

Understanding Your Six Needs of Mourning for Teens

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FROM THE HEALING YOUR GRIEVING HEART JOURNAL FOR TEENS



All of us, whether we are a child, a teen, or an adult, have six central needs or “yield signs” to confront when someone in our life dies.

Keep in mind that you will probably jump around in a random way while working on these six needs of mourning. Sometimes you will be working on more than one need at a time. Your awareness of these needs, however, will give you a great way to feel like you can do something to help yourself heal. While you have probably heard the saying “Time heals all wounds,” actually, only by working on these needs will your wounds heal!

NEED 1: ACKNOWLEDGE THE REALITY OF THE DEATH
Someone you love has died and can never come back. That’s a really hard thing to accept, but it’s true. It may take you weeks, even months, to really accept the fact that this person is gone. It’s normal for it to take that long.

First you’ll come to accept the death intellectually, with your head. Only over time will you come to fully accept it with your heart. Now and then, especially at first, you may push away or deny the reality to yourself. That’s also normal. You’ll accept the reality, bit by bit, as you’re ready.

NEED 2: LET YOURSELF FEEL THE PAIN OF THE LOSS
You need to let yourself feel the pain of your loss. You need to feel it before you can heal it. Of course, it’s easier to avoid, repress, deny, or push away the pain of grief than it is to confront it. The problem is, confronting it is what tames it. If you don’t confront it, it will lurk forever in your heart and soul.

You will probably need to “dose” yourself with your painful thoughts and feelings. In other words, you’ll need to let just a little in at a time. If you were to try to allow in all the pain at once, you couldn’t survive.

NEED 3: REMEMBER THE PERSON WHO DIED
When someone you love dies, that person lives on in you through memory. To reconcile your loss, you need to actively remember the person who died and commemorate the life that was lived. Talk about the person who died. Use his name. Look at pictures of her. Never let anyone try to take away your memories in a misguided attempt to save you from pain. You

need to remember, not to forget. Remembering the past makes hoping for the future possible.

Memories are not always pleasant. If that applies to you, this need can be very hard. Explore any painful memories with an adult you trust. You can also explore these kinds of thoughts and feelings in a private journal.

NEED 4: DEVELOP A NEW SELF-IDENTITY

The person who died was part of who you are. Part of your identity came from this person. Let’s say your best friend was Chris and she died. You probably thought of yourself not only as a son or daughter, a sibling, and a student, but also as “Chris’s best friend.” Others thought of you in this way too.

The way you defined yourself and the way society defines you has changed. Now you need to readjust your self-identity, to re-anchor yourself. This is really hard, especially if the person who died played a big part in your life.

NEED 5: SEARCH FOR MEANING

When someone we love dies, we naturally question the meaning and purpose of life and death. Why do people die? Why did this person have to die? What happens to people after they die? Why am I still alive? What’s life for? This may be the first time in your life that you’ve really thought about these questions. And questions just don’t get any harder than these.

Nobody really knows all the answers to these kinds of questions, not even grown-ups. But it’s OK to ask adults you care about and trust what they think. Some adults have lived enough, loved enough, experienced enough, and pondered enough to have some pretty good ideas. Hearing their philosophies might help you right now. Telling them what you think might help, too. Also, some of your best friends might be good listeners to your questions. Hearing what they think and feel might help you not feel so alone with these questions. Writing out what you think and feel in your own journal can also help.

NEED 6: LET OTHERS HELP YOU, NOW AND ALWAYS

When you’re a teenager, it’s natural to want adults to keep out of your face. You’re getting old enough now that you don’t need or want their help with

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every little thing, right? I agree with you. Growing up means finding your own way and doing things on your own.

But grief isn't an "on your own" kind of deal.

It's probably the hardest work anyone ever has to do. And you just can't do it all on your own. Talk to adults who care about you. If you don't want to talk to them, at least let them talk to you. Or hang out with them without talking. Talk to your friends, instead. Join a support group. E-mail your thoughts and feelings to someone you don't have to look at every day.

RECONCILING YOUR GRIEF

As you know by now, grief and mourning are powerful experiences. So is your ability to help yourself heal. In doing the work of mourning, you are moving toward your healing.

But it's important to remember that everyone grieves in different ways and different times. There is no set timetable for grief. You may feel that you're healing six months, a year, or two years after losing someone special. Then one day you might feel incredibly sad or lonely because you miss that person so very much. Know that this is normal!

Everyone is changed by the experience of grief—children, teens like you, and yes, even adults. You are changed. The death of someone loved alters your life forever. The issue is not that you will never be happy again. It is simply that you will never be exactly the same as you were before the death.

Please remember that healing in grief is often a two-steps-forward, one-step-back process. You will never completely "get over" the death, but you will, over time and with the support of others, learn to reconcile yourself to it.

Healing is not a perfect state of "recovery" or "resolution." You can and probably will have pangs of grief years after the death. That revisiting of painful feelings doesn't mean anything is wrong with you. Healing does not mean forgetting.

In exploring what your eventual healing goal will and can be, consider using the term "reconciliation." I believe this term is more expressive of what occurs as you work to integrate the new reality of moving forward with your life without the physical presence of the person who died.

If you do the hard work of mourning, you can and will experience reconciliation, which consists of a renewed sense of energy and confidence; an ability to acknowledge the full reality of the death; the capacity to enjoy experiences in life that are normally enjoyable; the ability to organize and plan your life toward the future, while still remembering your past; the awareness that you have allowed yourself to fully grieve and mourn, and you have survived; the ability to love and be loved; and the capacity to get to know new parts of yourself that you have discovered in your grief journey.

Yes, if you keep embracing your grief and sharing it outside yourself, you can and will come to this reconciliation. As you do this work, your painful thoughts and feelings will soften and grow less frequent. Instead of being ever-present, sharp, and stinging, they will be occasional and more dull and mellow.

My Grief Rights: Ten Healing Rights for Grieving Teens

By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.



Someone you love has died. You are probably having many hurtful and scary thoughts and feelings right now. Together those thoughts and feelings are called *grief*, which is a normal (though really difficult) thing everyone goes through after someone they love has died.

The following ten rights will help you understand your grief and eventually feel better about life again. Use the ideas that make sense to you. Post this list on your refrigerator or on your bedroom door or wall. Re-reading it often will help you stay on track as you move toward healing from your loss. You might also ask the adults in your life to read this list so they will remember to help you in the best way they can.

- 1. I have the right to have my own unique feelings about the death.** I may feel mad, sad, or lonely. I may feel scared or relieved. I may feel numb or sometimes not anything at all. No one will feel exactly like I do.
- 2. I have the right to talk about my grief whenever I feel like talking.** When I need to talk, I will find someone who will listen to me and love me. When I don't want to talk about it, that's OK, too.
- 3. I have the right to show my feelings of grief in my own way.** When they are hurting, some kids like to play so they'll feel better for a while. I can play or laugh, too. I might also get mad and scream. This does not mean I am bad; it just means I have scary feelings that I need help with.
- 4. I have the right to need other people to help me with my grief, especially adults who care about me.** Mostly I need them to pay attention to what I am feeling and saying and to love me no matter what.
- 5. I have the right to get upset about normal, everyday problems.** I might feel grumpy and have trouble getting along with others sometimes.
- 6. I have the right to have "griefbursts."** Griefbursts are sudden, unexpected feelings of sadness that just hit me sometimes—even long after the death. These feelings can be very strong and even scary. When this happens, I might feel afraid to be alone.
- 7. I have the right to use my beliefs about my god to help me deal with my feelings of grief.** Praying might make me feel better and somehow closer to the person who died.
- 8. I have the right to try to figure out why the person I loved died.** But it's OK if I don't find an answer. "Why" questions about life and death are the hardest questions in the world.
- 9. I have the right to think and talk about my memories of the person who died.** Sometimes those memories will be happy and sometimes they might be sad. Either way, these memories help me keep alive my love for the person who died.
- 10. I have the right to move toward and feel my grief and, over time, to heal.** I'll go on to live a happy life, but the life and death of the person who died will always be a part of me. I'll always miss this special person.