

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

Part Two

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.



In the last issue, 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, 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.

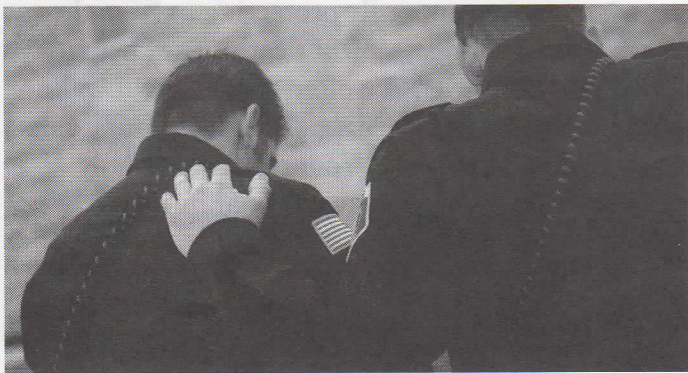
Think of shock and numbness as a bandage that your psyche has placed over your wound. The bandage protects the wound until it has become less open and raw. Only after healing has begun and a scab forms is the bandage removed and the wound openly exposed to the world.

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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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, 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.

Need someone to talk to? Peer relationships are best cultivated at one of the C.O.P.S. Hands-On Programs or at C.O.P.S. National Police Survivors' Conference during National Police Week in D.C.

To learn more about what C.O.P.S. Hands-On Programs are all about visit page 23 of this newsletter.

You can also reach out to your local C.O.P.S. Chapter, your Regional Trustee or the C.O.P.S. National Office about seeking additional counseling. Help is only a phone call away.