.” It is not instinctive to see grief and the need to openly mourn as something to honor, yet the capacity to love requires the necessity to mourn. To honor your grief is not self-destructive or harmful, it is courageous and life-giving.

The word *express* literally means “to press or squeeze out, to make known and reveal.” Self-expression can change you and the way you perceive and experience your world. Transforming your thoughts and feelings into words gives them meaning and shape. Your willingness to honestly affirm your need to mourn will help you survive this difficult time in your life. Your spiritual purpose is not to repress or overindulge your emotions but rather to allow them so fully that they move through you.

The pain of grief will keep trying to get your attention until you unleash your courage to gently, and in small doses, open to its presence. The alternative—denying or suppressing your pain—is in fact more painful. If you do not honor your grief by acknowledging it, it will accumulate and fester. So, you must ask yourself, “How will I host this loss? What do I intend to do with this pain? Will I befriend it, or will I make it my enemy?”

I have learned that the pain that surrounds the closed heart of grief is the pain of living against yourself, the pain of denying how the loss changes you, the pain of feeling alone and isolated—unable to openly mourn, unable to love and be loved by those around you. Instead of dying while you are alive, you can choose to allow yourself to remain open to the pain, which, in large part, honors the love you feel for the person who has died. After all, love and grief are two sides of the same precious coin.

As an ancient Hebrew sage observed, “If you want life, you must expect suffering.” Paradoxically, it is the very act of mustering the courage to move toward the pain that ultimately leads to healing.

Take Grief's Hand

Someone you have given love to and received love from has died. You are grieving. You are "bereaved" which literally means you have been "torn apart" and have "special needs." You are beginning, or are in the midst of, a journey that is painful, often lonely and naturally frightening.

Among your most special needs right now is to have the courage to grieve and mourn in a culture that doesn't always invite you to feel safe to do so. That said, I have written this article to help you draw forth your courage—the courage that already exists within you—to accept grief and mourning as they come.

There is a difference between grieving and mourning. *Grief* is the constellation of internal thoughts and feelings we have when someone we love dies. *Mourning* is when you take the grief you have on the inside and express it outside yourself. In other words, mourning is grief in action.

I encourage you to take grief's hand and let it lead you through the darkness and toward the light. You may not see the light at first, but forge ahead with courage, and with the faith that the light of hope and happiness does exist. Feel your pain, sorrow, sadness, disbelief, agony, heartbreak, fear, anxiety, and loneliness as much as you can.

This may seem odd, as these emotions could well be the ones you most want to avoid. You might fall into the common thinking of our society that denying these feelings will make them go away. You might have the urge to "keep your chin up" and stay busy and wait to "get over" your grief. Yet, ironically, the only way to help these hard feelings pass is to wade in the muck of them. To get in, and get dirty. Grief isn't clean, tidy, or convenient. Yet feeling it and expressing it is the only way to feel whole, once again. Unresolved grief can leave you feeling "stuck" or empty. Your ability to engage in life could be inhibited and you might feel like you've shut down.

Instead, choose grief. And as you walk with your grief, actively mourn. Cry when you need to, call a friend when you feel overwhelmed, join a grief support group, express yourself through writing, music, dance, or sports. By taking action, you will eventually integrate the death of your loved one into your life. In exchange, you will find the hope, courage, and desire to once again live a full and rewarding life.

While walking with grief, remember two important things: 1) Grief and mourning have no timeline. Your grief journey is unique and will take as little or as much time as needed, depending on the unique circumstances of your loss. 2) Taking breaks along the way is needed and necessary. I like to use the word "dosing" when referring to grieving and mourning. Grief is not something you can do all at once. Feeling so many feelings often leads to overwhelm. Instead, take in "doses" of grief and mourn in bits and pieces. Retreat and welcome respite as needed.

Grief may never leave your side, but it will allow you to let go and venture forth on your own more and more as days, weeks, months, and years pass. Tap into your innate courage and accept the hand held out by grief.

Befriend Courage

What is courage? When you think of courage, images of bravery might come to mind—knights on horseback charging the line, firefighters risking their lives to rescue a family from a burning building, or hikers summiting Mount Everest. This is bravery, not courage. Bravery is loud and boisterous. Courage is soft and quiet. Without the steady, quiet resolve and unfailing commitment of courage, bravery would never happen. Courage is what fuels bravery. It is the bridge between fear and action. It is a still, quiet voice encouraging you to go on.

Bravery is daring and doing, courage is friendly and welcoming. Find ways to make friends with courage. To “befriend” literally means making an effort to “become friends.” Imagine what it would be like to have courage as a friend who walks beside you at all times; a friend who never nags, never pushes, but simply places a gentle hand on your back and whispers words of encouragement, helping you take the next step, and the next. With courage by your side, you are able to go on, to walk through your days and do the next right thing.

Cultivate a relationship with courage every day. Each morning, welcome courage. Before you rise, say your favorite quote on courage out loud. Maybe it is the Serenity Prayer, borrowed from Alcoholics Anonymous, and one of my favorites: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Or maybe there’s another that you especially like. If you want, write down your favorite quotes on courage and put them on your fridge, dashboard, mirror or computer at work. This will help you keep courage close, all day long.

Look for simple ways to give voice to courage throughout the day. Maybe it is simply having the gumption to get out of bed. But maybe it’s the courage to share how you feel about your loss with a coworker or friend, or to walk through the doors of a grief support group. It could simply be making a phone call you’ve been putting off, writing a thank you to someone who helped after the funeral, going to church alone, or finding the backbone to be honest with yourself about something you fear. Healing after a death is hard. It takes courage in all shapes and sizes to mourn fully while living day to day. Congratulate yourself on welcoming courage, regardless of its size or reach.

About the Author

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is a respected author and educator on the topic of healing in grief. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School's Department of Family Medicine. Dr. Wolfelt has written many compassionate, bestselling books designed to help people mourn well so they can continue to love and live well, including *Understanding Your Grief*, *The Mourner’s Book of Hope*, and *The Mourner’s Book of Courage*, from which this article was excerpted. Visit www.centerforloss.com to learn more about the natural and necessary process of grief and mourning and to order Dr. Wolfelt’s books.

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