

THE GRIEVING PERSON'S BILL OF RIGHTS

by Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD, *Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition, Ft. Collins, Colorado*

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO . . .

1. **Experience your unique grief.** No one will grieve the same way you do. So, when you turn to others for help, don't let them tell you how you should be feeling.
2. **Talk about your grief.** Talking about your grief will help you heal. Seek out others who will let you talk as much as you want, as often as you want.
3. **Feel a multitude of emotions.** You will feel many emotions during your grief journey. Some may tell you that feeling angry, for example, is wrong. Don't take these judgmental responses to heart. Instead, find listeners who will accept your feelings without condition.
4. **Be tolerant of your physical and emotional limits.** Your feelings of loss and sadness can fatigue you. Respect what your body and mind tell you. Get daily rest. Eat balanced meals. And don't allow others to push you into activities you're not ready for.
5. **Experience grief "attacks."** Sometimes, a powerful surge of grief may overcome you. This can be frightening, but it is normal. Find someone who understands and will let you talk it out.
6. **Make use of ritual.** Rituals do more than acknowledge the death of someone. They provide you with support from caring people, as well as a way to mourn.
7. **Embrace your spirituality.** If faith is a part of your life, express it. Be with people who understand and support your religious beliefs.
8. **Search for meaning.** You may ask, "Why did he or she die? Why this way? Why now?" Some questions may have answers, others don't. Watch for clichéd responses people may give you, like, "It was God's will" or "Think of what you have to be thankful for." These sentiments are not helpful, and you do not have to agree with them.
9. **Treasure your memories.** Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after the death of a loved one. You will always remember. Instead of ignoring your memories, find others with whom you can share them.
10. **Move toward your grief and heal.** Reconciling your grief will not happen quickly. Remember, grief is a process, not an event. Be patient with yourself and avoid people who are impatient with you. Neither you nor those around you should forget that the death of someone loved changes your life forever.

COMMON SYMPTOMS OF GRIEF

While loss affects people in different ways, many people experience the following symptoms when they're grieving. Just remember that almost anything that you experience in the early stages of grief is normal – including feeling like you're going crazy, feeling like you're in a bad dream, or questioning your beliefs.

Shock and disbelief. Right after a loss, it can be hard to accept what happened. You may feel numb, have trouble believing that the loss really happened, or even deny the truth. If someone you love has died, you may keep expecting them to show up, even though you know they're gone.

Sadness. Profound sadness is probably the most universally experienced symptom of grief. You may have feelings of emptiness, despair, yearning, or deep loneliness. You may also cry a lot or feel emotionally unstable.

Guilt. You may regret or feel guilty about things you did or didn't say or do. You may also feel guilty about certain feelings (e.g. feeling relieved when the person died after a long, difficult illness). After a death, you may even feel guilty for not doing something to prevent the death, even if there was nothing more you could have done.

Anger. Even if the loss was nobody's fault, you may feel angry and resentful. If you lost a loved one, you may be angry at yourself, God, the doctors, or even the person who died for abandoning you. You may feel the need to blame someone for the injustice that was done to you.

Fear. A significant loss can trigger a host of worries and fears. You may feel anxious, helpless, or insecure. You may even have panic attacks. The death of a loved one can trigger fears about your own mortality, of facing life without that person, or the responsibilities you now face alone.

Physical symptoms. We often think of grief as a strictly emotional process, but grief often involves physical problems including fatigue, nausea, lowered immunity, weight loss or weight gain, aches and pains, and insomnia.

Source: helpguide.org

Need to talk? Call one of our rabbis today: 818-788-6000.



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VALLEY
BETH SHALOM

Cares.

SUPPORTING OUR VBS FAMILY IN TIMES OF LOSS

A Publication of the Valley Beth Shalom Caring Connection

Volume I

RESOURCES & 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 Support Group

818-703-3176 or
818-784-1414
vbscounseling.com

► **HOPE Connection** Providing individual and group support, educational programs and information that help alleviate the pain of grief and promote healing.

818-788-HOPE (4673)
hopegroups.org

► **Our House Grief Support Center** Grief support services, education, resources and hope.

818-222-3344
ourhouse-grief.org

You are NOT ALONE in your grief.

VBS CARES. We created this publication for those in our community that have been touched by death to teach one simple message: "You are not alone."

When a loved one passes, the fabric of our lives tears open like an old pair of pants whose hem has become worn out. With a shriek and a cry our lives change. Just a moment before, there was a life in this world who loved and cared for us, whose very presence was a gift and brought light into our lives. And now they are gone.

Something in the cosmic tapestry has ripped. The rabbis recognized these emotions and created a symbol, called "kria". We tear our shirts, our ties or our ribbons, symbolizing the deep trauma of loss when we lose our loved ones. For the world's imperfections are laid bare, and we feel we lost a part of ourselves.

It's not uncommon to feel scared and alone in your grief.

How can this happen? How will I continue on? Will I only know sorrow for the rest of my days? How can anyone else know what I am going through right now?

In the Torah, when the Holy One created the world, God blew the breath of life into a clod of earth and called it man. But upon seeing Adam's sadness and loneliness, God said, "It is no good for a human being to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). It's better for us to be together.

You must know that you are never alone in your grief.

For two thousand years, the Jewish community has owned this idea. When we feel caught in the chasm between what was and what will be, our religion is there to catch us. God is always found in the "in between." That's why we put a mezuzah on the lintel of the door, for it is in the space that is neither inside nor outside where God is found. With God, you are never alone in your grief.

For two thousand years the Jewish community, as God's agent, has taken care of each other, creating specific times and rituals that bring the community to your home to pray, reflect, and share a meal together. The following are the major phases of the year of mourning.

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VALLEY BETH SHALOM



SHIVA

Seven days of Shiva [literally, sitting], begin at the conclusion of the funeral (Day One) through the next six days. During this time you might feel overwhelming sadness and melancholy. You might also feel relief if the person who died had suffered from a long illness. The first three days are for intense mourning, followed by four days of mourning and reflection. You might also feel the comfort of the warm embrace of your community. These are all normal emotions. Typically during Shiva, you do not go out of the home for entertainment nor engage in business. You can host a minyan (prayer service) in your home as a focused time of reflection and say the Mourner's Kaddish prayer. Your community comes to you so you are never alone in your grief. You can also attend the Daily Minyan at VBS.

SHLOSHIM

[Lit. 30 days] counted from the end of Shiva (Day Seven), through thirty days after the funeral. During this period, you come back into the world, but not fully. Typically you go back to work, but do not enjoy entertainment. Many mourners come to the synagogue for daily services to say Kaddish. It is in this period of time that you feel as though the world is strange and different. Waves of sadness might overcome you, a sense of loneliness as you experience a "normal" week but without the presence of the one who died. You may also feel a compulsion to "keep busy" like cleaning out the house or taking on a major project at work, only to be overwhelmed by the sadness of loss. Again, these are all normal feelings. By coming to synagogue or joining a bereavement group, you can work through these emotions. By joining the community, you are never alone in your grief.

Yahrzeit

The anniversary of the day of death. It's customary for the mourner to attend services to say Kaddish on Shabbat during this first year. If one loses a parent, the custom is to attend minyan daily. On the evening of the Yahrzeit, we light a candle of remembrance that lasts twenty-four hours. It's a way of bringing light back into the world when all we see is darkness. The Yahrzeit is observed annually on the Hebrew date. You can recite Kaddish in our Daily Minyan as well as on the Shabbat closest to the date. It is also common to erect a memorial plaque in the synagogue or give tzedakah in your loved one's name. By giving back to your community you honor them and yourself, showing that you are never alone in your grief.

We created VBS CARES to help you through this first year of mourning. You will receive the next guide in about six months and again right before your Yahrzeit. Think of it as a way for us to check in with each other. Read the articles and poems, and use it as a time keeper that can help you ask, "How am I doing?" Just remember that we haven't forgotten about you, because we really do believe that you are never alone in your grief.

Blessings,
Rabbi Noah Zvi Farkas

RECOMMENDED READING

A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort

Dr. Ron Wolfson

Making Loss Matter

Rabbi David Wolpe

On Grief and Grieving

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross & David Kessler

To Begin Again

Rabbi Naomi Levy

How to Survive the Loss of a Love

Peter McWilliams, Harold H. Bloomfield, MD and Melba Colgrove, PhD

Mourning and Mitzvah: A Guided Journal for Walking the Mourner's Path through Grief to Healing

Rabbi Anne Brener, LCSW

Remembering with Love: Messages of Hope for the First Year of Grieving and Beyond

Elizabeth Levang, PhD

The Orphaned Adult

Alexander Levy

JEWISH TRADITIONS OF MOURNING

Fear not death, for we are all destined to die. We share it with all who ever lived and all who ever will. Cry for the dead, hide not your grief, do not restrain your mourning. But remember that endless sorrow is worse than death. When the dead are at rest, let their memory rest, and be consoled when a soul departs.

- From the Wisdom of Ben Sirach

TIPS FOR COPING WITH GRIEF AND LOSS

GET SUPPORT

The single most important factor in healing from loss is having the support of other people. Even if you aren't comfortable talking about your feelings under normal circumstances, it's important to express them when you're grieving. Sharing your loss makes the burden of grief easier to carry. Wherever the support comes from, accept it and do not grieve alone. Connecting to others will help you heal.

Finding support after a loss:

• **Turn to friends and family members.** Now is the time to lean on the people who care about you, even if you take pride in being strong and self-sufficient. Draw loved ones close rather than avoiding them, and accept the assistance that's offered. Often, people want to help but don't know how, so tell them what you need – whether it's a shoulder to cry on or help with funeral arrangements.

• **Draw comfort from your Judaism.** Embrace the comfort our mourning rituals can provide. Spiritual activities that are meaningful to you – such as praying, meditating, or going to synagogue – can offer solace. Take a class or do some learning. The Torah is the book of life, so learning in your loved one's honor is especially meaningful in our tradition. If you're questioning your faith in the wake of the loss, talk to a rabbi or others in your community.

• **Join a support group.** Grief can feel very lonely, even when you have loved ones around. Sharing your sorrow with others who have experienced similar losses can help. To find a bereavement support group in your area, contact local hospitals, hospices, funeral homes, and counseling centers.

• **Talk to a therapist or grief counselor.** If your grief feels like too much to bear, call a mental health professional with experience in grief counseling. An experienced therapist can help you work through intense emotions and overcome obstacles to your grieving.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

When you're grieving, it's more important than ever to take care of yourself. The stress of a major loss can quickly deplete your energy and emotional reserves. Looking after your physical and emotional needs will help you get through this difficult time.

• **Face your feelings.** You can try to suppress your grief, but you can't avoid it forever. In order to heal, you have to acknowledge the pain. Trying to avoid feelings of sadness and loss only prolongs the grieving process. Unresolved grief can also lead to complications such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and health problems.

• **Express your feelings in a tangible or creative way.** Write about your loss in a journal. If you've lost a loved one, write a letter saying the things you never got to say; make a scrapbook or photo album celebrating the person's life; or get involved in a cause or organization that was important to them.

• **Look after your physical health.** The mind and body are connected. When you feel good physically, you'll also feel better emotionally. Combat stress and fatigue by getting enough sleep, eating right, and exercising. Don't use alcohol or drugs to numb the pain of grief or lift your mood artificially.

• **Don't let anyone tell you how to feel, and don't tell yourself how to feel either.** Your grief is your own, and no one else can tell you when it's time to "move on" or "get over it." Let yourself feel whatever you feel without embarrassment or judgment. It's okay to be angry, to yell at the heavens, to cry or not to cry. It's also okay to laugh, to find moments of joy, and to let go when you're ready.

• **Plan ahead for grief "triggers."** Anniversaries, holidays, and milestones can reawaken memories and feelings. Be prepared for an emotional wallop, and know it's completely normal. If you're sharing a holiday or lifecycle event with other relatives, talk to them ahead of time about their expectations and agree on strategies to honor the person you loved.

Source: helpguide.org

LIFE AND DEATH

by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis [z"l]

What is left to be done after the dying is over?
After the earth has covered the grave
the casket lowered
the ribbon cut
the tears shed
the last kaddish recited
the farewells over
the closure formed?



But there is no final closure in death.
Life and death are locked in embrace.
So intimately intertwined that the "Kree-a"
of the cloth cannot tear them apart.
Something important remains intact.

When the dying is over,
a different kind of memory takes over.
Not the memory that is obituary.
Not the memory that records the past indiscriminately,
but an active memory that sifts through
the ashes of the past to retrieve isolated moments,
and that gives heart to the future.
That memory is an act of resurrection.
It raises up from oblivion the glories of forgotten years.

Even the memories of failure,
the recollections of frustration and regret, are precious.
Broken memories are like the tablets Moses shattered,
placed lovingly in the holy Ark of remembrance.
Memories are saved –
those immaterial, disembodied ghosts that endure.

What is left after death?
Pointers, ensigns, marking places
that raise us up to life and give us a changed heart,
perhaps a life lived differently,
better, wiser, stronger than before.
What is left after death? The life of the survivor.

HONORING YOUR LOVED ONE WITH A MEMORIAL PLAQUE

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

The 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 Orit Rappaport at 818-530-4014 or email orappaport@vbs.org.