

# 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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## Understand the Six Needs of Mourning



By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

**N**o map exists for your journey through grief. The wilderness is undiscovered and you are its first explorer.

But when we are in mourning, we all basically have the same needs. Instead of referring to stages of grief, I say mourners have six central needs. Unlike the stages of grief you might have heard about, the six central needs of mourning are not orderly or predictable. You will probably jump around in random fashion. You will address each need when you are ready to do so. Sometimes you will be working on more than one need at a time. Your awareness of these needs however will give you a participative, action-oriented approach to healing as opposed to a perception of grief as something you passively experience.

### **MOURNING NEED #1** Accepting the Reality of the Death

You can know something in your head but not in your heart. This need of mourning involves gently confronting the reality that someone will never physically be in your life again.

Whether the death was sudden or anticipated, acknowledging the full reality of the loss may occur over weeks and months. To survive, you may try to push away the reality at times. Acknowledging someone you love has died is a process, not an event; embracing this painful reality is not quick, easy or efficient.

### **MOURNING NEED #2** Letting Yourself Feel the Pain of the Loss

This need of mourning requires us to embrace the pain of our loss – something we naturally don't want to do. It is easier to avoid or deny the pain of grief than it is to confront it, yet it is in confronting our pain that we learn to reconcile ourselves to it.

You cannot (nor should you try to) overload yourself with the hurt all at one time. Sometimes you may need to distract yourself from the pain of death, while at other times you need to create a safe place to move toward it. As you encounter your pain, you will also need to nurture yourself physically, emotionally and spiritually. Eat well, rest often and exercise regularly.

### **MOURNING NEED #3** Remembering the Person Who Died

Do you have a relationship with someone after they die? Of course you do. You have a relationship of memory. This need of mourning involves allowing yourself to pursue this relationship.

Some people may try to take your memories away. Trying to be helpful, they encourage you to take down all the photos of the person who died. They tell you to keep busy. You are living in a culture that teaches you to move away from – instead of toward – your grief.

Following are a few examples of things you can do to keep memories alive while embracing the reality that the person has died:

- Talking or writing about favourite memories.
- Keeping some special keepsakes.
- Displaying photos of the person who died.
- Visiting places of special significance.
- Reviewing photo albums at special times.

## **MOURNING NEED #4** Developing a New Self-Identity

Your personal identity is the result of the ongoing process of establishing a sense of who you are. Part of your self-identity comes from the relationships you have with others. When someone with whom you have a relationship dies, your self-identity naturally changes.

A death often requires you to take on new roles. After all, someone still has to take out the garbage, someone still has to buy the groceries and someone still has to balance the chequebook. You confront your changed identity every time you do something that used to be done by the person who died.

Many people find that as they work on this need, they ultimately discover some positive aspects of their changed self-identity. You may develop a renewed confidence in yourself. You may develop an assertive part of your identity that empowers you to go on living even though you continue to feel a sense of loss.

## **MOURNING NEED #5** Searching for Meaning

When someone you love dies, you naturally question the meaning of life. You probably will explore religious and spiritual values. The death reminds you of your lack of control. It can leave you feeling powerless.

You might feel distant from your God, even questioning the very existence of a higher power. You may rage at your God. Such feelings are normal. Mourners often find

themselves questioning their faith for months before they rediscover meaning in life. But be assured: it can be done, even when you don't have all the answers.

Early in your grief, allow yourself to openly mourn without pressuring yourself to have answers to such profound "meaning-of-life" questions.

## **MOURNING NEED #6** Receiving Ongoing Support from Others

The quality and quantity of understanding support you get during your work of mourning will have a major influence on your capacity to heal. You cannot – nor should you try to – do this alone. Drawing on the experiences and encouragement of friends, fellow grievers or professional counsellors is not a weakness but a healthy human need. And because mourning is a process that takes place over time, this support must be available months and even years after the death.

Unfortunately, because our society places so much value on the ability to "carry on," many bereaved people are abandoned shortly after the death. To be truly helpful, people must appreciate the impact this death has had on you. They must understand that in order to heal, you must be allowed – even encouraged – to mourn long after the death. And they must encourage you to see mourning not as an enemy to be vanquished but as a necessity to be experienced as a result of having loved.

One of the most important sayings of the The Compassionate Friends, an international organization of grieving parents, is "You need not walk alone." I might add, "You cannot walk alone." Support groups, where people get together and share the common bond of experience, can be invaluable – supporting your need to mourn long after the death.

### *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 and the world. Among his publications are the books "Grief One Day at a Time;" "When Your Soulmate Dies;" and the bestselling "Understanding Your Grief."

# But Only the Truth?



By Dr. Earl A. Grollman

Should we always tell the truth? We might dismiss this as a rhetorical question. The immediate response may be, “of course.” We can substantiate this thought with infallible sources:

- The Hebrew Bible (Zachariah): “Speak everyone truth to his neighbors.”
- The New Testament (John): “You shall know the truth and the truth will make you free.”
- Martin Luther: “Peace if possible, but truth at any rate.”
- Hindu Proverb: “The name of God is truth.”
- William Shakespeare (Hamlet): “To thine own self be true.”
- Court witnesses promising: “To tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.”

## TRUTH VERSUS LITTLE WHITE LIES

The word true is from the old English treowe, “faithful.” It connotes fidelity, sincerity and veracity.

If a lie is an untruth, what is a white lie? According to the dictionary, it is “but a trivial, harmless utterance said in the interest of politeness or tact. The colour connotes ‘intending no evil.’”

Recently, I was invited to a friend’s home that housed a costly selection of art. He proudly showed me his new collection of paintings and asked my opinion. If I told him the truth, I might have said, “Those painting look like a monkey threw paint on a canvas.” But what would be gained? The art was already purchased and cherished. I smiled and said, “They’re very interesting.” He nodded his head in agreement. The truth would have set no one free.

There are times when the truth hinders more than it helps. When visiting an Alzheimer’s patient, the woman greeted me and said, “You just missed my husband.” Should I have been truthful and said her husband died more than 10 years ago? What would that have accomplished besides greater confusion and disorientation? Instead, I smiled and asked, “What did you talk about?” She regaled me with memories of long ago. I had never witnessed such tenderness and happiness since the onset of her dementia. It is called a “therapeutic privilege.”

## SELF-JUSTIFICATION

Perhaps the greatest untruth is when we lie to ourselves. We seize without justification false claims and facts and assert them to be true and valid. We may be misled by insecurity, anger, feelings of inferiority and need for power, or perhaps a lack of hope.

Are we reminded of Stephen Colbert’s coined word, “TRUTH-I-Ness”? That is, to make arguments where facts and reality were non-factors. It is just how we feel and are conditioned – approximations of the truths we believe in, and not necessarily the truth itself.

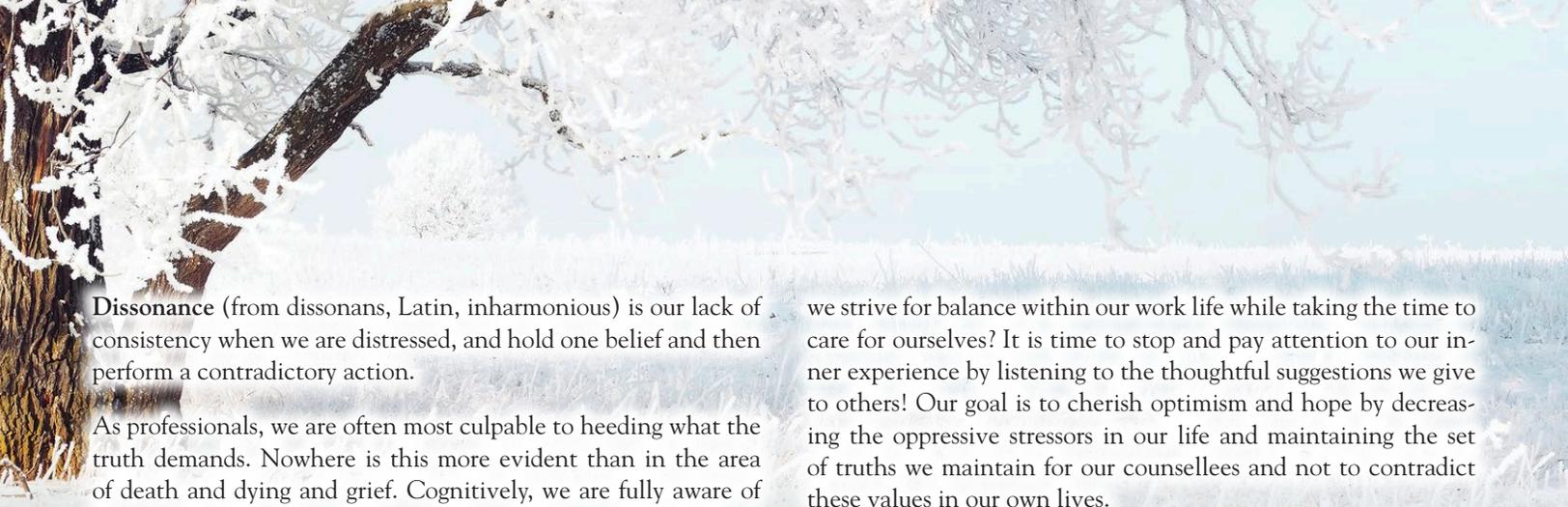
## COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

There are times when it is easy to separate truth from falsity.

**Truth:** Birth leads to death.

**Falsity:** The world is flat.

**Cognitive** (from *cognitio*, Latin) meaning “to get to learn, to know based on reasoning and knowledge.”



**Dissonance** (from dissonans, Latin, inharmonious) is our lack of consistency when we are distressed, and hold one belief and then perform a contradictory action.

As professionals, we are often most culpable to heeding what the truth demands. Nowhere is this more evident than in the area of death and dying and grief. Cognitively, we are fully aware of the complexities of mourning and the need to ventilate feelings. We devote our lives to bringing our clients insights and healing. Yet, many of us fail in our own dissonance to carry this message of truth into our own personal lives. There is often cognitive dissonance, when we know what to do, how to help others through grief, yet are unable to follow our own advice.

Years ago, I was asked by King's College in London, Ontario to do a survey on how professionals in the field of grief handle the death of their loved ones. A majority responded that they mourned alone. They reacted to their anguish by keeping their emotional turmoil to themselves. Instead of acknowledging and expressing their pain, many returned almost immediately into the frantic activity of professional life. The male professionals, especially, coped in isolation.

Simply put, we professionals don't always practice what we preach. As one writer explains, "We try to disguise ourselves as Superman but beneath the surface we are only Clark Kent." Is it any wonder why we won't open the buttons of our shirt to let people know who we really are?

Stress is almost a mainstay for helping professionals. We carry a great responsibility. Our grieving clients are in great travail. They depend upon us. Have we ever pondered late at night, "Is it possible that my very despondent client could take her life?" How emotionally draining!

Our schedule is overloaded. Maybe we stop at a fast-food restaurant for a quick bite. There is a blizzard of details at the office. Perhaps, we get up very early, work late at night, take care of business on weekends, and shorten our vacation time. The expensive gym equipment purchased a year ago languishes in the basement.

While we dispense counsel to others about leading a balanced life, we often ignore this sage advice for ourselves. Let's be honest. Do we strive for balance among our own family relationships? Do

we strive for balance within our work life while taking the time to care for ourselves? It is time to stop and pay attention to our inner experience by listening to the thoughtful suggestions we give to others! Our goal is to cherish optimism and hope by decreasing the oppressive stressors in our life and maintaining the set of truths we maintain for our counselees and not to contradict these values in our own lives.

### AS WE FACE THE FUTURE

It takes real guts to look into the mirror and dare ask:

"What are some of my insecurities and vulnerabilities?"

"What truths do I hide about myself?"

"With whom can I share my innermost feelings and thoughts?"

"How can I live a more complete, authentic and fulfilled life?"

Of course, this is a difficult task. But heed the words of the Catholic-Benedictine monk, David Steindl-Rast: "Pain is a small price to pay for freedom from self-delusion."

No one can be 100 per cent truthful no matter how trustworthy and scrupulous we aspire to be. On some occasions it may be advisable to veer from absolute honesty.

Perhaps the only true response is: "Always tell the truth, except when we shouldn't."

### 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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