

# Healing Grief



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Victor M. Parachin



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# Contents

Introduction	1
STEP ONE <i>Know What to Expect</i>	5
STEP TWO <i>Put Your Pain into Words</i>	11
STEP THREE <i>Let Friends Be Your Lifeline</i>	15
STEP FOUR <i>Be Aware of “Miserable Comforters”</i>	19
STEP FIVE <i>Commit to Overcoming</i>	25
STEP SIX <i>Tap into Your Faith</i>	31
STEP SEVEN <i>Get Physical</i>	37
STEP EIGHT <i>Become Informed</i>	41

STEP NINE	
<i>Join a Support Group</i>	45
STEP TEN	
<i>Be Patient</i>	49
APPENDIX 1	
<i>Especially for Men: Eight Steps Men     Can Take to Heal from the Wound of Grief</i>	52
APPENDIX 2	
<i>Nine Common Myths and Realities     about Grief</i>	59
APPENDIX 3	
<i>Some Commonsense Answers about Grief</i>	67
Notes	73

## Introduction

Death is a fact of life.

Sooner or later each one of us will lose, to death, someone we love, value, and hold dear. That loss will plunge us into mourning. While the pain of bereavement is as intense as any pain we will ever experience, we do have a choice in how we respond to the loss. We can experience a good mourning or we can experience a bad mourning. We can experience healing grief or remain frozen in time, stuck in a place of pain. The choice is ours. Sadly, there are some whose experience with loss results in bad mourning. They feel forever the oppressive hand of grief. Unable to move on, they remain riveted in one place, irrevocably attached to their disappointment, anger, remorse, regret, resentment, or guilt—or some combination of these. They are permanently doubled over from the blow of grief.

On the other hand, there are those—and they are the vast majority of griever—who experience good mourning. They remember forever the one who has died, but come to terms with the loss and find new ways of living without the loved one. Those who experience good mourning find themselves enlarged in heart, spirit, and mind. For them, mourning becomes

the raw material out of which they forge a new life and deepen their personality, becoming more aware, more compassionate, more loving, more gentle, more insightful, and more wise.

This is a book about healing grief. You have picked up this book because you have had a loss to death and because you want to heal, to recover, to move forward. Today the choice is yours—a good mourning or a bad mourning, healing or hurting. Resolve now that you *will* move through grief, that you will eventually arrive in a better place despite the magnitude of your loss.

Perhaps this story can be instructive. During World War II the British had a small military force in Singapore. When it became clear that the Japanese had military superiority and could easily take over Singapore, the British surrendered. All British military became Japanese prisoners of war (POWs). One officer, however, entertained the idea of slipping out of the city to take his chances in the jungle.

However, he had two conflicting sources of information about life in the Malaysian jungle. Some people told him that the jungle was an extremely dangerous place filled with wild animals, deadly snakes, and fruit so poisonous that one bite of it would result in instant death. Yet others told the officer that the jungle was a most hospitable place. It offered ample fresh water and a wide variety of delicious wild fruit. The jungle was a safe place and could sustain human life indefinitely, they said.



After considering both viewpoints, the officer decided not to become a POW, choosing to take his chances in the jungle. He did survive and eventually made his way to friendly forces who reunited him with the British military. However, he came to his own unique conclusion about the jungle. The jungle, he told friends, was neutral. It was not out to destroy him nor to support him. *To survive he had to make wise use of the environment around him.*

That officer's experience sheds light on the journey through grief. Life is not out to destroy us nor to simply support us. *Life is neutral!* Surviving the burden of loss means we have to make wise use of the environment around us. What follows in this small book are ten steps you can take to experience healing grief.

## STEP ONE



HEALING GRIEF

# Know What to Expect

Expect the unexpected.

The loss of a loved one throws people into an emotional jungle. The psychological geography is unknown, unfamiliar, and uncomfortable. You may be amazed and frightened by the powerful and sometimes conflicting emotions that will roll over you in the days and weeks and months following a death. Sometimes simply knowing the roller coaster emotions that can come is helpful in alleviating some of the stress. Following are some of the most common symptoms that people experience as a part of grief. As you read them, keep in mind that you may not experience all the symptoms, nor do they progress in any particular order. Because every loss is unique, every mourner grieves in his or her own unique way.

*Shock and denial—“This can’t be happening to me!”*

The initial information that a death has occurred is shocking and numbing. The full impact of the tragedy will take some time to be realized. This is God’s way of protecting us from the immediate and full impact of the loss. In a way, shock and numbness give us space and time to gradually absorb the magnitude of the loss.

*Loneliness and vulnerability*—“*I didn’t know loneliness could hurt so much.*” When the funeral service is over, family and friends leave us and return to their own daily activities. It is at that time that loneliness and feelings of vulnerability overwhelm us. One woman, who lost a child, recalls: “My daughter’s death is the loneliest of all experiences I have ever had. I had no idea that loneliness could be so deep and intense. I also find myself hovering over the other two children, worrying about every little detail. One death in the family has left me feeling so very vulnerable.”

*Tears and weeping*—“*I just can’t stop crying.*” People who have never cried throughout their adult lives suddenly find themselves weeping at any time. Be reassured that tears are a normal and healthy response to death. Tears are nature’s “safety valves.” They cleanse the body of toxins that build up from stress, and provide an important release of tension.

*Pain and hurt*—“*I don’t think I can take any more!*” The loss of a loved one conspires with other emotions to create deep psychological pain. In her book *Barbara Bush: A Memoir*, the former first lady includes a chapter on her daughter Robin, who died from leukemia at three years of age. Mrs. Bush writes that the funeral started “the most painful period of adjusting to life after Robin. We (she and her husband George) wakened night after night in great physical pain—it hurt that much.”<sup>1</sup> Although it may seem unbearable, the pain will lessen in intensity over time.

*Panic and anxiety*—“*What am I going to do?*” A death brings with it a great many changes. Income may be reduced, and financial instability can become a daily struggle. You may become a single parent having to juggle your work, your children, their schooling, and extra activities without a partner’s help. Or you may become a widow or widower finding that your circle of friends has changed, with some unable to relate to you the way they did when you were part of a couple. All this creates feelings of anxiety and even panic at times.

*Guilt and regret*—“*I should have done more.*” Like many grievors, you may find yourself second-guessing your words and actions: *If only I had been there. If only I hadn’t said that. If only I had called.* This way of thinking results in feelings of guilt and regret. Challenge your thinking, because a closer examination will usually reveal that you did your best under the circumstances.

*Anger and frustration*—“*How could she do this to me?*” One man, whose wife died from cancer at thirty-five years of age, found himself angry with her after the death. “She had smoked for nearly twenty years. Even though she was well aware of the studies about the dangers of smoking, she never quit. There are times when I become angry that she let this happen to herself and to me!” You too may find yourself angry and frustrated—at the person who died, at a member of the medical staff, or at some insensitive family member or friend. A death triggers bouts of anger from time to time.

*Depression and sadness*—“*Will life ever be worth living again?*” Although depression is not a welcome experience, it is a normal one to have following a death. It is also a beneficial one. In his book *Death and Grief: A Guide For Clergy*, Alan D. Wolfelt notes: “Depression is nature’s way of allowing for a time-out while one works to heal the wounds of grief. Depression shuts down the physiological system and prevents major organ systems from being damaged.”<sup>2</sup>

*Recovery and readjustment*—“*Knowing I am adjusting to life again would please my loved one.*” The time will come when you will be free of pain and depression over the loss of a loved one. Rather than bringing you to the verge of tears, memories of your loved one will bring you a smile. In his book *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, J. William Worden writes:

One benchmark of a completed grief reaction is when the person is able to think of the deceased without pain. There is always a sense of sadness when you think of someone you have loved and lost, but it is a different kind of sadness—it lacks the wrenching quality it previously had. One can think of the deceased without physical manifestations such as intense crying or feeling a tightness in the chest.<sup>3</sup>