

Healing Your Traumatized Heart: Seeking Safety, Understanding, and Peace

Part One

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Someone you love has died a sudden, traumatic death.

If you are in the early days of your grief journey, you are likely still feeling numbed by shock and disbelief. This is a normal and necessary step, for it is nature's way of protecting you from the full force of the loss all at once. You will embrace the reality, in doses and over time, as you are ready. If you have journeyed longer and further into the wilderness of your grief, you may be struggling with profound anger, despair, and other emotions. These feelings, too, are normal and necessary. In fact, whatever you are feeling, and no matter where you are in your grief journey, your feelings are not right or wrong—they simply are. Embracing them and expressing them are your tasks on the path that leads to healing.

You may have found that you are struggling with both the traumatic nature of the death and your grief over this overwhelming loss. For purposes of this article, trauma can be defined as an event of such intensity, brutality, or magnitude of horror that it would overwhelm any human being's capacity to cope. You have been traumatized, which is essentially a normal response to an extreme event.

SIDEBAR:

Trauma: An injury; something hurtful. The wounding of your emotions, your spirit, your beliefs about yourself and the world, your will to live, your dignity, your sense of security.

Naturally, traumatized mourners often find themselves replaying and reconsidering over and over the circumstances of the death. This is both normal and necessary. Such replay helps you begin to acknowledge the reality of the death and integrate it into your life. It is as if your mind needs to devote time and energy to comprehending the circumstances of the death before it can move on to confronting the fact that someone you love has died and will never be present to you again.

Post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, is a term used to describe the psychological condition that survivors of sudden, violent death sometimes experience. People with PTSD often have nightmares or scary thoughts about the terrible experience they or their loved one went through. They try to stay away from anything that reminds them of the frightening experience. They often feel angry and are unable to care about or trust other people. They are often on the lookout for danger and get very upset when something happens without warning. Their anxiety level is continually high. The more you learn about trauma and PTSD, the more you will have some sense of control at a time when you naturally feel out of control. Knowledge is one of the best antidotes to anxiety, fear and depression.

If you think you may be experiencing PTSD, talk to your family doctor or a compassionate grief counselor. You may need counseling and/or medication for a time to help you feel safer and cope with your day-to-day life. You will need to get help for your PTSD before you can deal with grief and mourning.

It may be helpful for you to know that your response to trauma and the potential onset of PTSD symptoms has more to do with the intensity and duration of the stressful event in your life than with your personality. Don't think you are "weak" because this traumatic event and its repercussions have overwhelmed your coping resources. Don't feel ashamed if you need professional help. Often it is in acknowledging our helplessness that we ultimately become helpful to ourselves.

But many of you are traumatized without having full-blown PTSD. You may have anxiety and anger. You may think about the circumstances of the death a lot. You may be in great pain. But if you are still

able to function in your daily life and interact lovingly with others, you may not have the actual disorder called PTSD. Still, you are traumatized and in need of special care and consideration, both from yourself and from others.

SIDEBAR:

Psychic numbing or acute aftershock:

Diminished or absent capacity to feel; a form of heightened shock that should be perceived as a healthy response to overwhelming stress. Provides insulation from self and the outside world. This is a normal response to an abnormal event.

The traumatic nature of the death and your thoughts and feelings about it will color every aspect of your grief. It is part of your grief. But it is not the totality of your grief. Other factors that contribute to your grief include the nature of the relationship you had with the person who died, your unique personality, your religious and cultural backgrounds, your gender, your age, your previous experiences with loss, as well as others. Your grief is a complicated blend of thoughts and emotions, most of which stem from your love for the person who died. Over time you will come to find that your grief is as much or more about the life than it is about the death.

Know this: If you are able to muster the courage to actively mourn, you will heal. And you will eventually love and live again. Remember, you are not alone, and there are no rewards for speed. Millions of others have not only survived the traumatic death of a loved one, they've chosen to truly live. Find ways to reach out to these people. Find ways to share your experience. Find ways to make connections.

In Part Two of this article, I will present several ideas to help you mourn and journey toward healing. In the meantime, God bless you. I hope we meet one day.

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., C.T. is an internationally noted author, educator, and grief counselor. 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.

*Recipient of the Association of Death Education and Counseling's Death Educator Award, Alan is committed to helping people mourn well so they can live well and love well. Among his many books on healing in grief are *Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart* and *Healing Your Traumatized Heart: 100 Practical Ideas After Someone You Love Dies a Sudden, Violent Death*. For more information on Dr. Wolfelt and his books and seminars, visit www.centerforloss.com.*

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Part Two

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In Part One, I introduced the concept of traumatic grief and its natural overlap with the condition known as PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder. While you may not be suffering from full-blown PTSD, the nature of your loss is still traumatic and you are deserving of special care and attention, from yourself as well as others.

I also said that if you are able to muster the courage to actively mourn, you will eventually integrate this profound loss into your life, all the time realizing you have been forever transformed and changed by it. And, honoring your need to mourn will eventually allow you to love and live again.

This article presents several self-care suggestions for the early weeks and months of your grief. In later articles I will share additional mourning tips and self-care principles.

Seek safety and comfort

After a traumatic experience, it's natural to feel vulnerable, unsafe and anxious. Your nervous system is telling your brain that the world isn't a safe place right now. Something violent has happened and, you naturally think, it could happen again.

To overcome your trauma, you must locate yourself among people and in places that make you feel safe. If this means moving in with a friend or relative temporarily, that's OK. If this means avoiding certain places or people, that's OK, too.

What calms and comforts you? Taking a walk? Cuddling with someone you love? Hugging your pet? Relaxing in the tub? Yoga or meditation or prayer? Identify activities that soothe you and turn to them when your anxiety is high.

You will not be able to mourn if you feel unsafe or overly anxious. Seek safety and comfort first, then you can begin to slowly embrace your grief.

Allow for numbness.

Feelings of shock, numbness and disbelief are nature's way of temporarily protecting us from the full reality of a sudden, violent death. They help us survive our early grief. We often think, "I will wake up and this will not have happened." Mourning can feel like being in a dream. Your emotions simply need time to catch up with what your mind has been told.

Trauma loss often goes beyond what we consider "normal" shock. In fact, you may experience what is called "psychic numbing"—the deadening or shutting off of emotions. Your sense that "this isn't happening to me" may persist for months, sometimes even years. Don't set rigid expectations for yourself and your ability to function "normally" in the world around you.

Think of shock and numbness as a bandage that your psyche has placed over your wound. The bandage protects the wound until it has become less open and raw. Only after healing has begun and a scab forms is the bandage removed and the wound openly exposed to the world.

Consider yourself in "emotional intensive care."

Something catastrophic has happened in your life. Something assaulting to the very core of your being. Something excruciatingly painful. Your spirit has been deeply injured. Just as your body cannot

be expected to recover immediately from a brutal attack, neither can your psyche.

Imagine that you've suffered a severe physical injury and are in your hospital's intensive care unit. Your friends and family surround you with their presence and love. The medical staff attends to you constantly. Your body rests and recovers.

This is the kind of care you need and deserve right now. The blow you have suffered is no less devastating than this imagined physical injury. Allow others to take care of you. Ask for their help. Give yourself as much resting time as possible. Take time off work. Let household chores slide. In the early weeks and months after the death, don't expect—indeed, don't try—to carry on with your normal routine.

Be aware that your grief affects your body, heart, mind, social self, and spirit.

Grief is physically demanding. This is especially true with traumatic grief. Your body responds to the stress of the encounter and the immune system can weaken. You may be more susceptible to illness and physical discomforts. You may also feel lethargic, weak or highly fatigued. You may not be sleeping well and you may have no appetite. Your stomach may hurt. Your chest may ache.

The emotional toll of grief is complex and painful. You may feel many different feelings, and those feelings can shift and blur over time.

Your abilities to think, reason, and remember will likely be affected by your traumatic grief, as well, especially in the early weeks and months.

Bereavement also naturally results in social discomfort. Friends and family may withdraw from you, leaving you isolated and unsupported.

You may ask yourself, "Why go on living?" "Will my life have meaning now?" "Where is God in this?" Spiritual questions such as these are natural and necessary but also draining.

Basically, your grief may affect every aspect of your life. Nothing may feel "normal" right now. If this is true for you, don't be alarmed. Just trust that in time, you will find peace and comfort again.

Until next time, remember above all to practice self-compassion. Care for yourself "with passion" and seek out others who will help care for you and listen to you without judgment.

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