

# VBS CARES

## SUPPORTING OUR VBS FAMILY IN TIMES OF LOSS YOU ARE NOT ALONE IN YOUR GRIEF

A Publication of the Valley Beth Shalom Caring Connection

Volume 2

### Resources and Support

#### About Support Groups

Sharing feelings of pain and loss can actually have a healing effect. Support groups offer an opportunity to discuss your loss with others in similar circumstances in a safe, confidential and non-judgmental setting. We encourage you to take advantage of these wonderful programs.

#### VBS Counseling Center

Widow/Widower Grief Support Group  
818-703-3176 or 818-784-1414

#### Our House Grief Support Center

Grief support services, education, and resources.  
818-222-3344  
ourhouse-grief.org

#### The HOPE Unit Foundation

Bereavement Support Groups  
818-788-HOPE (4673)  
hopeunit.org

#### Valley Beth Shalom Website

VBS.org/bereavement

## BEREAVEMENT AT SIX MONTHS

**Sally Weber**  
LCSW, Founder VBS Caring Connection

Mourning is a process of coming to terms with a significant loss. It's a process of adjustment. It's a process of finding (albeit usually reluctantly) a 'new normal' in which you will live out your life, find meaning, build on the past and create a different future from the one you may have anticipated. It's a process filled with emotions—sadness and regret, anger, longing for what was, the gentle joys of warm remembrance, and the often unexpected pride—and joy—of discovering one's own resilience.

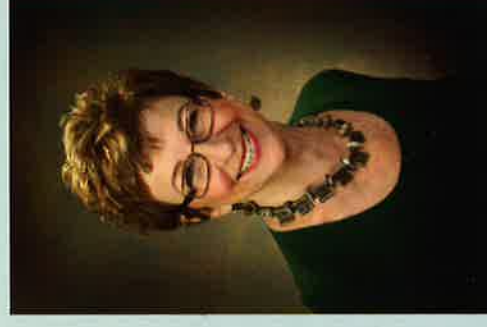
Despite what we originally learned from Kubler-Ross about the seven steps of mourning, bereavement can be messy. A very 'up' day can be followed by a 'down' day. And vice versa. A period of significant 'moving forward' can be set back by a birthday, an anniversary, any life cycle ritual that you are celebrating for the first time without the person you've lost. Or the anxiety about a possible 'set back' because of an anniversary can instead be a day of surprise, of 'I did it!'

Although Judaism gives us many crucial rituals to mark our mourning path—Shiva; Shloshim; the unveiling; Yahrzeit; Yizkor—it doesn't ritually make note of the sixth month landmark. However, it is an important milestone psychologically and one that sometimes marks a certain turning point in our journey.

The Tasks at Six Months: Six months is both a significant period and 'just part of the process.' It's a time when much of the immediate support—friends coming by, meals being provided, phone calls to check in on how you're doing—may have wound down. Not disappeared, simply wound down. People around you are moving on with their lives—and often assuming that you are too. You may feel 'forgotten' as the intensity of initial support changes. You have probably experienced one or more life cycle events or Jewish holidays without your loved one and are steeled not to be blindsided by the increased sense of loss you experience. But there are holidays and celebrations yet to come, some of which may carry unexpected weight. And your friends and community may not be there to buffer you as strongly as they had during the first few months.

One of the most significant challenges of the grief process is to see the lessening of overt support not as abandonment, but to see this time as an opportunity to reach out for care. People often say "I don't know what to do to help you." It's OK to let them know—"I'd love an invitation for Shabbat dinner, for a holiday meal; I'd like to see a movie/ play—want to go together?" This is easier for some, much harder for others. Baby steps are helpful—a phone call to friends, asking if they want to meet you for frozen yogurt one night may feel much easier than asking for a Shabbat dinner invitation. At six months, people are often waiting to follow your lead. Finding ways to 'practice' reaching out can make the bigger requests easier. The worst that can happen is that someone will say, "I'm so sorry—I'm not available." And that only means that you should call the next person you'd like to see.

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Connecting our clergy and expertly trained VBS  
volunteers with members in need of support

[caringconnection@vbs.org](mailto:caringconnection@vbs.org) or 818-530-4056



Valley  
Beth Shalom



# THE JOURNEY THROUGH GRIEF: THE MOURNER'S SIX RECONCILIATION NEEDS

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition

The death of someone loved changes our lives forever. The movement from “before” to “after” is almost always a long, painful journey. I have learned that if we are to heal we cannot skirt the outside edges of our grief. Instead, we must journey all through it, sometimes meandering the side roads, sometimes plowing directly into its raw center. The journey also requires mourning. There is an important difference. Grief is what you think and feel on the inside. Mourning is the outward expression of those thoughts and feelings. We all grieve when someone we love dies, but if we are to heal, we must also mourn. There are six “yield signs” you are likely to encounter on your journey through grief—what I call the “reconciliation needs of mourning.” For while your grief journey will be an intensely personal, unique experience, mourners must yield to this set of basic human needs to heal.

## **Need 1. Acknowledging the reality of the death.**

This first need of mourning involves gently confronting the reality that someone you care about will never physically come back into your life again. Whether the death was sudden or anticipated, acknowledging the full reality of the loss may occur over weeks and months. 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. Remember—this first need of mourning, like the other five that follow, may intermittently require your attention for months. Be patient and compassionate with yourself as you work on each of them.

## **Need 2. Embracing the pain of the loss.**

It is easier to avoid, repress or deny the pain of grief than it is to confront it, yet it is in confronting pain that we learn to reconcile ourselves to it. You will probably discover that you need to “dose” yourself in embracing your pain. 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 others you will need to create a safe place to move toward it.

## **Need 3. Remembering the person who died.**

Precious memories and objects that link you to the person who died (such as photos, souvenirs etc.) are examples of some of the things that give testimony to a different form of a continued relationship. This need involves allowing yourself to pursue this relationship. But some people may try to take your memories away. Trying to be helpful, they encourage you to take down photos of the person who died or even move out of your house. In my experience, remembering the past makes hoping for the future possible. Your future will become open to new experiences only to the extent that you embrace the past.

## **Need 4. Developing a new self-identity.**

Part of your self-identity comes from the relationships you have with other people. When someone with whom you have a relationship dies, your self-identity naturally changes. You may have gone from being a “wife” or “husband” to a “widow” or “widower.” The way you define yourself and the way society defines you is changed. A death often requires you to take on new roles that had been filled by the person who died. After all, someone still has to take out the garbage and buy the groceries. You confront your changed identity every time you do something that used to be done by the person who died. This can be hard work and can leave you feeling drained. Many people discover that as they work on this need, they ultimately discover some positive aspects of their changed self-identity. You may develop a renewed confidence in yourself and a more caring and sensitive side. You may develop an assertive part of your identity that empowers you to go on living even though you continue to feel a sense of loss.

## **Need 5. Searching for meaning.**

When someone you love dies, you naturally question the meaning and purpose of life. You probably will question your philosophy and explore religious and spiritual values as you work on this need. You may discover yourself searching for meaning in your continued living as you ask “How?” and “Why” questions. “How could God let this happen?” “Why did this happen now, in this way?” The death reminds you of your lack of control. It can leave you feeling powerless. The person who died was a part of you. This death means you mourn a loss not only outside of yourself, but inside of yourself as well. This death also calls for you to confront your own spirituality. You may doubt your faith and have spiritual conflicts and questions racing through your head and heart. This is normal and part of your journey toward renewed living.

## **Need 6. Receiving ongoing support from others.**

The quality and quantity of support you get during your grief journey will have a major influence on your capacity to heal. You cannot—not should you try to—do this alone. Drawing on the experiences and encouragement of friends, fellow mourners or counselors is not a weakness but a healthy human need. And because mourning is a process that takes place over time, this support must be available months and even years after a death. Unfortunately, because our society places so much value on the ability to “carry on” and “keep your chin up,” many mourners are abandoned shortly after the event of the death. “It's time to get on with your life” is the type of message directed at mourners. To be truly helpful, the people in your support system must appreciate the impact this death has had on you. They must understand that in order to heal, you must be allowed to mourn long after the death. And they must encourage you to see mourning not as an enemy to be vanquished but as a necessity to be experienced as a result of having loved.

## **Reconciling your grief**

People do not “get over” grief. Reconciliation is a term I find more appropriate for what occurs as the mourner works to integrate the new reality of moving forward in life without the physical presence of the person who died. With reconciliation comes a renewed sense of energy and confidence, an ability to fully acknowledge the reality of the death and a capacity to become reinvolved in the activities of living. In reconciliation, the sharp, ever-present pain of grief gives rise to a renewed sense of meaning and purpose. Your feelings of loss will not completely disappear, yet they will soften, and the intense pangs of grief will become less frequent. Hope for a continued life will emerge as you are able to make commitments to the future, realizing that the person who died will never be forgotten, yet knowing that your life can and will move forward.

## RECOMMENDED READING

**Death, Bereavement, and Mourning**  
Samuel Heilman, Editor

**Gesher Hachaim (The Bridge of Life):  
Life as a Bridge Between Past and Future**  
Rabbi Yechiel M. Tucazinsky

**Kaddish**  
Leon Wieseltier

**The Orphaned Adult:  
Confronting the Death of a Parent**  
Marc Angel

**Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying,  
Bury the Dead, and Mourn as a Jew**  
Anita Diamant

**Wrestling with the Angel: Jewish Insights on  
Death and Mourning**  
Jack Riemer, Editor

**Grief Expressed When a Mate Dies**  
Marta Felber

**How to Survive the Loss of a Love**  
Peter McWilliams, Harold H. Bloomfield  
and Melba Colgrove



## PRAYERS OF LIFE

**Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis**

When I cry my voice trembles with fear.

When I call out it cracks with anger.

How can I greet the dawn with song

when darkness eclipse the rising sun?

To whom shall I turn  
when the clouds of the present eclipse the rays of tomorrow?

Turn me around to yesterday  
that I may be consoled by its memories.

I enter the sanctuary again  
to await the echo of your promise.



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Extra support: Don't be hard on yourself if life is not 'normal' after six months. It won't be. But do be aware of signs that you might need some extra support: Are you still finding it difficult to work or socialize with friends? Are you sleeping more/less? Eating more/less? Drinking? Are you experiencing depression without relief, unable to find moments of happiness or pleasure in moments of daily life? If so, you may want to consider seeing a therapist—someone experienced in bereavement counseling—with whom you can meet privately. This is not a sign of craziness, weakness, or an inability to 'move on'—it's a sign that you know how to take care of yourself.

Recognize that people do care. But if they are not grieving, they may not be there for you in the way they were in the beginning. This is natural—it's just people moving back to their 'normal' at a time when you're trying to adjust to a 'new normal'. This can be true whether you've lost a spouse, a relative, a child, or even a beloved pet. A friend once told me that when you lose a parent, you move to the other side of a bridge: If you haven't lost a parent, you can't really understand what that new place is like. That's true of many kinds of losses. Friends and family may try to imagine what you need—by imagining what they would need, but they haven't been there. Support groups can be of enormous help during this period. They provide not only support (obviously) but a place for you to share your mourning process with others on the same path while moving forward.

New Rituals: Use the precedent of Jewish ritual to create your own ritual for this moment. It may be as simple as planning to invite friends or family over for a meal on the six month anniversary of your loss. (Make it potluck—you don't have to put in heavy labor for a ritual!) You may decide to simply light a candle, to choose a favorite reading or poem or prayer that celebrates your strength in reaching this point (personally, I've always liked Tefilat HaDerech—the prayer for travelers!) Reflect on the surprises of the last six months—the things you never thought you'd be able to do after this loss but have found yourself doing. And, as my mother would always say after a difficult life achievement, give yourself a kiss!

## HONORING YOUR LOVED ONE WITH A MEMORIAL PLAQUE

At Valley Beth Shalom, we offer to memorialize your loved one on a brass memorial plaque, permanently displayed in the synagogue, for \$1,200.

Purchase of a plaque guarantees perpetual inclusion in the Yahrzeit list and Scroll of Remembrance, our High Holiday publication, so your loved one will be honored forever.

**To purchase a plaque or for more information,  
contact Myra Miller at 818-530-4014 or  
mmiller@vbs.org**

## EXILE

### Rabbi Ed Feinstein

Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden. They lived together, east of Eden, tilling the earth and raising children, and struggling to stay alive. After the years of struggle, when their children were grown, they decided to see the world. They journeyed from one corner of the world to the other. In the course of their journeys, wandering from place to place, they found themselves standing before the entrance to the Garden of Eden, now guarded by an angel with a flaming sword. They were frightened and they began to flee when God spoke to them:

"Adam, you have lived in exile these many years. Your exile is finished. Return to the Garden." Suddenly the angel disappeared, and the way to the Garden opened.

"Come in, My children, welcome to Paradise!"

But Adam had grown wary these many years.

"Wait," he replied, "It's been so many years. Remind me what it's like in the Garden."

"The Garden is paradise!" God responded. "In the Garden, there is no work. You need never struggle or toil again. In the Garden there is no pain, no suffering. In the Garden there is no death. Day after day, life goes on for eternity. Come my children, return to the Garden!"

Adam listened to God's words – no work, no struggle, no pain, no death. An endless life of ease. And then he turned and looked at Eve. He looked at the woman with whom he had struggled to make a life, to take bread from the earth, to raise children, to build a home. He thought of the tragedies they had overcome and the joys they had cherished.

And Adam shook his head, "No thank you, not now... Come on Eve, let's go home." And hand in hand, Adam and Eve turned their backs on Paradise and walked away.



## FROM MOURNING TO CHESED

### Rabbi Noah Zvi Farkas

After a loved one dies, many of us feel like retreating from the world. The shock of the loss and the notable absence of those we love on holidays, birthdays, or anniversaries push us inside of ourselves. We find ourselves sitting at home and refusing invitations to dinner or the movies, we decline visits from friends and family, we say "not yet" when someone asks us to rejoin the community. While loss is hard, and there needs to be time for reflection and sorrow, we can't let the darkest part of our lives define our identities.

According to tradition, we sit Shiva – a week's worth of time where we close ourselves out from the business of life – from work, from restaurants, from luxury. But Shiva must end. We must rise from our low places and go outside and walk out into the neighborhood to see the world again. We must re-engage and choose life over death. One of the most powerful ways of coming back from that dark place of mourning is to turn our sadness into loving kindness. In Hebrew, *chesed* is a special word that means the effusive love that God has for the world that adds goodness to goodness. When we perform acts of *chesed* we emulate this type of love. By volunteering to feed the hungry or knit caps for cancer patients, you can turn your mourning into *chesed*. When you see the joy of those you help, their joy can wash over us. *Chesed* is contagious. It brings life back into a world of death. It brings light to where there is only darkness.

Please contact the Valley Beth Shalom Chesed Connection to find out how you can get involved --- website: [www.vbs.org/chesed](http://www.vbs.org/chesed); email: [chesedconnection@vbs.org](mailto:chesedconnection@vbs.org); phone number: 818-530-4035.

