

# BEREAVEMENT NEWSLETTER

The later stages of grief are often referred to as “Recovery, Readjustment or Reconciliation”. During this time you may feel some sign of returning hope or “becoming yourself again”. Most people find themselves **changed** from who they were at the beginning of the grief process. You may find that you are now more compassionate and understanding of others. You may find that you now set your priorities differently.

Reconciliation is essential if you are once again to live a satisfying, enriched life. It truly is possible to find meaning in life again following the death of a loved one.

The following article on Reconciliation was written by Dr. Alan Wolfelt, a leading researcher and author in the field of death education and grief.

## RECONCILIATION

By Dr. Alan Wolfelt

The final dimension of grief is often referred to as “resolution, recovery, reestablishment, or reorganization”. This dimension often suggests a total return to “normalcy”, and yet, in my personal as well as professional experience, everyone is changed by the experience of grief. For the mourner to assume that life will be exactly as it was prior to the death is unrealistic and potentially damaging. Recovery, as understood by some persons – mourners and caregivers, alike – is all too often erroneously seen as an absolute, a perfect state of re-establishment.

Reconciliation is a term I believe to be more expressive of what occurs as the person works to integrate the new reality of moving forward in life without the physical presence of the person who has died. There is a renewed sense of energy and confidence, an ability to fully acknowledge the reality of the death, and the capacity to become reinvolved with the activities of living. There is also an acknowledgment that pain and grief are a difficult, yet necessary part of life and living.

As the experience of reconciliation unfolds, the mourner recognizes that life will be different without the presence of the significant person who has died. There is a realization that reconciliation is a process, not an event. The tasks involved in working through the completion of the emotional relationship with the person who has died, and redirecting energy and initiative toward the future, often takes longer and involves more labor than most people are aware. We, as human beings, never “get over” our grief, but instead become reconciled to it.

The specific course of mourning cannot be prescribed because it depends on many factors, such as the nature of the relationship with the person who died, the availability and helpfulness of a support system, the nature of the death, and the ritual or funeral experience. As a result, despite how much we know about dimensions of the grief experience, these dimensions will take different forms with different people. One of the major factors influencing the mourner's movement toward reconciliation is that he or she be allowed to mourn in his or her own unique way and time.

Reconciliation is the dimension wherein the full reality of the death becomes a part of the mourner. Beyond an intellectual working through, there is an emotional working through. What has been understood at the "head" level is now understood at the "heart" level – the person who was loved is dead. When a reminder such as holidays, anniversaries, or other special memories are triggered, the mourner experiences the intense pain inherent in grief, yet the duration and intensity of the pain are typically less severe as the healing of reconciliation occurs.

The pain changes from being ever-present, sharp and stinging, to an acknowledged feeling of loss that has given rise to renewed meaning and purpose. The sense of loss does not completely disappear, yet softens and the intense pangs of grief become less frequent. Hope for a continued life emerges as the griever is able to make commitments to the future, realizing that the dead person will never be forgotten, yet knowing that one's own life can and will move forward.

## **CRITERIA FOR RECONCILIATION**

Those persons who have worked with their grief to move toward the dimension of reconciliation are usually able to demonstrate:

- A recognition of the reality and finality of the death of the person who has died.
- A return to stable eating and sleeping patterns that were present prior to the death.
- A renewed sense of energy and personal well-being.
- A subjective sense of release or relief from the person who has died (they have thoughts of the person, but are not preoccupied with these thoughts).
- The capacity to enjoy experiences in life that should normally be enjoyable.
- The establishment of new and healthy relationships.
- The capacity to live a full life without feelings of guilt or lack of self-respect.
- The capacity to organize and plan one's life toward the future.

- The capacity to become comfortable with the way things are, rather than attempting to make things as they were.
- The capacity to being open to more change in one's life.
- The awareness that one has allowed oneself to grieve.
- The awareness that one does not "get over grief", but instead is able to acknowledge, "This is my new reality, and I am ultimately the one who must work to create new meaning and purpose in my life."
- The capacity to acknowledge new parts of one's self that have been discovered in the growth through one's grief.
- The capacity to be compassionate with oneself when normal resurgences of intense grief occur (holidays, anniversaries, special occasions).
- The capacity to acknowledge that the pain of the loss is an inherent part of life that results from the ability to give and receive love.

*There is an old Chinese tale about the woman whose only son died. In her grief, she went to the holy man and said. "What prayers, what magical incantations do you have to bring my son back to life?"*

*Instead of sending her away or reasoning with her, he said to her, "Fetch me a mustard seed from a home that has never known sorrow. We will use it to drive the sorrow out of your life."*

*The woman set off at once in search of that magical mustard seed. She came first to a splendid mansion, knocked at the door, and said, "I am looking for a home that has never known sorrow. Is this such a place? It is very important to me." They told her, "You've certainly come to the wrong place," and began to describe all the tragic things that had recently befallen them. The woman said to herself, "Who is better able to help these poor unfortunate people than I, who have had misfortune of my own?" She stayed to comfort them, then went on in her search for a home that had never known sorrow.*

*But wherever she turned, in houses and in palaces, she found one talk after another of sadness and misfortune. Ultimately, she became so involved in ministering to other people's grief that she forgot about her quest for the magical mustard seed, never realizing that it had in fact driven the sorrow out of her life.*

*By Rabbi Harold S. Kushner  
"When Bad Things Happen to Good People"*

The Season of Grief reminds us that life constantly changes. We hold nothing forever, even what we believe we cannot live without . . . and yet we must . . . and we do. This season also reminds us that we have a God who invites us to grow in response to our pain, a God who hungers for us to find true family in one another, a God who aches for us to celebrate life and love in ways that empower hope and healing. We have a faithful and freeing God . . . who allows us to choose.

As seasons pass, our wounds scar over, but we are never, ever the same. The marks of nightmares-come-true never fully fade – and that, my friend, is fortunate! It would be sad to have no painful memories . . . for the gift of compassion is received and passed on . . . only by broken hearts that remember.

*Excerpts from “Life is Change – Growth is Optional”  
By Karen Kaiser Clark*

#### **Other Resources You Might Find Helpful:**

***Men and Grief*** by Carol Staudacher. This book lets men share their common ground and see themselves as much less isolated.

***Being a Widow*** by Lynn Caine. Deals with the need to express emotions, get into dreams, anxiety attacks, sleep problems, the children, the new you and creating a new life.

***The Bereaved Parent*** by Harriette Schiff. Many parents feel that no one can help because no one can understand the complex ramifications of their tragedy. This book offers guidance and suggestions on how to cope.

#### **BEREAVEMENT NEWSLETTER**

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