

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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Helping Yourself Heal During the Holiday Season



By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Holidays are often difficult for anyone who has experienced the death of someone loved. Rather than being a time of family togetherness, sharing and thanksgiving, holidays can bring feelings of sadness, loss and emptiness.

Love does not end with death

Since love does not end with death, holidays may result in a renewed sense of personal grief – a feeling of loss unlike that experienced in the routine of daily living. Society encourages you to join in the holiday spirit, but all around you the sounds, sights and smells trigger memories of the one you love who has died.

No simple guidelines exist that will help you better cope with your grief during this joyful, yet painful time of the year. As you read through this article, remember that by being tolerant and compassionate with yourself, you will continue to heal.

Talk about your grief

During the holiday season, don't be afraid to express your feelings of grief. Ignoring your grief won't make the pain go away and talking about it openly often makes you feel better. Find caring

friends and relatives who will listen – without judging you. They will help make you feel understood.

Be tolerant of your physical and psychological limits

Feelings of loss will probably leave you fatigued. Your low energy level may naturally slow you down. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. And lower your own expectations about being at your peak during the holiday season.

Eliminate unnecessary stress

You may already feel stressed, so don't overextend yourself. Avoid isolation, but be sure to recognize the need to have special time for yourself. And realize that merely "keeping busy" won't distract you from your grief, but may actually increase stress and postpone the need to talk out thoughts and feelings related to your grief.

Be with supportive, comforting people

Identify those friends and relatives who understand that the holiday season can increase your sense of loss and who will allow

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you to talk openly about your feelings. Find those persons who encourage you to be yourself and accept your feelings – both happy and sad.

Talk about the person who has died

Include the person's name in your holiday conversation. If you are able to talk candidly, other people are more likely to recognize your need to remember that special person who was an important part of your life.

Do what is right for you during the holidays

Well-meaning friends and family often try to prescribe what is good for you during the holidays. Instead of going along with their plans, focus on what you want to do. Discuss your wishes with a caring, trusted friend. Talking about these wishes will help you clarify what it is you want to do during the holidays. As you become aware of your needs, share them with your friends and family.

Plan ahead for family gatherings

Decide which family traditions you want to continue and which new ones you would like to begin. Structure your holiday time. This will help you anticipate activities, rather than just reacting to whatever happens. Getting caught off-guard can create feelings of panic, fear and anxiety during the time of the year when your feelings of grief are already heightened. As you make your plans, however, leave room to change them if you feel it is appropriate.

Embrace your treasure of memories

Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after the death of someone loved. And holidays always make you think about times past. Instead of ignoring these memories, share them with your family and friends. Keep in mind that memories are tinged

with both happiness and sadness. If your memories bring laughter, smile. If your memories bring sadness, then it's all right to cry. Memories that were made in love – no one can ever take them away from you.

Renew your resources for living

Spend time thinking about the meaning and purpose of your life. The death of someone loved created opportunities for taking inventory of your life – past, present and future. The combination of a holiday and a loss naturally results in looking inward and assessing your individual situation. Make the best use of this time to define the positive things in life that surround you.

Express your faith

During the holidays, you may find a renewed sense of faith or discover a new set of beliefs. Associate with people who understand and respect your need to talk about these beliefs. If your faith is important, you may want to attend a holiday service or special religious ceremony.

As you approach the holidays, remember: grief is both a necessity and a privilege. It comes as a result of giving and receiving love. Don't let anyone take your grief away. Love yourself. Be patient with yourself. And allow yourself to be surrounded by loving, caring people.

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.

Suicide Through the Ages



By Dr. Earl A. Grollman

One of the most complicated death situations is a suicide. People have been killing themselves since the beginning of recorded time. How have attitudes toward suicide evolved through the generations?

To better understand these attitudes, let us peruse the history of chronicled events from psychological, sociological and legal perspectives. This article will focus on Judeo-Christian traditions, but first we will look to earlier cultures for their insights.

Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Later Cultures

The First Egyptian Period (Seventh to 10th Dynasty, 2000 BCE) documents the life of a man who was filled with unendurable pain and suffering. He did not consider suicide a violation of his spiritual or legal code.

Stoicism (the school of philosophy about 300 BCE) asserted that when circumstances were no longer tolerable, one could voluntarily withdraw from life by taking that life.

Epicureans (according to the founder Epicurus born in 341 BCE) concluded that when the attainment of pleasure is no longer possible, death is the viable alternative.

There were dissenters. Plato (circa 427 BCE-347 BCE) believed that people, even while suffering from extreme injustice, must find the courage to endure.

First Centuries – Judaism and Christianity *Judaism*

“And God saw all that he had made, and found it very good.” With almost the first words of Genesis, there is the assertion that life is good and that each person should treasure it and never despair of its possibilities, for behind it is God.

Despite a religious emphasis on the sanctity of life, the Holy Scriptures contain but six references to suicide. In each case there are extenuating circumstances, such as the fear of being taken captive or the possibility of suffering humiliation or unbearable pain. Saul, the first king of Israel (1020 BC), fell upon his own sword to prevent being mocked and tortured by the Philistines.

When capture by the Romans became a certainty, a Jewish community in 73 AD committed mass suicide in the fortress of Masada.

There is an interesting twist with the great Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (37AD-100 AD). In his earlier works, Josephus extolled King Saul for his suicidal action, and all the martyrs – “better that they should die thus gaining commendation and lasting names.”

Later Josephus reversed this position. Conditions changed. An increasing number of suicides were recorded. The rise was partly due to the growing Greco-Roman influences and the rise in spiritual and social crises. Now that the suicidal act had become more frequent, a condemnatory tone was introduced. The ancient Israelites were intensely concerned for the survival of their tiny nomadic tribe. The suicide of even one Hebrew was a threat to tribal continuity.

As a result, suicides were buried outside the cemeteries at cross-roads as a sign of disgrace. There were instances of indignities practiced upon the corpse – the body was dragged through the streets, and was left for preying birds to consume.

Early Christianity

When Christianity came into being, suicide was common in Greece and Rome. The early Christians accepted the prevailing attitude of their era, particularly when persecution made life unbearable. To escape Roman torture, many took their lives.

The apostles did not denounce self-execution. The New Testament touched on this question only indirectly in the report of Judas' death. For several centuries, the leaders of the church did not condemn the practice.

The year 313 AD is noteworthy. The Christian maltreatment had ended. Christianity was now the official religion of Rome.

Until Augustine (354-430 AD) denounced suicide as a sin, there was no official church position against it. After deliberating at great length, whether a suicide death could be condoned in the case of a woman whose honour was in danger, his words, "Suicide is an act which precludes the possibility of repentance; it is a form of homicide and this is a violation of the Decalogue Article 'Thou shalt not kill.'"

The Second Council of Churches expressed the earliest organizational disapproval of suicide in 533 AD. The Council of Hereford in 672 AD withheld burial rites to those who took their lives. In 1284 AD the Synod of Nimes refused suicides holy ground burial.

A further elaboration of the Augustinian concept was cited by Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274 AD). He opposed suicide on the basis of three postulates: 1) It was against the natural inclinations of preservation of life and charity toward the self. 2) Suicide was a trespass against the community. 3) It was a trespass against God who had given life to humanity.

Suicide and the Courts

Theological restrictions were translated into both criminal and civil laws. Early English practice penalized survivors by confiscating their property. In the 16th century, a person who persuaded another to assist in one's suicide was guilty of murder. "Blameworthy intent" equated suicide with homicide. A parliamentary act directed that burials for those who had committed suicide could take place in church cemeteries but without religious ceremony and only between 9 p.m. and midnight.

Suicide was a felony in England and many other countries. The punishment for attempted suicide was imprisonment. However there were dissenters who spoke out. The Jewish sage, Yoseph Karo (1488-1575), approached the subject from the standpoint of mental illness: "that he had done the deed unwittingly." John Donne (1572-1632), the dean of St. Paul's Cathedral and

renowned poet, had himself as a youth contemplated taking his life. In his book *Biathanatos*, he later made a plea for charity and acceptance. His position was echoed by many secular writers and philosophers. Hume, Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau wrote essays defending suicide under certain conditions.

Eventually the courts realized the laws were not preventing the increase of suicides but it was not until 1961 that the British Parliament enacted a bill abolishing the criminality of suicides. Both in Canada and the United States, it was finally decreed that suicide was not an indictable offence.

Today, many disciplines view suicide from psychological and sociological perspectives as well as legal and theological perspectives. Increasingly, suicide is recognized not only as a profound religious question but also as a major medical problem.

The prominent clergyman Dr. Norman Vincent Peale in *The Healing of Sorrow* wrote, "For we do not know how many battles have been fought and won before he or she loses that one particular battle. And is it fair that all the good acts and impulses of such a person should be forgotten or blotted out by the final act? I think our reaction should be one of love and pity, not condemnation."

No one is suggesting that suicide is desirable or commendable. Just as jurists have revoked anti-suicide statutes, so have many in the religious realm been re-evaluating their attitudes. The goal is to understand the complexities of our clients. For prevention, we could review recent studies to broaden our views, especially in relation to mental health. Consider these questions: What can we do for meaningful interventions? And in postvention, what compassionate support can we offer to the survivors?

As Bishop John Robinson explains, "Truth finds expression in different ages."

About the Author

Dr. 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 counselling." His books on coping with bereavement have sold more than a million copies. For further information, visit www.beacon.org/grollman.



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