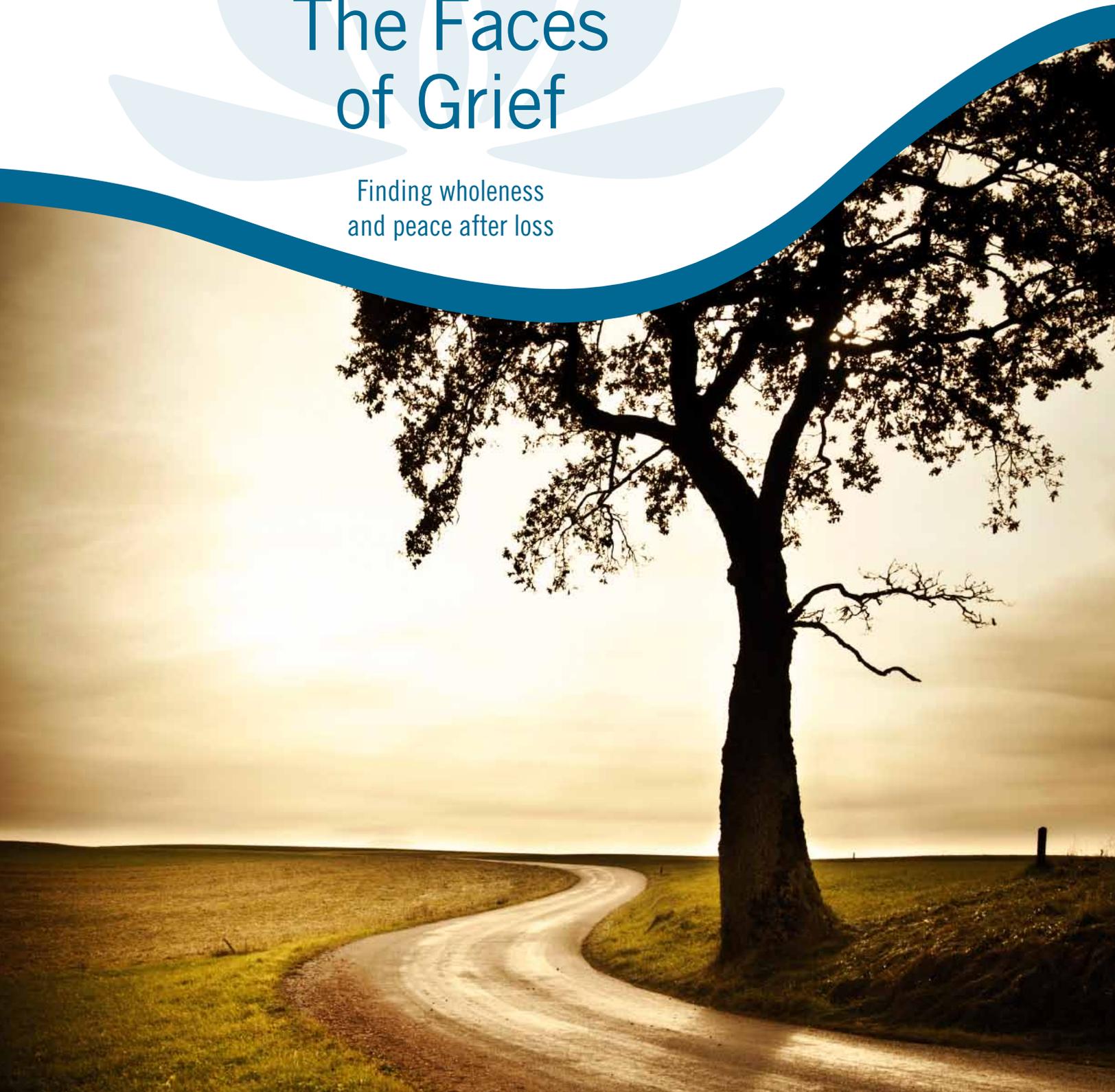


The Faces of Grief

Finding wholeness
and peace after loss



*What does grief look like?
It comes in such a variety of colors and
hues, and it wears many faces.
Grief is more a part of life
than many of us realize—
since loss is such a frequent
life companion.*

The Faces of Grief was written by Sonia Solomonson, a freelance writer and editor, and a life coach with Way2Grow Coaching in Streamwood, Ill.

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Don't avoid the pain; the only way to get over the pain is through it—not under, above, or around it.

How to use this resource

This resource may be adapted for use in several contexts. It is organized in three parts or sessions, but can be adapted for use as a one-day retreat or used by an individual.

For an individual, the questions may be used for personal reflection and prayer or perhaps to prepare for conversation with a pastor, mentor, counselor or close friend.

In a group setting, the questions will also serve as discussion starters for support groups for people dealing with loss of a spouse or family member, or support groups for those dealing with unemployment, chronic illness, infertility, divorce or congregational conflict. In such a group setting, the leader should adopt rules or guidelines for the discussion, including asking the group members to preserve confidentiality about what is discussed. Such rules can create a safe space for all participants to speak openly about what they are experiencing.

Whether in a group or for an individual, the questions, reflection and discussion may be good starting points for *journaling*. To learn more about using a journal on your spiritual walk, see [“Journaling: Create Your Own Sacred Writing.”*](#)

Either as an individual or in a group, the experience of this resource may be enhanced by a sacred space. To learn more about creating sacred spaces for prayer, meditation and spiritual thought, see [“Sacred Spaces.”*](#)

Keep in mind that this resource is intended to help readers learn about and reflect on the journey of grief—not to take the place of professional services. If your experience of loss or grief feels overwhelming or is preventing you from functioning in your daily life, we strongly encourage you to seek out an appropriate mental health professional or counselor. Speak to your pastor or physician to help you find services that can assist you.

* For those reading a printed copy of this resource, you can find these two program resources at www.womenoftheelca.org. They are available as free, downloadable PDFs.



A Recipe, A Season

When we grieve, we each walk a different journey. No one can tell you how to grieve. Your process is *your* process. As in the book *Tear Soup* (see the list of books and resources at the end of this resource), we each need to make our own soup recipe, filling the pot with tears, feelings, memories, misgivings and more. Your soup will not taste like mine. Your soup will take a different amount of time to cook than mine. This is an individual process, and we should never judge one another's grief.

Session 1: A Recipe, A Season

I recently spent a weekend with a dear friend whose beloved husband died just over a year ago. For her right now, grief dresses in muted colors. Food doesn't taste so good anymore, nothing is quite as much fun and she limits the places she goes by herself. Bright color hasn't yet returned to her life.

A few weeks ago I was visited by yet another dear friend whose beloved husband also died just over a year ago. Her grief, while still real, has taken on some bright colors and hues once again. She is engaged in new projects, she still enjoys cooking and often shares her food with others, and she seems to be finding a new "normal" for her life.

Yesterday I spent time with a friend who learned only hours earlier that she'd lost her job. She was numb. We don't yet know how her grief will take shape. I remember that process, too, because a year ago I was "Reduced In Force" after 22 years in the same office. I recall being unable to cry for days after being told my position and I were eliminated. I was simply too stunned and numb. My grief process looked different day to day and month to month. I rediscovered the roller-coaster effect of grief as I moved in and out of anger, sadness, despair, fear—and many more emotions. Now, a year later, my grief is dressed in the colorful garments shaped by the hope of new life and new dreams.

As I write this yet another friend waits for the rescue of her beloved fiancé who is lost in the mountains where he was backpacking. What emotions fill her days as she waits at the trailhead for rescuers to find her beloved? For days she's lived in hope, but now fear is crowding in. And for those of us who care about her and her fiancé, our waiting and our grief walk the passageway between hope and fear, too.

I recall the grief I experienced following my divorce some 24 years ago. Gray was the most familiar color

in my palette those days. A dear friend, one of few who stayed to walk the journey with me, reminded me recently of how she and her husband kept calling, visiting and writing me. "It was as though you dropped into a hole and pulled the cover over the top," she said. "We couldn't reach you for a long time." I was simply unable to reach out and accept their love and care. I had all I could do to help my sons through the experience and also try to help my close family understand what was happening (even though I barely understood myself). I am so grateful to God for friends who wouldn't let me go—who were persistent in their love and care for me.

Then there's my friend whose husband has resigned a call as part-time pastor so he can focus on his other full-time work. They are leaving a community they have loved and where they've felt loved and cared for. "It is time to move on," her husband said. Grief also comes when we make the life choice ourselves. And my friend told me that her husband's grief comes out sideways, showing up as irritation at small things—inconsequential things taking on huge significance in his eyes. Her style is to process grief more directly.

We have seen people literally bowed down with grief at the death of a loved one. And we've seen others who appear stoic and strong. Grief does have many faces, indeed. I'm sure you see many in your mind's eye as you read this.

When we grieve, we each walk a different journey. No one can tell you how to grieve. Your process is *your* process. As in the book *Tear Soup* (see the list of books and resources at the end of this resource), we each need to make our own soup recipe, filling the pot with tears, feelings, memories, misgivings and more. Your soup will not taste like mine. Your soup will take a different amount of time to cook than mine. This is an individual process, and we should never judge one another's grief.

When my family and I gathered at the hospice facility for Dad's final days on this earth, I recall a gentle and caring social worker telling us all to be patient with one another because we would each experience this grief differently. I was grateful to her for that reminder. How right she was. Some of us spoke openly in Dad's presence about what was coming, and others were uncomfortable saying the words "death" or "dying" in Dad's hearing. Some of us cried openly; others carried their grief deep inside. Some of us needed solitude and space to grieve; others needed to stay close to the family group.

A grief process is not done on schedule either. We cannot foretell the length of the process. We cannot foretell the shape it takes. Generally, it's not linear. We may work through grief's stages only to think we've moved on—when wham! A song, a smell, or another event will send us right back into the grief again. I often say that all we can do is fasten our seat belt and be ready for the ride. It is best to be ready for *anything* because grief isn't at all predictable.

My friend who seems to have re-engaged life since her husband died told me, "Faith and a purpose are so important in the grieving process," and added, "Even though we were very close and almost inseparable, we each had our individual lives and gave each other space so we didn't smother the other. It is so important when one spouse dies that the other still has identity as a separate child of God and knows she has a purpose in life."

She has a ritual for evenings because those can be the loneliest times. "Before I go to bed, I relax in my chair, listen to a few easy-listening songs, thank God for some of the warm memories, and then get ready for bed." She finds joy in the many wonderful memories she has and thinks of all the blessings her spouse brought into her life.

There appear to be seasons of grief, too, each with different colors and each with a different purpose. In the fall of grief, we let go just as leaves let go of the trees and fall to the ground. The winter of grief is the time of going inside, the inner journey, a time

of hibernation as it were. In the springtime of grief new life begins to emerge; and summer is the time when life continues, and we let it be nourished and grow. Again, we need to remember that the process is seldom linear. We may move from spring back into winter for a while, and the letting go process often is ongoing.

For reflection, discussion, journaling

What images of grief do you carry—either your own or someone else's?

What did you learn about grief when you were a child? A young adult?

When you were growing up, how did your family acknowledge grief? Or didn't they?

How has your attitude and approach to grieving changed through the years? Why?

Describe your experience of the seasons of grief. How did you feel? What did you do to take care of yourself?



A Difficult Journey

However it begins, we know a loss puts us on a journey we wouldn't necessarily ask to take. This journey, however, can transform us. It's often said that what doesn't kill us makes us stronger. There's some truth in that. But we don't want to be too glib with such statements either. Grief journeys are extremely painful and troubling. And some people simply cannot recover.

Session 2: A Difficult Journey

Grief often begins with a word. Perhaps it's a phone call with news of illness or death, perhaps a doctor's words, or it may be the hurtful words signaling an end to a job or relationship.

However it begins, we know it puts us on a journey we wouldn't necessarily ask to take. This journey, however, can transform us. It's often said that what doesn't kill us makes us stronger. There's some truth in that. But we don't want to be too glib with such statements either. Grief journeys are extremely painful and troubling. And some people simply cannot recover.

Let's take a look at some of the life experiences that set us on such a path. And let's examine our attitudes. Later we will look at the resources we have that can be packed in our bags for the journey.

As many different ways as there are of experiencing grief, there are also that many and more different causes of grief. When you hear the word *grief*, what comes to your mind? Is it death? While that's a big one, it is by no means the only event that can cause grief.

Consider these:

Relationship changes (conflict within a relationship, for example—whether it be partner or spouse or whether a friend or other family member)

Divorce or separation

Illness and loss of health

Terminal illness

Miscarriage or stillbirth (While it's death, it carries a unique experience of grieving.)

The aging process with its physical and mental changes (gradual loss of abilities, sight, hearing, mobility)

The loss of independence that accompanies later stages of aging (car keys taken away, for example)

Job loss, transfer or change

Job promotion (Sometimes that brings loss in terms of leaving behind beloved co-workers or changing the way you relate to them.)

Moving (or having friends or family move away from you)

Empty nest

Loss of a beloved pet

Trauma (fire or a break-in to your home, etc.)

Natural disaster

Goodbyes of any type

Starting or stopping work, even when it's your choice (This can still involve losses such as loss of time with children, loss of free time or it might be the reverse: too much free time.)

Downsizing in your workplace (Being a survivor causes grief, too.)

Disappointments (not getting the promotion you expected, for example)

Infertility

Children moving far away (A friend of mine has a son, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren now living in

Canada. She needed to grieve for them not being nearby.)

Foreclosure or bankruptcy

Moving out of your home into a care facility (or moving your parents or other loved ones into one)

Abuse: physical, sexual, emotional

Watching parents age and/or deteriorate

Loss of a pastor or a change of congregations

Mid-life crisis

The realization that expectations won't be met (Perhaps we see that our primary relationship will never be what we had hoped. Letting go of these hopes can hurt.)

Dreams (These are generally the last thing to die in times of loss.)

Retirement (or now, with the economic downturn, coming out of retirement to return to work)

This list may seem long, but it's only a partial list of life experiences that can initiate grief. Loss of any kind brings grief—if we notice. Often we don't think of these experiences as loss, so we don't stop to deal with them.

But what happens when we don't grieve? Have you ever experienced a loss and thought your response was out of proportion to the actual loss? It just might have been because old griefs come to the fore when new losses occur. Certainly those we haven't tended to adequately will come roaring onto our screens wanting attention. It helps clear the channels when we can acknowledge and process losses as they occur. Grief and loss are a natural part of life. Grief affects us emotionally, spiritually and physically. Old losses surface as we're ready to grieve.

Unresolved grief waits in the wings for the next loss so it can reappear and ask for our attention--and often comes out sideways or in sneaky ways that take us, and those we love, by surprise. And it can also affect physical health and relationships. I know that when I haven't tended to my grief over a loss, it shows up as stress particularly in my neck and back. It also can close down my heart so that I'm not as open and loving in my relationships. Grief needs to be acknowledged—and addressed.

Multiple losses

Even when we've grieved a loss, it can surface again and again. I grieved for years after my divorce. A divorced friend and I did a ritual with a clergy friend that included hymns, prayers, candle lighting, burning papers that contained a listing of our losses. We both felt the church had been there for our marriages, so we wanted it also to acknowledge the death of those relationships. I [journalled](#), attended workshops and retreats, I cried and I talked with friends.

Yet 16 years after the divorce, when my former husband died, all the losses and anger of divorce resurfaced to mingle with the new grief of his death. I moved through the old grief more quickly. I grieved deeply for my three sons, who had lost their father too soon. And I had an overwhelming sense of sadness, both because he was dead and would miss out on events in the lives of our children and grandchildren—and because I was incredibly sad that we hadn't been able to save our marriage. I had to forgive the young man he was, unable to do what was necessary to sustain our marriage; and I had to forgive myself for that as well.

Within each of these types of loss are embedded multiple losses. For example, when I lost my job last fall, I realized that I had lost: income, financial security, healthcare coverage, lifestyle, community, choice, connections, dreams, responsibility, confidence, a forum for my writing, structure to my days, opportunities for expression, some of what brought meaning into my life and much more.

Anger is a part of loss—anger at the person who died, at whoever seemed to have caused the loss we've incurred, and often, anger at God. Anger is perfectly normal and appropriate. We have a right to be furious, indignant and filled with rage. For our own (and others' good), we don't want to dwell in the land of anger forever. But it is an appropriate land through which to pass in our grief journey! I remember a friend assuring me that my anger at God following my divorce was quite all right, and that, in fact, it was a credal statement in itself (I had felt guilty about that anger). My friend assured me that God could handle it.

For reflection, discussion, journaling

What comes to mind when *you* hear the word *grief*?

Share your experiences of grieving different types of losses.

What losses have contained layers of loss for you? Were you aware of it at the time? Did you grieve each loss?

Describe how anger has played into your grief experiences. Did it cause you guilt?

How might you grieve some of the smaller losses in your life? Or do you tend to this already?

Feel the Feelings

Don't avoid the pain; the only way to get over the pain is *through* it—not under, above, or around it. Some grief is never gone. It's a forever-hole in our hearts—such as the suicide of a loved one or the death of a child or partner. We simply learn to live with it. And yet other types of grief, when processed, are finished at some point in time. We may be changed by it (in some ways of which we're aware and many of which we're not), but we really are done grieving.

Session 3: Feel the Feelings

How do you process *your* grief? What ways have you found to express your pain, anger, sadness?

There are times when words are meaningless and groans and sounds are needed to carry out our grief. Some years ago I attended a workshop in which the presenter taught us how to bring sounds up from deep within us to grieve our losses. Find a safe place and let yourself express in sound the grief you are feeling. Groan. Wail. Cry until you collapse, exhausted. Give the physicality of your grief its own expression.

All we need to do is read the Psalms to find cries of pain and despair. The psalmist knew how to rage and lament. Especially read the Psalms of Lament—those of community lament: 44, 74, 79, 80, 83, 90, 137—and those of personal lament: 3, 5, 7, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 31, 35, 38, 39, 42, 51, 55, 57, 59, 77, 88, 140. Lamentations 3 is another good one. Let yourself wail, groan, keen, and cry loudly. Feel the grief and pain in your body.

While I love reading the Psalms from the Bible, I can sometimes get hung up on the “smiting” language and the violent imagery. So I also like reading from Nan Merrill’s adaptation, *Psalms for Praying*.*

For example, here is Psalm 42 from Merrill’s book:

“My soul is cast down within me,
 therefore I remember You
 From my mother’s womb to maturity,
 through all the days of my life.
 Deep calls to deep
 at the thunder of your waterfalls;
 All your waves and your billows
 have washed over me.
 By day You lead me in steadfast love;
 at night your song is with me,
 prayer from the Heart of my heart.”

And Psalm 55 from Merrill’s book:

“Give ear to my prayer, O Beloved,
 and hide not from my
 supplication!
 Listen to me, and answer me; for,
 I am overwhelmed by anxiety,
 I am tormented by the noise of
 my doubts,
 Because of the oppression of
 my illusions.
 They keep me bound in a prison,
 and, like bad company,
 they enclose me in darkness.
 My heart is in anguish within me,
 thoughts of death keep me
 company.”

In addition to lament, other expressions of grief may include:

Finding favorite Scripture passages and keeping them close. One such for me is Isaiah 43:1b-2—“I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” And verse 4a: “Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.”

Praying. When you cannot find the words, let others pray for you—as my friend is now doing while she waits for her fiancé to be found in the mountains.

Creating a ritual. In a previous section I mentioned my divorce ritual—an important step for me in moving on with my life. I have also done rituals to note God’s presence in my life when I lost my job and when I was passed over twice for significant

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job promotion as well as for many other times of grief and loss. Rituals are important times to name losses, take steps toward letting go and forgiveness, acknowledge God's gifts and presence in the process, and pray for healing and new life. My life coach presented me with a new idea on rituals recently: Whereas my rituals were always done in a discrete time frame, he suggested that a ritual can be progressive (just like a progressive dinner)—taking place over time as you feel the need for the next piece. My job-loss grief has been like that—done over the space of months: first praying, reading Scripture and saying a litany of loss as I unpacked the tote bags containing my personal belongings from the office; then over time, naming losses, lamenting, praying, reading Scripture, journaling, crying, writing letters to some of the principal characters involved (but not mailing them), and talking with friends.

Forgiving. Earlier I said I had to forgive my former husband and my younger self for the failure of our marriage. Sometimes we need to forgive someone for a broken friendship, for job loss or some other hurt. I had to forgive my father for not taking his anti-seizure medication when the radiation for his brain tumor took away nearly all his abilities and he got tired of living in such a limited way.

Drawing your grief. You need not be an artist to give shape and form to your grief on paper with whatever medium you prefer. Sometimes you surprise yourself with the colors or images that land on the paper or the canvas.

Journaling. Again, when you write without thinking about what you want to say, your soul can express its deepest self. You will discover feelings and thoughts that have remained at a subconscious or even unconscious level. Let your pen move across the pages without censoring yourself.

Writing letters to anyone who caused the grief (don't send them; these are for your release). You can write a letter even if the person has died (we often experience anger toward the one who left us).

Watching a movie—a sad one if you need to release tears, an inspiring or happy one if you want to move away from your sadness. This will depend on where you are with your grief process.

Finding or creating a support group. This isn't true for everyone but most of us respond well to a community of care around us. Sometimes we want or need that, but simply cannot respond (as I experienced after my divorce).

Finding a life coach or spiritual director to guide you through the process. For years I had a spiritual director with whom I discussed many of life's challenges, sorrows and joys. And now, thanks to my life coach, I have done a lot of hard emotional work around my job loss—feeling the feelings and then ultimately letting go of the hurt, anger and sadness. Consequently, I feel extremely open inside—more able to access all the good things that are out there and in front of me. That is what opened me up to the possibility of being trained as a life coach myself. That in turn has made my heart so happy that I feel even more open and loving to everyone. Even my chiropractor says I haven't been this serene and relaxed in the 23 years he's known me!

Breaking dishes. Yes, you read that correctly. If your grief emerges as intense anger, consider breaking dishes to release the anger. Some experts recommend that, and I have friends who have done it. My life coach recommends keeping one of the pieces as a reminder that God loves us in our brokenness. (Hint: you can find inexpensive plates at garage sales or flea markets.)

Surrounding yourself with good people. This is not the time for negative voices. Remember the story of Job?

Tending to self-care insofar as it's possible. Eat a balanced diet, exercise (walking is good) and get enough rest.

Seeing a therapist if you need to. There is no shame in getting whatever help we need. I have found enormous help from talking my losses over with a counselor. And currently my significant other and I

are seeing a couples counselor so we can be as whole as possible in our developing relationship (we're both divorced and don't want to act out of old grief and losses related to our previous marriages).

Playing. When the time is right, do things you enjoy.

Pampering yourself and letting others pamper you. I recommend massages and pedicures. This is not a time to be hard on yourself.

Expressing your grief, whatever form that may take—singing, painting, writing, even dancing.

Volunteering. Yes, at some point you may feel the need to reach out to others. It is important to know there is life beyond loss and grief.

Laughing. Yes, it's okay to laugh.

Surrendering to feelings of tiredness. Naps are a gift.

Deciding what to hang on to, even when you are letting go. After my divorce, for example, I knew there were good memories I wanted to keep.

Telling the story. We need to tell the details over and over, as though to actually believe that this awful thing has really happened to us. Find those few people willing to listen (and love) you into your healing. Listening you into your healing is also what spiritual directors, life coaches, and counselors can do.

Creating new dreams—when it's time. Dreams are the last thing to die. You'll know when you're ready for new ones.

Author Dawna Markova says we tell “rut stories” or “river stories.” Rut stories are negative and keep us stuck and river stories are positive, life-giving and keep us moving forward. Which will yours be?

The only way out

Above all, don't avoid the pain; the only way to get over the pain is *through* it—not under, above, or around it. Sometimes, though, you simply have to give yourself a break from facing it. That's okay too. As Molly Fumia says in her book *Safe Passage*, “There is someone inside of us who knows exactly what to do.” You will know deep inside what you need and when you need it. It's your journey. You set the pace.

Know the paradox of grief: You are *not* alone—many people walk the journey with and alongside you. God certainly walks with us and many times, carries us. Yet we feel that we *are* alone. The inner journey of grief is ours alone to take and no one can do that inner work, the letting go, the forgiveness, the decision to let the healing happen and move on. But even in that inner work, the Holy Spirit comforts and guides us.

Some grief is never gone. It's a forever-hole in our hearts—such as the suicide of a loved one or the death of a child or partner. We simply learn to live with it. And yet other types of grief, when processed, are finished at some point in time. We may be changed by it (in some ways of which we're aware and many of which we're not), but we really are done grieving.

Pay attention and grieve with intention—the intention of healing and moving on. You have a choice. Eventually you can decide what your narrative or story will be now that you've processed much of the grief. Will it be focused on the loss and sorrow? Or will it be about the gifts from the relationship or job or previous situation and how you've been helped by God and others through the grief and now are enjoying new dreams and new life? This is not to deny the grief nor the mark of that loss on our lives.

Earlier we said that grief often begins with a word. In the midst of our deepest grief, when we have no words for what we experience, we also often find little comfort in words. What is more important most often is presence: the presence of people who care

and who don't paper over our grief with their well-meant but sometimes unhelpful clichés or platitudes. Just be with me, sit with me, cry with me, hold me. But please don't give me easy answers or hollow promises. Don't try to fix me, even though you mean well. Especially don't tell me that I would be okay if my faith were deeper or if I trusted God more. The grief work is mine; I must do it. But I welcome caring people to walk alongside me.

In the end, however, grief won't have the last word. While the way through is difficult, we know God holds and surrounds us with lavish love, caressing comfort and serene strength. That same God who walks with us day by day through the grief also holds out to us the promise of new life. Hold on to that hope and keep walking toward the Light, which is the Christ. Jesus knows pain and grief, having taken on our human form and having experienced rejection, loneliness, pain and death.

For reflection, discussion, journaling

What are you losing or what have you lost? List all aspects.

Do you feel anger in your grief? How does that look and feel? Are you comfortable experiencing anger? How do you express it?

What about anxiety, sorrow, regret? How do you experience those?

Do you feel gratitude amid the loss? For what?

What's yet unfinished in your grief process? And what do you want to do about that?

How is God present in all this? Or *is* God present?

What things would you add to the list of coping mechanisms?

How have you gotten through grief in the past? Would you do anything differently today?

Resources

Good Grief by Granger E. Westberg (Fortress Press)

Turn My Heart: A Sacred Journey from Brokenness to Healing by Susan Briehl and Marty Haugen (GIA Publications)

Grievers Ask: Answers to Questions about Death and Loss by Harold Ivan Smith (Augsburg Books)

Grieving the Death of a Pet by Betty J. Carmack (Augsburg Books)

Helping Children Grieve by Theresa M. Huntley (Augsburg Books)

Grieving the Death of a Friend by Harold Ivan Smith (Augsburg Books)

Andrew, You Died Too Soon: A Family Experience of Grieving and Living Again by Corinne Chilstrom (Augsburg Books)

Understanding Mourning: A Guide for Those Who Grieve by Glen W. Davidson (Augsburg Books)

Grace All Around Us: Embracing God's Promise in Tragedy and Loss by Stephen Paul Bouman (Augsburg Books)

What Can I Do?: Ideas to Help Those Who Have Experienced Loss by Barbara A. Glanz and Ken Druck (Augsburg Books)

Turn My Mourning Into Dancing: Finding Hope in Hard Times by Henri Nouwen (Thomas Nelson, Inc.)

Praying Our Goodbyes by Joyce Rupp (Ave Maria Press)

Necessary Losses by Judith Viorst (Free Press)

A Path Through Loss by Nancy Reeves (Northstone Publishing)

Mourning into Dancing by Walter Wangerin Jr. (Zondervan Publishing House)

Tear Soup by Pat Schwiebert, Chuck DeKlyen and Taylor Bills (Grief Watch, Publisher)

Safe Passage by Molly Fumia (Conari Press)

Books on rituals

Blessings & Rituals For the Journey of Life by Susan Langhauser (Abingdon Press)

Marking Time: Christian Rituals for All Our Days by Linda Witte Henke (Morehouse Publishing)

Out of the Ordinary by Joyce Rupp (Ave Maria Press)

For Everything A Season: 75 Blessings for Daily Life by the Nilsen Family (Zion Publishing)

Blessing Rites for Christian Lives by Shawn Madigan (Good Ground Press)