

Along the Way

IU Health Hospice Bereavement Services Newsletter

Resources

Books:

- *Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart* by Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD
- *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief* by Francis Weller
- *Bearing the Unbearable: Love, Loss, and the Heartbreaking Path of Grief* by Joanne Cacciatore, PhD

Websites:

- Dr. Alan Wolfelt's Center for Loss & Life Transition: centerforloss.com
- Francis Weller's website: francisweller.net
- Dr. Joanne Cacciatore's Center for Loss and Trauma: centerforlossandtrauma.com
- Dr. Joanne Cacciatore's MISS Foundation for traumatic loss: missfoundation.org

Phone:

- **AARP Friendly Voices**
Someone who cares is just a phone call away. Request a call by calling 888.281.0145 for English, or 888.497.4108 for Spanish.
- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** Call or text 988 if you are facing mental health struggles, emotional distress, substance use concerns or need to talk to someone.



The practice of mourning: Grief as a gateway to depth, meaning and compassion

By Adrienne Gruver, MSW, Bereavement Coordinator

"Grief is not a problem to be solved, not a condition to be medicated, but a deep encounter with an essential experience of being human."

– Francis Weller, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*

Grief is present in loss because we have loved. It is a testament to a relationship, to someone who touched our lives in a meaningful way. Grief is a noun—the collection of emotions and thoughts we have in response to loss. It is internal—a presence, a weight, something we carry that needs tending. Mourning, on the other hand, is the verb. It is what we do with grief—the way we express it. It is external—the action of tending to our grief.

In *Understanding Your Grief*, Alan Wolfelt describes a fundamental truth: grief never really ends. Like any significant life experience, it transforms us, whether we resist its impact or take time to reflect on the change. Grief is part of us now. Can we use it for growth? Wolfelt calls grief a wilderness and emphasizes the practice of intentional mourning—not to resolve or "get over" our grief, but to navigate it and integrate loss into our life. To reconcile grief, he prescribes open and honest mourning as a catalyst for healing.

Francis Weller, in *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, takes this further. He asserts that it is primarily through our experiences with grief and sorrow that we come to know compassion and the full beauty of the world. Grief, he says, is not an obstacle but a teacher—continually shaping our lives. By approaching our sorrows with reverence, we not only grow but transform sorrow into connection and nourishment for community. He advocates for "an apprenticeship with sorrow"—a sustained

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Indiana University Health

The six needs of mourning

When someone we love dies, we grieve. Expressing that grief through the act of mourning can help us process our loss. Alan Wolfelt states “grief waits on welcome, not on time” because our grief responds to attention and expression. Merely staying busy and letting time pass will not necessarily help our healing the way mournful expression will. Although there are no right or wrong ways to mourn, Wolfelt describes six needs for mourning to help us intentionally and proactively approach the process.

- Acknowledge the reality of the death
- Embrace the pain of the loss
- Remember the person who died
- Develop a new self-identity
- Search for meaning
- Let others help you – now and always

For more information on what each need involves visit centerforloss.com or read the book by Alan Wolfelt, *Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart* (2nd Edition).



The practice of mourning, continued

practice of going inward, whether through writing, meditation, art, or movement, to steady and deepen us, and then connecting outward to share our stories. Joanne Cacciatore, in *Bearing the Unbearable*, likens grief to a physical weight we carry. Mourning, she writes, is the practice of being with grief—stretching and exercising our “grief-bearing muscles” so we can carry what once seemed unbearable. Grief does not lessen over time; rather, we grow stronger through the practice of being with grief. And as we grow stronger, we can do more with grief. This strength emerges from a cyclical process of surrendering inward to grief, then moving outward with understanding, connection and compassion. This practice of mourning not only helps us live in our new world without our loved one but also fosters connection, empathy, and community. So, how do we learn to be with grief? How do we approach it with reverence? How do we actively mourn? Let us stretch Cacciatore’s metaphor of strengthening our grief-bearing muscles for one perspective.

When starting a new exercise regimen, we feel sore. If we push too hard too quickly, we risk injury or burnout. But if we start slowly, doing a little each day, we can make exercise part of our life. Some days we have more energy to stretch ourselves further; other days we need to back off and recover. When we intentionally stretch into our edges, holding the stretch and breathing into the space of tightness, our bodies soften, adapt and grow stronger. The repeated practice of the exercise prepares us for future challenges.

So it is with grief. In new grief, the weight is unfamiliar and heavy. Encountering it through active mourning is painful, especially if we have never done so before, and it will make us ache. If we expose ourselves too quickly to the full reality of our loss, we may feel overwhelmed and seek to keep busy and avoid our grief as much as we can. But if we build slowly—dosing ourselves with moments of being present to our grief—we grow our capacity to hold grief. Through small acts of mourning, like talking about our loved one, we become more familiar with loss, and it becomes something we continuously work on and learn from. Some days we will have more energy to be with our grief, and other days we will need to retreat, taking time away from the pain to recover. But by making mourning into an intentional practice—stretching into the tightness and surrendering to the ache—we soften, understand and grow. Each time we make that stretch, we become more flexible, more capable of carrying grief’s weight. The repeated practice of mourning strengthens us for the days when the burden feels heavier.

Cacciatore asks that we pause, feel our sorrow, honor our beloved dead and practice being with. She teaches that it is precisely this experience with our own pain that fosters compassion and connection with life. Weller speaks of the gravitas that our apprenticeship with sorrow brings. The word grief comes from *gravis*, the Latin word for heavy, as does *gravitas*, which describes those who carry the world’s burdens with dignity. Weller suggests that by honoring our encounters with loss—allowing our sorrows to deepen us and sharing them with others—we develop a wisdom that is needed in our culture. Wolfelt, too, recommends the practice of mourning to carry us through the wilderness of grief. His six needs of mourning (see sidebar) remind us that mourning is participative and active.

We are all in different places with our grief. When the time is right, which will be different for everyone, begin your practice of mourning. What that looks like will also be different for everyone. However, based on these three authors, it will involve both times of solitude and times of connection. It will be an iterative process, one that repeats, shifts and deepens over time. By making mourning an intentional part of our lives, we build a steady, compassionate relationship with our grief. We learn to live alongside loss, not by bypassing it, but by opening ourselves to its lessons. In doing so, we shape not only a more meaningful life for ourselves but also a kinder, more compassionate world.



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