Although many of us are able to speak frankly about death, we still have a lot to learn about dealing wisely with its aftermath: grief, the natural reaction to loss of a loved one.

Relatively few of us know what to say or do that can be truly helpful to a relative, friend or acquaintance who is grieving. In fact, relatively few who have suffered a painful loss know how to be most helpful to themselves.

Two new books by psychotherapists who have worked extensively in the field of loss and grief are replete with stories and guidance that can help both those in mourning and the people they encounter avoid many of the common pitfalls and misunderstandings associated with grief. Both books attempt to correct false assumptions about how and how long grief might be experienced.

One book, "It’s OK That You’re Not OK," by Megan Devine of Portland, Ore., has the telling subtitle “Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn’t Understand.” It grew out of the tragic loss of her beloved
partner, who drowned at age 39 while the couple was on vacation. The other book, especially illuminating in its coverage of how people cope with different kinds of losses, is “Grief Works: Stories of Life, Death and Surviving,” by Julia Samuel, who works with bereaved families both in private practice and at England’s National Health Service, at St. Mary’s hospital, Paddington.

The books share a most telling message: As Ms. Samuel put it, “There is no right or wrong in grief; we need to accept whatever form it takes, both in ourselves and in others.” Recognizing loss as a universal experience, Ms. Devine hopes that “if we can start to understand the true nature of grief, we can have a more helpful, loving, supportive culture.”

Both authors emphasize that grief is not a problem to be solved or resolved. Rather, it’s a process to be tended and lived through in whatever form and however long it may take.

“The process cannot be hurried by friends and family,” however well meaning their desire to relieve the griever’s anguish, Ms. Samuel wrote, “Recovery and adjustment can take much longer than most people realize. We need to accept whatever form it takes, both in ourselves and in others.”

We can all benefit from learning how to respond to grief in ways that don’t prolong, intensify or dismiss the pain. Likewise, those trying to help need to know that grief cannot be fit into a preordained time frame or form of expression. Too often people who experience a loss are disparaged because their mourning persists longer than others think reasonable or because they remain self-contained and seem not to mourn at all.

I imagine, for example, that some adults thought my stoical response to my mother’s premature death when I was 16 was “unnatural.” In truth, after tending to her for a year as she suffered through an unstoppable cancer, her death was a relief. It took a year for me to shed my armor and openly mourn the incalculable loss. But 60 years later, I still treasure her most important legacy: To live each day as if it could be my last but with an eye on the future in case it’s not.

Likewise, I was relieved when my husband’s suffering ended six weeks after diagnosis of an incurable cancer. Though I missed him terribly, I seemed to go on with my life as if little had changed. Few outside of the immediate family knew that I was honoring his dying wish that I continue to live fully for my own sake and that of our children and grandchildren.

Just as we all love others in our own unique ways, so do we mourn their loss in ways that cannot be fit into a single mold or even a dozen different molds. Last month, James G. Robinson, director of global analytics for The New York Times, described a 37-day, 6,150-mile therapeutic road trip he took with his family following the death of his 5-year-old son, collecting commemorative objects along the way and giving each member of the family a chance to express anger and sadness about the untimely loss.

Ms. Devine maintains that most grief support offered by professionals and others takes the wrong approach by encouraging mourners to move through the pain. While family and friends naturally want you to feel better, “pain that is not allowed to be spoken or expressed turns in on itself, and creates more problems,” she wrote. “Unacknowledged and unheard pain doesn’t go away. The way to survive grief is by allowing pain to exist, not in trying to cover it up or rush through it.”

As a bereaved mother told Ms. Samuel, “You never ‘get over it,’ you ‘get on with it,’ and you never ‘move on,’ but you ‘move forward.’”

Ms. Devine agrees that being “encouraged to ‘get over it’ is one of the biggest causes of suffering inside grief.” Rather than trying to “cure” pain, the goal should be to minimize suffering, which she said “comes when we feel dismissed or unsupported in our pain, with being told there is something wrong with what you feel.”

She explains that pain cannot be “fixed,” that companionship, not correction, is the best way to deal with grief. She encourages those who want to be helpful to “bear witness,” to offer friendship without probing questions or unsolicited advice, help if it is needed and wanted, and a listening ear no matter how often mourners wish to tell their story.
To those who grieve, she suggests finding a nondestructive way to express it. “If you can’t tell your story to another human, find another way: journal, paint, make your grief into a graphic novel with a very dark story line. Or go out to the woods and tell the trees. It is an immense relief to be able to tell your story without someone trying to fix it.”

She also suggests keeping a journal that records situations that either intensify or relieve suffering. “Are there times you feel more stable, more grounded, more able to breathe inside your loss? Does anything — a person, a place, an activity — add to your energy bank account? Conversely, are there activities or environments that absolutely make things worse?”

Whenever possible, to decrease suffering choose to engage in things that help and avoid those that don’t.

Embracing Who We Are Now... After Loss

Still Standing Magazine

One of the most shocking realizations, after losing a child, is the jarring reality of feeling uncomfortable in your own skin. Nothing seems to make sense, or even feel familiar. As if it isn’t enough to lose what is most sacred and precious to us, we lose ourselves in the process. Activities or thoughts that once brought us joy don’t seem to matter anymore. Nothing is the same. Our relationships with those around us change. Things taste different, smell different, feel differently...or don’t feel at all, as a blanket of numbness settles over us, turning the world gray for a time. At first, there is shock and pain, and waves of grief. Then, the world turns gray.

At Sufficient Grace Ministries, so many mothers ask us, will I ever feel normal again? It was the only time I called a support group leader during my own grief walk, the desperate moment I needed to hear words spoken from a mother who had walked through this wilderness, reassuring that...

“Yes, life was different. I was different. But, someday, I would feel normal again...a new normal.”

A new normal...what is that? And, how long until I get there? And, will I be lost forever? Will I lose me too? And, do I even care?

Those are the natural wonderings through season of grief I like to call “stumbling through the wilderness awhile”.

Finding your way on a path no one would ever ask for, discovering someone you’ve never known is now wearing your skin...well, it takes some time, and grace, and grit. There is a temptation to just slip away, to live in the depths of the pit of despair, ignoring the light...because sometimes, only the darkness feels real...normal. For a time, it seems as if we have to cling to the sorrow for comfort, as if letting go of it for a moment means we’ve forgotten. Or without it, we may feel nothing at all. That revelation is frightening, especially when you don’t know who you are anymore.

There seem to be seasons in our grief walk, when at first, we want to be surrounded by people who understand our loss, people who are walking with us in this wilderness. We long to hear something that resonates, something that makes sense to our new, broken selves. We may emerge from that season longing for a purpose...some beauty to be born from our pain. We may even pour ourselves into seeking a purpose...pouring out all our grief...and all our desperation to birth something beautiful and lasting...to mother something tangible this side of heaven. That season may or may not remain, becoming part of our new life. Sometimes, it is a passing season. And, that’s ok.
We are often hesitant when the next season ebbs and flows into our lives, as the sea of grief does so well. The next season that I’ve experienced and watched many mothers ponder through, is the desire to live life in the land of the living again...in our new skin. To explore who we are now. And, maybe even to walk away from the heaviness of being surrounded by loss each day. It is a difficult tearing away, as we’ve found some peace and hope and comfort in this unlikely camaraderie...walking with others who limp in the brokenness. We love these women like family...and we are used to the heavy cloak of sorrow. What will life look like if we step away from the haven? Are we forgetting our babies? Forsaking our dear friends? Moving on? Letting go? As if we are somehow betraying our babies, ourselves, our bereaved sisters to just want to learn to live again.

No. While we will heal and joy will be restored in our lives, we are forever changed. Our very personality may even change. And, we will never get over losing our children. Not that we wallow in grief forever. Not that we will not be fully healed and complete. We will, but we will have a missing place in our hearts until we reach heaven’s welcoming gates. A place where a much loved, dearly cherished, longed for and dreamed about life once lived. Now that life lives on in heaven...the place that we are homesick for, at times. Our children will forever be part of the tapestry of our lives...they are part of who we are. Please understand that. We can no more deny them than we could our children who walk this earth with us.

So, we tentatively tiptoe back into a life reshaped, redefined, forever changed. It is frightening, and quite honestly at times, exhilarating...learning to live and love and breathe and notice the world around us again through changed eyes...as if seeing for the first time. And even filled with precious gifts...or it can be, if we’re brave enough to lean into the reshaping, to even one day...when the time is right...embrace the new pieces of us that emerge and form together into something of great beauty. Something tattered and worn with the battering of great loss and grief, polished around the rough places by disillusionment with everything we thought we could once rely on as truth.

Seventeen years after the loss of my identical twin daughters, Faith and Grace, and nearly 16 years after the loss of my newborn son, Thomas, I feel myself embracing a new reality again. As I walk with more and more families through loss, supporting them as a birth and bereavement doula, walking beside them in the grief wilderness...I feel a new awakening in recent years. A rebellion of sorts...a rebellion of the molds we think we need to squeeze ourselves into as mothers...as women. A rebellion against the idea that grief and healing need to look a certain way. A grace rebellion, of sorts...as I see the incredible need for grace for ourselves...for others stumbling along with us...and even for those broken souls who do not understand us at all. In the course of these years, I’ve come to surrender some of my ideas of what life should like...first gasping for air in this tumultuous sea, then learning to swim, leaving the water for awhile to sit on the beach, then returning with first tentative steps to throw a life raft to a new swimmer...then re-entering grief’s sea, willingly to swim alongside another floundering soul. Sometimes even dancing for awhile on top of the water...held by the One who covers with grace. Fiercely, rebelliously choosing to be there. Fully, beautifully, with all the graceful abandon laid on my mother-heart, embracing the beautiful destiny of being the mother of not only my children on earth, but those who walk in heaven.

That picture may look different for everyone. But, this...this has been my journey to embracing life in this new skin. I believe it takes time to walk there awhile in a wilderness, but know this...there is a way...a time...a season when you will be free to hope again, to laugh without guilt, to feel something that isn’t so gray as the world finds color again. When it happens, don’t be afraid. Take some time to learn to dance there, to embrace your inner “grace rebel” and just be beautiful, amazing you. If I’m truly honest, I like this me better now than the me I thought I lost.
Make plans to attend the National Gathering Conference in 2019!

Join us for a weekend of inspirational speakers, informative workshops on a variety of grief topics and special ceremonies to honor and remember our children. Spend time with fellow bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents.

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NATIONAL GATHERING 2019

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What to Do if You Are Grieving
by Heather Bass

Many people can feel rudderless during the grieving process, not only because they are experiencing new and challenging emotions, but also because there is no rulebook for how to act or feel. Although there is no one way to feel, there are resources to help people move forward.

1 SUPPORT

- Instead of trying to be alone, seek out support from friends and family. If you feel a tendency toward social isolation, identify one or two people you feel comfortable around even when you aren’t feeling well, and try to spend time with them.
- Seek support from a grief counselor or therapist. Professionals can help you understand what you are experiencing and give advice on coping with your feelings.
- Look for support groups for people going through similar events. Camaraderie is integral to validating your own experience instead of feeling alone in it.

2 SELF CARE

- Prioritize eating and sleeping. Sometimes grief is so consuming that we forget the importance of these most basic acts.
- Make time for physical exercise. Whatever your fitness level, try to get outdoors and spend time in nature. Exercise releases endorphins and clears the mind. Nature has an incredible way of helping us feel centered and in touch with something larger than ourselves.
- It may seem silly at this time but pamper your body. Schedule regular massages, hair treatments or pedicures. Not only is it important to remind yourself of what it feels like to be cared for and to feel good physically, but body treatment helps process emotions so they can be released through the body.

3 SIGNIFICANT ACTIVITIES

- Write a list of things you love to do. In periods of grief people often feel scattered and forget what activities bring them joy.
- Prioritize expressive activities such as art projects, crafts or woodworking. It can be therapeutic to create something new and beautiful at a time of loss, whether it is a painting, an old car you are repairing or something else.
- Consult friends and therapists before returning to work. Eventually it will be very healthy for you to reengage in your previous behaviors to keep your mind active and your sense of self-worth strong.

An Alphabet of Grief by Kristin Meekhof

An A to Z guide designed for those who lament.

A stands for Absorb: It took me several months to realize that my grief had burrowed itself deep within my body. I thought it was pretty audacious of grief to not only rip through my world, but then to take up residence within my body and cause physical discomfort. This felt unfair. Sometimes the bereaved experience broken heart syndrome or panic attacks or migraines. For myself, deliberate body work including yoga, meditation, running and breath work helped me mitigate the problems.

B stands for Blind spot: Unfortunately, we do not have panoramic vision. Our visual acuity (literally and figuratively) is limited and grief can restrict it even more. The bereaved often can't perceive what others see as far and this can impact their decisions. For myself, at times, grief took out the color in the world, and I saw things very much in black- and- white.
C stands for Core: Grief hits the very core of your being and completely obliterates your sense of self. Without a strong core, us mortals tend to sway to the slightest winds. This means the bereaved don't feel strong to make decisions both short-term and long-terms. It means while at the market, the bereaved pause to rethink what groceries to purchase. It means they consistently feel off balance and finding an equilibrium becomes a daily painful task. It also means grief can rob them of daily energy and self-esteem. This lack of confidence that comes with healthy self-esteem makes decisions seems like inordinate challenges. In other words, the bereaved feel others and the world around them is unreliable.

D stands for Defeat: No matter how the death happened there is likely a sense of defeat. Perhaps a literal battle with alcohol or depression or cancer ended. Or maybe it was a death so abrupt and tragic it leaves even the most stoic teary-eyed. No one wants to tell the bereaved this but death does damage. For the bereaved it is like death leaves them alone in a very dark room and upon exit they are changed. One can't help but be changed by this experience. It doesn't mean that the damage is permanent but for a while, the bereaved know and feel something severed their heart and there stands that feeling of defeat.

E stands for Eager: Often the bereaved are eager for a distraction, and then once experiencing one rather it be a movie or a weekend away with friends they want to crawl back into their shell. They are eager to get back to the familiar routine only to discover that great sorrow has replaced the former schedule.

F stands for Fear: C.S. Lewis famously wrote, "No one ever told me grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid." We are each on a journey and post loss, fear often seems to be constant companion. Some miles are easier to travel than others and there are times the bereaved seems to be coasting along only to be ambushed by fear. And suddenly all the fears named and unnamed wash over the bereaved like a tsunami. Along the way, though it is possible to find companions both in word and in deed who will help get the bereaved across the icy spots.

G stands for Goodness: Despite being in a new world, I found goodness still exists. Certainly, there were times of hopelessness that I tasted, but there were unlikely people who were unafraid of my sadness and sat next to me. I call them "unlikely" in the sense that they didn't have a reason to extend themselves to me. They weren't paid professionals or weren't part of my family. These people had a way of coming to me in the realest way. Their repeated kindness and goodness were forces that showed me love can hold us when we are suffering.

H stands for Healing: The multiple fractures that death creates are real, severe and deep. However, I know that healing is possible. It isn't fast, but when I learned that in the midst of terrible sorrow that goodness still exists, healing began to take root. And slowly, I began to see that the world still had things to offer me -- not in the overly materialistic way, but in things like a friend's letter, a long-forgotten photograph of my beloved sent to me from afar, a candle lit at a New York City cathedral or an early morning meditation. And upon these moments of awakening I felt there was joy still calling me to be witness to it.

I stands for Identity: The bereaved have a new identity as a surviving partner, spouse, parent, sibling. This new identity is ill-fitting and awkward. And yet, I know that we are more than our identities. We are more than our deepest mistakes and losses. Our identity is more than any type of status the secular world may label us with.

J stands for Joy: After my husband died, I didn't realize joy wasn't killed, but instead was still waiting for me to witness to its gifts — both small and large. And the longer I clung to my fears the more I unknowingly kept blocking joy. Joy verges on sweaty palms, wrestles fear aside and ushers even the most skeptical into the light. And without my consent, I found it calling me back into the sun.

K stands for Kindness: Often the bereaved have this amazing ability to send themselves on the most excruciating guilt trip with the Resentment triplets named Shoulda’, Coulda’, Woulda’ as their guides. If you are in lament, listen to how you speak to yourself. Be kind to yourself in speech and in action.

L stands for Leaving room for the unexpected: Leave room in your day for the unexpected rather it be a movie or a phone call or even a hug. And equally as important, leave room in your heart to love again, and I'm speaking about a romantic relationship, but I mean to leave room for that love that a friendship brings. Love that a masterpiece, rather it is hanging in an art institute or it is the drawing your grandchild created. Love that song, that photograph, that book. Love.
M stands for Miracle: I'm not speaking of a specific religious faith; instead, I'm writing about miracles in the sense of wonder – something that moves you between the world of rational to the world of unknown infinity. A miracle might be an experience one has in a chance encounter with someone who offers healing words about a loved one.

A few years ago, I was rather upset, thinking about defeat when I was driving and came upon a license plate that read "Hope Mor(e)." And there you have it. For me, the miracle was in the form of a message. And for those who want to believe in a faith beyond what the eyes can see, I view this message of hope to me as a miracle of sorts. Those two words were what I needed to see. I can't explain how this license plate suddenly appeared in my line of vision, but there it was "Hope Mor(e)" and that's what I think miracles nudge us to do: Hope more.

N stands for No: Sometimes the bereaved say "Yes" when they mean "No" out of fear for hurting someone's feelings. Saying "No" to blame and second-guessing is tough but often necessary as a part of healing.

O stands for Open: Saying "No" allows one to stay open to another path and to receiving gifts. During grief, the heart tends to constrict, and staying open to healing and the unknown takes courage. Closing the heart and mind can be hindrances to healing. Stay open.

P stands for Pass: If you are reading this as someone who is grieving, give yourself a pass. Perhaps, you made a commitment you now regret. Give yourself "a pass" and tell them "no." Maybe you are wondering how you'll get through the holiday dinner, and now the day is upon you and you would rather stay home, use your "pass". You get to sit it out.

Q stands for Question: The bereaved find themselves questioning everything from how they will make it through the day to if they should fire their accountant. They will question their family's loyalty and friend's intentions. The bereaved want very much to trust, but post-loss they're often living in the world of the unknown, which means they question everything.

R stands for Rawness: The internal wounds of the bereaved are raw and traumatic. To an outsider, it may appear the bereaved need to push through the pain and toughen up, but what is unknown is the wound seems to burn through all the layers of the skin, only to leave behind a fistful of scar tissue. And the scar tissue doesn't care if you are strong in mind. Therefore, be gentle to all that is unseen and unknown.

S stands for Silence: The bereaved experience disgraceful silence, uneasy silence, forced silence, respectful silence and other rhythmic silences that evoke both love and fear. Grief speaks loudest during the silence as this is when the absence of the loved one is most deeply felt.

T stands for Tiny Steps: Healing doesn't occur in one fail swoop. Instead it often occurs in tiny turtle steps. The bereaved often inch their way towards the goal and sometimes even crawl. What is important is that they are still moving towards the light.

U stands for Unique: No one heals exactly the same way. If you're reading this as someone who is grieving, I am writing this to tell you that how decide to handle the circumstances surrounding your loved one's death is unique yours. It is yours to decide what is useful for your healing. How you perceive this loss may be unexpected and may become undone by grief, but this too is uniquely yours to experience.

V stands for Vacillate: The bereaved may tell you that their thinking at times can be powerful from believing they've conquered grief, only to feeling moments or days later that they can't get through the day without crying. The slightest thing can send the bereaved into a spiral of fear, and it is also important to remember the bereaved have the capacity to heal.

W stands for Wonder: If you're lamenting a loved one then you know the world, this life is filled with horrific terrible experiences, and still there remains beauty and wonder. We may be used to seeing beauty with our loved ones and just thinking of experiencing beauty and wonder without them seems wrong. And still there remains myriad ways to witness beauty and stand in wonder of the unknown.

X stands for X-Ray: If there was a magical way that grief could appear as an actual wound on an x-ray image it could help to serve practitioners who treat the bereaved, and it may also surprise those who thought their wounds had long healed. Unresolved issues of grief have an uncanny and surprising way of
staying within the body. Years after a loss, it is not unusual for a bereaved one to experience bouts of sadness related to their loss. Sometimes the bereaved aren't even connecting their sadness to their loss for they believe years earlier they were healed. Grief may be a shadow in our body waiting for the time to heal.

**Y stands for (and) YET:** There are tragic and traumatic things that happen in life and YET there exists a tenderness so profound that it can unfurl the tightest grip one has on fear. Wonder is something that made my (now) late husband curious about heaven. Shortly after he was diagnosed with advanced cancer, knowing his life was coming to an end, he wondered aloud about the afterlife - heaven. It was this sense of wonder that lessened his fear of dying and held for him promise in his next chapter.

**Z stands for Zen:** As with the miracle segment, I'm not writing about a particular religion or faith. What I've learned, since 1979 (when my father died) is that inner peace is possible after loss. Those "zen" like moments usually catch the bereaved off guard. Personally, I know when this happens, I'm not prepared for them. It may be a song that moves the bereaved to tears or a photograph that falls out between the pages of a book, and these are the things that remind the bereaved of a land far ago. There are things the bereaved may not be capable of -- forgetting trauma may be one of those things. However, the bereaved are capable of experiencing "zen" like experiences if even for fleeting moments, and these moments remind the bereaved that beyond all the suffering there remains a peace that surpasses comprehension.
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Losing a pregnancy, baby or a child is the most painful experience a parent can endure. It leaves a hole in the soul that seems impossible to fill. It’s not something anyone can fully grasp unless they’ve gone through it themselves. The greatest challenge for those who have lost a pregnancy, baby, or child is finding support and guidance to work through the pain in ways that result in positive growth and long-term healing.

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We know how lonely and confusing grief can be when you don’t know where to start. It’s why we are passionate about reaching out to those in a similar place. We don’t want anyone to have to struggle alone without the wise guidance and emotional support necessary to heal.

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