

# Frontline

*This newsletter is dedicated to professional caregivers. It is our hope that this newsletter will help you give comfort and strength to those you serve.*

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## The Bereavement Caregiver's Self-Care Manifesto



By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Like you, I'm proud of the work I do with bereaved people. At the same time, I've discovered that good self-care is essential to truly "being present" to those I wish to help. This is the caregiver's conundrum: How do we care well for others while at the same time caring for ourselves? Perhaps, like me, you are aware that you may be good at meeting the needs of everyone else, but tend to ignore or minimize your own need for self-care. If so, this "Manifesto" should be of help to you!

For bereavement caregivers, good self-care is critical for at least three major reasons. First, we owe it to ourselves and our families to lead joyful, whole lives. While caring for the bereaved is certainly rewarding, we cannot and should not expect our work to fulfil us completely.

Second, our work is draining – physically, emotionally and spiritually. Assisting the bereaved in movement toward reconciliation is a demanding interpersonal process that requires much energy and focus. Whenever we attempt to respond to the needs of those in grief, chances are slim that we can (or should) avoid the stress of emotional involvement. Each day we open ourselves to caring about the bereaved and their personal life journey. And genuinely

caring about people and their families touches the depths of our hearts and souls. We need respite from such draining work.

And third, we owe it to the bereaved themselves. My personal experience and observation suggest that good self-care is an essential foundation of caring for and meaningfully companionship the bereaved. They are sensitive to our ability to "be with" them. Poor self-care results in distraction from the helping relationship, and bereaved people often intuit when we are not physically, emotionally and spiritually available to them.

Poor self-care can also cause caregivers to distance themselves from people's pain by trying to act like an expert. Because many of us have been trained to remain professionally distant, we may stay aloof from the very people we are supposed to help. Generally, this is a projection of our own need to stay distant from the pain of others, as well as from our own life hurts. The "expert mode" is antithetical to compassionate care and can cause an irreparable rift between you and the bereaved.

The following list of bereavement caregiver rights is intended to empower you to care well for yourself as you care well for others.

**Bereavement caregiving presents us with the gift of an enhanced awareness of the many tragedies that touch people's lives. Just as those you companion are changed by death, you are changed by their experiences as well.**

**1. I deserve to lead a joyful, whole life.**

No matter how much I love and value my work with bereaved people, my life is multifaceted. My family, my friends, my other interests and my spirituality also deserve my time and attention. I deserve my time and attention.

**2. My work with bereaved people does not define me.**

I am a unique, worthy person outside my work life. While relationships can help me feel good about myself, they are not what is inside me. Sometimes I need to stop "doing" and instead focus on simply "being."

**3. I am not the only one who can help bereaved people.**

When I feel indispensable, I tend to ignore my own needs. There are many talented caregivers in my community who can also help the bereaved.

**4. I must develop healthy eating, sleeping and exercise patterns.**

I am aware of the importance of these things for those I help, but I may neglect them myself. A well-balanced diet, adequate sleep and regular exercise allow me to be the best I can be.

**5. If I've been overinvolved in my caregiving for too long.**

I may have forgotten how to take care of myself. I may need to rediscover ways of caring for and nurturing myself. I may need to relearn how to explore my own feelings and instead of focusing on everybody else's.

**6. I must maintain boundaries in my helping relationships.**

As a grief caregiver, I cannot avoid getting emotionally involved with other people. Nor would I want to. Active empathy allows me to be a good companion to those in grief. However, I must remember I am responsible to others, not for others.

**7. I am not perfect and I must not expect myself to be.**

I often wish my helping efforts were always successful. But even when I offer compassionate, "on-target" help, the recipient of that help isn't always prepared to use it. And when I do make

mistakes, I should see them as an integral part of learning and growth, not as measurements of my self-worth.

**8. I must practice effective time-management skills.**

I must set practical goals for how I spend my time. I must also remember the Pareto principle: 20 per cent of what I do nets 80 per cent of my results.

**9. I must also practice setting limits and alleviating stresses I can do something about.**

I must work to achieve a clear sense of expectations and set realistic deadlines. I should enjoy what I do accomplish in helping others but shouldn't berate myself for what is beyond me.

**10. I must listen to my inner voice.**

As a bereavement caregiver, I will at times become grief overloaded. When my inner voice begins to whisper its fatigue, I must listen carefully and allow myself some grief downtime.

**11. I should express the personal me in both my work and play.**

I shouldn't be afraid to demonstrate my unique talents and abilities. I must also make time each day to remind myself of what is important to me. If I only had three months to live, what would I do?

**12. I am a spiritual being.**

I must spend alone time focusing on self-understanding and self-love. To be present to those I work with and to learn from those I companion, I must appreciate the beauty of life and living. I must renew my spirit.

Bereavement caregiving presents us with the gift of an enhanced awareness of the many tragedies that touch people's lives. Just as those you companion are changed by death, you are changed by their experiences as well. To embrace our deep appreciation for life and love we must stay grounded – and to do so means caring for ourselves as well as care for others.

*About the Author*

Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt is a noted author, educator and grief counsellor. He serves as director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado and presents many grief-related workshops each year across North America. Among his newest publications are the books *The Depression of Grief and Finding the Words: How to Talk with Children and Teens about Death*. For more information, write or call the Center for Loss and Life Transition, 3735 Broken Bow Road, Fort Collins, Colorado 80526, (970) 226-6050 or visit [www.centerforloss.com](http://www.centerforloss.com).

# Dr. Victor E. Frankl: Finding Meaning in Crisis



By Dr. Earl A. Grollman

I took many courses in psychology and philosophy during college, but I never heard the psychiatrist Victor Frankl's name mentioned even once. It wasn't until graduate school that a fellow student told me about him, saying I had to read his work. After perusing one of Frankl's books, I was hooked. I knew I needed to learn more about this man who believed we could find meaning in life, even in the most dire of circumstances.

Despite the fact I was not fluent in German, I was able to discern Dr. Frankl's brilliant insights, and I devoted myself to learning as much as I could about his theories and ideas. Over time, I wrote several articles in professional magazines about my newly discovered author-philosopher-psychiatrist.

To my surprise, I received a telephone call from Munich asking if I would have lunch with Frankl who was speaking at Harvard. Of course, I quickly accepted. As they say – it was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Later, I was even invited to come to his clinic in Germany, both to study and to teach with him. (Sadly, I had to decline due to family responsibilities.)

In the years that followed, Dr. Victor E. Frankl became a seminal influence in my life and in my career as a grief therapist.

## Who Was Dr. Victor Frankl?

Victor Frankl was born in Vienna in 1905. He received his medical degree and gravitated toward neurology and psychiatry. As a young physician, he achieved great acclaim by helping those with emotional problems and the prevention of suicide.

Meanwhile, the shadow of the swastika lengthened over Europe. As a Jew, he was sent to Auschwitz and Dachau. His account of those years are described in his stirring book, *From Death-Camp to Existentialism*. During his incarceration, he was confronted with the many questions of suffering and his own meaning of life.

The Holocaust had exacted a severe price – the loss of family. His medical practice had also vanished.

When the war was over, he had to start anew. In 1950, he created the Austrian Medical Society of Psychotherapy and became its first president. He also became chief of the Neurological Poly Clinic, and visiting professor at Harvard Medical School. He was the author of 29 books that have been translated into 21 languages. His book *Man's Search for Meaning* sold more than four million copies and is still in print today. Carl Rogers, one of the founders of the humanistic approach to psychology, hailed Frankl's works "As one of the outstanding contributors to psychological thought."

## Approaches to Psychotherapy

Dr. Frankl understood we are more than our organic parts. Too often scientific psychologies have explained behaviour only in anatomical terms. Instinctive urges and the unconscious are also useful concepts, but this is only a fractional segment of the whole personality.

To Frankl, existence was more than a static experience. From the Latin root *ex-sistere* "to stand out," existence must promote potential, "a dynamic progress of growth." He explained, "The person who stands still is passed by. The individual who is smugly contented, loses himself or herself. It is life itself that asks questions of mankind."

An "existential vacuum" exists when there is pessimism, apathy and boredom. Demoralization leads to insecurity, fatalism, denying our own singularity and uniqueness by attempting to be like everyone else. How then may we find meaning in our life?

Frankl's Logotherapy has helped an anguished world to find purpose in the context of inescapable horror. It is based on the belief

that life may have meaning even to the last breath, whatever the limitations may be. But in the final analysis and in every living moment, each person, when possible, may choose what attitude he or she will take.

Frankl offered three pathways to meaning. That is, he measured life by what we give to the world by our creativity; by what we take from the world in terms of what we experience; and by our attitude in confronting unavoidable suffering. As Frankl wrote, "Under the blows of fate, in the white heat of suffering, life is hammered and formed." He then quoted Goethe, "In many a sigh is found an insight. For there are few predicaments that we cannot ennoble either by doing or enduring."

**In my own career, I have discovered how people find meaning even when confronted by serious illness and death:**

- One woman in the hospital told me she had not spoken to her sister in decades because of a family feud. When I asked her if she wanted me to contact her sister, there was a resounding "yes." Later, I saw the two together, weeping in each other's arms. The patient thanked me saying, "Now I can die in peace."
- One man in the community was a captain of industry and had little time for his family. But when his wife went to hospice, he visited his wife with cancer almost every day, sharing memories and their love for each other.
- A widow went back to school after her husband's death and is now enjoying the career she always wanted as a social worker.

Two psychiatrists, Richard Tedeschi and Larry Calhoun, have written about "posttraumatic growth" as the above illustrations testify. During crises, we rethink priorities, refine our goals and redefine our future. We learn to grow through these experiences – becoming more tolerant, more patient, more open-minded, more compassionate.

In the words of an anonymous poet, "Without the valleys there would be no mountains, and if you don't scale the mountain you don't see the view."

Of course, there are inner tensions. But this is essential to mental health rather than the empty space of passivity. Nothing will help us to survive more than a basic trust in finding the meaning of life, with the belief that suffering and sacrifice are worth the cost.

**If I were to explain Dr. Frankl's message in one line, "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."**

When a loved one dies, the human spirit (das geistige) may sometimes assist the bereaved to grow by identifying value in difficult situations. We may ask, "What is my responsibility here?" "And how shall I respond to the challenge?" For the meaning of life is not invented by the lonely self; it is revealed in the struggle of the personal encounter with the challenging demands confronting us.

Frankl vigorously challenged the feelings of utter despair. Of course, this is a natural grief reaction! But he has taught that whenever possible we should attempt to counteract the circumstances that would cause our defeat, leaving us hopeless without any possible purpose. And no matter how dire the situation, we should take care of ourselves and help others in their distress when possible. "Thus life may have radiant meaning even in the darkest hours."

If I were to explain Dr. Frankl's message in one line, "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."

Of course, the lifelong career of a distinguished psychiatrist cannot be condensed into a single article. For further information, reading *Man's Search for Meaning* or *From Death-Camp to Existentialism* may afford further insights to helping those in sorrow as well as understanding ourselves.

### About the Author

Rabbi Earl A. Grollman, a pioneer in crisis management, is an acclaimed writer and lecturer. In 2013, the Association for Death Education and Counseling presented him with its Lifetime Achievement Award, only the fourth time in three decades. This award honours "his national and international impact on the improvement of death education, caring for the dying person, and grief counseling." His books on coping with bereavement have sold more than a million copies. For further information, visit [www.beacon.org/grollman](http://www.beacon.org/grollman).



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