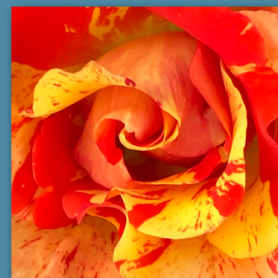


THE ADAIRE HOUSE FACILITATORS GUIDE..

A GUIDEBOOK
FOR SUPPORT AND
DISCUSSION GROUP
MEETINGS FOR BEREAVED
SPOUSES AND PARTNERS

DR. HOWARD J FISCHER



The Adaire House Facilitators Guide..

A Guidebook for Peer-Led Support and
Discussion Group Meetings for Bereaved Spouses
and Partners

Dr. Howard J Fischer

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adairehouse.org
howard@adairehouse.org

Appreciations

To Lori Klein, for being my mentor as a facilitator and for showing me, through her compassionate example, how to make a support meeting be responsive and full of hope and healing. For her strongly affirmative encouragement of this project and her kind and insightful comments on the contents of the Guidebook.

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To Alfred Westlake, Jalene Berger and Carol Less for helping me to flesh out the Adaire House programs and to understand and use social media to bring Adaire House to a much wider audience.

To all those in the support and social groups I have facilitated for sharing their stories and being willing to take the hard look at themselves and their lives that bereavement often leads us to. And for those who became “friends in grief” and built the next part of their lives together.

To Andi.. This is in your name and in your honor, always and in all ways.

Introduction

Adaire House is a group of peer-led support programs that were created in honor of my wife Andrea Adaire Fischer to be places where hope and healing can grow. Together they provide an integrated set of support programs to not only help bereaved spouses and partners to navigate their early grief, but also to help them beyond that in building new lives and futures, in honoring their loved ones as they find new meaning and purpose in their lives, and perhaps in finding others to become “friends in grief” to journey with going forward.

This Guidebook has been written and compiled from the Adaire House programs to provide a set of notes that can be used by any individual or small group of bereaved spouses and/or partners to facilitate support and discussion group meetings.

The notes were originally created to provide educational ideas about grief and to facilitate support and discussion groups where bereaved spouses and partners came together to talk about the specific topics or about their feelings and stories as they navigated their grief journeys. They are also a companion to the book, [Flowers From Andrea](#) that is the story of my personal grief and healing journey. The topics in The Facilitators Guide loosely follow the order of the chapters in the book and are grouped into the same general categories as in the book.

At the time of this writing, I have been bereaved for seven years. Over those years, it has become clear to me that my perspective on grieving is different from that of the non-bereaved counselors I have been working with. With that perspective, the material in the Facilitators Guide was taken directly from the notes I prepared, distributed and presented at almost four years of bi-monthly Support Group and Discussion Group meetings. All of the meetings were peer-led, mostly by myself, but occasionally by other bereaved spouses or partners using these guidelines.

I am not a grief counselor, nor a social worker. I am just a bereaved spouse who has been fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to help others and the skills to study, document, format and present what I’ve learned during my own grief journey and from talking to many other bereaved spouses and partners.

The Guidebook is not meant to be a guide to grief. It is meant to be a guide that can be used by those wanting to facilitate discussions and encourage sharing in an informal, peer-led environment. It has no expectations of counseling expertise or solutions involved. It holds no responsibility for actions or outcomes in any group where it is used. These guidelines are just suggestions of things to talk about for those who use them.

The success of the groups I have been facilitating has been so beyond my expectations and has led to so much hope and healing, that I felt that if I made my meeting notes and questions available in an easy to use way, maybe others could

duplicate what I've done in their own way and bring some level of hope and healing to the bereaved spouses and partners in their own communities.

I believe that any of what I've done and any of what I've shared in this Guidebook and in *Flowers From Andrea* can happen anywhere people can come together to meet and talk in a quiet, safe place, including in peoples homes. *It really only takes a group of people willing to come together and talk about their grief for it to become a support group!*

While there are many positive, supportive and extremely helpful online and social media groups available on many different platforms, it became clear when our groups had to stop meeting in person during the COVID shutdown that the video conferencing meetings we had during that time were not as helpful and did not do the same things or fill the same needs that the in person meetings did.

There is a very strong and important advantage to being in the same room, face-to-face, talking about grief and sharing our stories, our tears and our hugs in person that unfortunately can't be duplicated online. I believe that meeting in person can enhance the sharing, help and friendships we can create as an addition to what the social media posts, support and comments we perhaps already share can do for us. In-person support groups can be another important part of the healing journey we all take within our bereavement.

While we all want to “escape our grief” at times, and many of our social activities often center on that, I have seen that it is also very important to talk together about our grief. Talking about our grief *and* finding social activities go hand in hand in facilitating the healing process. If we support each other in as many ways as we can, we can grow hope and healing together and learn how to approach the next parts of our lives together.

It is my hope that these guides will be a platform on which bereaved spouses or partners can build support for themselves and others in their communities. Something as simple as a once-a-month potluck or a support meeting at someone's home or coffee at a local venue that is quiet enough for conversation can be enough to encourage the healing process in any local community of bereaved spouses and/or partners.

Based on what I have seen in my own community, if people choose to come together to talk about their grief, these guides can at the least help start the conversation and at best encourage and facilitate hope and healing.

I suggest that anyone who wishes to use this Guidebook consider taking the time to read through *Flowers from Andrea* to see the larger story of my personal grief journey as well as a lot of stories from myself and others I've talked with. I believe that those stories will give you some more expanded ideas about how and why the topics were developed and how they might relate to things in your own lives or in those of the

people you might interact with in a support group setting. If you find that the book is helpful to you, it is also something that could be used in a “book club” type format with your group to read and discuss at your meetings.

This entire project has really been created to encourage bereaved spouses and partners to start coming together and meeting to help each other through their grief, to help them find healing and ultimately wellness and to begin living once more. Coming together to talk and share our stories and to perhaps become each others “friends in grief” has proven to be a very powerful tool to help navigate the difficult journey we are all faced with and our need to find ways to live with and accept what has happened in our lives.

I am sharing them here to enable groups to come together for hope and healing, especially in places where there are no formal bereavement programs available to help.

If you are trying to set up a support group, feel free to email (howard@adairehouse.org) or call/text me (970-227-2396) or private message Howard Fischer on Facebook with any questions you might have about setting up or facilitating a meeting. I am happy to help in any way I can. If you phone and I don't answer, please leave me a message and I will get back to you as soon as I can. Please make sure to include a call back number and your name so I can respond to your questions.

In Hope and Healing,

Dr. Howard Fischer, 2023

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How to use this Guidebook to Facilitate a Support or Discussion Group Meeting:

Any individual or any small group of bereaved spouses and/or partners who want to form a support or discussion group can use the notes in this Guidebook to help create and facilitate those meetings.

The topics included in the Guidebook can be used as stand alone notes as published. They may also be used in any order, they may be combined or modified, or parts can be left out to create support or discussion meeting notes that best fit the groups and situations they are used to facilitate. I believe that they are at their best when they are expanded to include stories and insights from the facilitator(s) based on what they learned and experienced in their own grief journeys.

Taking the lead in locating a group of bereaved spouses and/or partners who want to come together to talk about their grief is probably the most difficult part. If you are part of a local online/social media group, that is an excellent place to find people who might want to meet in person. Once you have a group who are willing to meet somewhat regularly, you can choose a meeting location and get contact information for each person so you can notify them about meeting times and places.

There are some suggestions in the Introduction to the Guidebook for how and where to meet. Once those parts are done, I recommend that you follow the list below to get started and then you can modify it if you want to suit your specific needs as you go forward.

Suggested ways to use the guidebook:

- Read all of the topics first to get an idea of what is available in the guidebook.
- The topics have been grouped into three sections called Early Grief, Learning to Live Again and Reconstruction, and Acceptance and Wellness
- Start the first group meeting with any topic from the Early Grief part of the Guidebook. Select the topics for following meetings in any order that you feel will follow the flow of the discussions and the needs expressed in the previous meetings you've facilitated.
- For each topic you use, feel free to add or remove anything that you feel will make them more accessible to those in the group you are facilitating. There may be some overlap and repetition between topics when a concept makes sense to be included again in a different context. *Add your own stories and experiences!* In time, you can create your own meeting notes to reflect your journey and the lessons you have learned.

- For examples of actual meeting notes, you can go to wavesofgrief2020.org and look at our blog posts that contain the meeting notes from all the Adaire House meetings.
- I would suggest that you avoid giving advice as best as you can during meetings and avoid any conversations about controversial topics as well as religion and politics. The point of the meetings you facilitate is only to talk about grief in the context of what people are going through and experiencing so you all can help each other through your grief journeys.
- I would also suggest that as a facilitator, people are looking to you for guidance and leadership and it would be wise to not allow yourself to become “personally or romantically involved” with any of the people in your groups. It’s fine to become friends...
- Print a set of topic notes for yourself.
- Prepare for each meeting by reading the topic notes you printed and decide what and how you want to present them at the meeting. Highlight within the notes to help you present the important points you want to cover.
- Print the notes as a handout for each person that will be at the meeting. There is a suggested introduction included below that you may add to the top of the handout notes if you want to.
- If you don’t want to be that formal, you really don’t need more than an outline for yourself to use to lead the group you gather together through each meeting. It’s always only about what works for you and how you can find your own way to help others find hope and healing.
- You are welcome to contact me if you need help getting started.

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Suggested Introduction to include at the top of a Meeting Handout if you create one:

Name of the Group and the Date of the meeting:
Contact information for lead facilitator:

Candle Lighting

Welcome statement

We are all here because we share a very difficult and intense common experience, each in our own way. You are all being very courageous to be here and to be willing to listen, share and learn together and we honor you all for that courage.

This is a peer group. We are all fellow travelers who may be not as far or further down the road than you, but we are all here to share our grief journeys, to help promote hope and healing and to become each others "friends in grief". We all share a perspective of experience that allows us to deeply understand and help each other on our paths to hope and healing. (use whatever parts or all of the welcome statement as it suits your situation and inclination)

(Read) Meeting guidelines

Participant Introductions

Please share your name, your spouse or partners name and something about them.

Meeting topic:

Meeting Notes:

Suggestions on How and What to Prepare for a Meeting:

- Have name tags and a marker pen available.
- Have tissues available at the meeting.
- Bring a votive candle, container and lighter to the meetings.
- Have a sign up sheet available for names and contact information of the participants.
- Print a copy of the meeting notes for the facilitator and as a handout for each participant. Again, examples of meeting notes can be found at wavesofgrief2020.org
- Print meeting guidelines to have them available for new participants.
- Try to keep the number of participants at each meeting in the 12-15 range or less so that everyone has the time and the comfort to comment if they choose to.
- Do whatever works for you and fits the group you are facilitating. It can be as loose or as formal as you want to make it. My list is what worked for me and is only meant to be a suggestion or a guide to get you started.

A Suggested Meeting Format:

- Meetings seem to work best at an hour and a half long. 6:30-8 PM during the week or 1-2:30 PM on weekends are times that have worked well for my groups. Potlucks can be 3 or more hours long.
- Fill out and wear name tags.
- Have people sign in with names and contact information.
- *Candle lighting:* Bring a votive candle, container and lighter to the meetings and light it at the beginning of the meeting in honor of the love you all continue to share for and with your loved ones.
- Read the welcome statement.
- *Read the meeting guidelines,* either those included here or your own guidelines so that everyone is aware of them. Hand them out to new participants at each meeting as well.
- *Introductions:* Have each person give their name, the name of the person they are grieving and the date of their passing or how long they have been bereaved. If there is time they may add a short comment about something significant they want to share about their loved ones.
- After the introductions, try to present the meeting topic in 30 minutes or less to allow time for discussion, comments from the group about the meeting topic, their grief stories, or any other topic they may want or need to talk about. Comments from the group members should be the bulk of the time spent during the meeting.

You may need to split some of the longer topics in the Guidebook into sections to keep the presentation part from becoming too long.

A good meeting contains enough time for the participants to talk about the topic, about their grief, and to share their stories to encourage hope and healing.

In the end, you can do it any way you want that promotes hope and healing and allows the people attending to talk about their grief and the things that they need to express. Try to insure that each person who wants to talk gets a chance to do so but also respect people's wish to remain silent.

Send an email or text message or social media meeting reminder with time, date, and location to the group 2-3 days prior to each meeting.

Make sure to keep the content of what is said at the meetings confidential. All members of the group should follow the confidentiality guideline in the example below.

Feel free to email (howard@adairehouse.org) or call/text me (970-227-2396) or message Howard Fischer on Facebook with any questions you might have about setting up or facilitating a meeting. I am happy to help in any way I can. If you phone and I don't answer, please leave me a message and I will get back to you as soon as I can. Please make sure to include a call back number and your name so I can respond to your questions.

Updates and new Topics will be posted on our website, adairehouse.org as they are developed.

(Example of) **Meeting Guidelines:**

- Please turn off or put cell phones on vibrate during meetings. If you need to take a call, please do so outside the meeting room.
- Please respect each other's experiences, thoughts, feelings and unique perspective on their grief even if it is different or very different from your own.
- Talk or be silent as you feel comfortable but please listen respectfully when someone is speaking. Please allow everyone equal time to speak if they choose to and please don't interrupt while someone else is speaking.
- ****Respect each other's confidentiality**, What is said in the group remains in the group: at times, we will be talking about deeply personal and often private things that should not be shared beyond the group. You may talk about things that you learned and heard in the group but please do not share peoples names or identifying characteristics.
- Avoid giving advice. Please stick to sharing ideas you have or that have helped you or perhaps not worked for you but if you are not asked for advice specifically, try to avoid phrasing your comments in that way, remember, our journeys are our own.
- Try to be willing to look deeply at your own and other peoples feelings with respect and without judgements. Let's share and help each other to find hope and healing on this difficult and ongoing journey.
- It's OK to express emotions during meeting, it's OK to cry and it's OK to hug each other to show our support.
- It's also possible that opening up your own or listening to other's grief experiences and feelings will make things feel more intense for you in the days and nights following these meetings. That can happen as what you heard or thought makes you look more deeply at your own feelings. Those feelings are "normal" to have and generally pass and generate new understandings of what you are experiencing, usually in a relatively short time.
- There can also be negative grief or mourning behaviors that are loud or violent or hurtful to ourselves or others, or intrusive on others that we should be aware of. If your grieving starts to move you in any of those directions, it is important for you to find and talk to a professional grief counsellor who will be able to help you to channel your grief towards more positive directions. In addition to attending this discussion group, please look to find professional counseling if dealing with your grief begins to seem overwhelming. Please talk to a facilitator after the group meeting if you feel any of these things happening in your life.

Something Else to Try:

Socialization:

At some point, often late in the first year of bereavement, the need to socialize often begins to manifest in people's lives. The often isolating time of our heaviest, early grief begins to weigh on us and we begin to feel the need to be with other people in some way.

Sometimes, old friendships can slip away, as people from our past, from our lives as part of a couple, are challenged by our new situations.

If we find that old relationships have not weathered the storm of our grief, a possible way for support programs to help people find new connections and interactions is to also bring its members together in some social way. Often, getting together socially with a group of bereaved people who all "get it" and all understand what we are going through can be a healthy and healing way of transitioning back to living again in a new world and the next part of our lives.

Coming together as part of a support program for meetings can be a start in the socialization process. Adding other events that slowly bring some measure of sociality to what the group does can help the process move forward.

A gentle and easy way to begin is to create a once-a-month potluck at the homes of the members of the group. If a different person hosts the group each month, it doesn't become a burden on anyone and it gives the group a place to talk, to share food, to learn about each other and in the end, as they perhaps become each others "friends in grief", they can become the people they travel forward with as they build the next part of their lives.

Beyond that, it is possible to meet in low energy venues within your communities. You can find quiet places to meet for lunch or dinner or an evening out with your new friends. Going slowly at first, getting together where it is quiet enough to talk are good strategies for beginning the socialization process. At the start, it should really be about getting to know one other and to talk about grief if you want or need to and really not about going out and "having fun", especially as the group is getting to know one another.

Topic Notes

Early Grief Topics

We are not our Grief, We are Grieving

Two quotes to begin with:

“Life is like a river and grief is like a flood.”

“Grief is like waves breaking on a beach, overwhelming during a storm and changing to broader, lower swells that wash up less often and more gently on the shore when the storm is over.”

Definition(s) of Grief and Mourning: What are we actually talking about here?

Grief: is a deep sorrow, especially when caused by someone's death. It is a *feeling within yourself* in response to someone dying.

The important thing to remember here is that *grief is a feeling* or actually *a very large and complex group of very intense feelings* that, especially early in the journey, come over you and kind of take you over. It is often totally visceral and emotional and not rational or thoughtful at all.

Mourning: is the *expression* of deep sorrow caused by someone's death. An external expression of your inner feelings (of grief) when someone dies. Mourning is about your *expression of how your grief makes you feel*.

As with all parts of grief, they are your expressions and reflect who you are and how you loved.

We grieve because we love:

It's important to know and remember that *it is our love and the ending of our lives with our loved ones that cause us to grieve*.

We miss them and all the interactions and time we spent together. We miss the things we did and said and were to each other, the things we will never get to do or the things we will never do again.

We feel the sadness and loneliness of being without them filling their space in our daily lives. Numbing silence fills our homes. For all these things and many others, we experience that deep sorrow and pain, feeling and believing that we will not be able to have any more time or experiences or love with our spouse or partner.

And everything and every moment reminds us of this. And it hurts! And it becomes the most wished for thing we have, if I could only have another hug or another day or...

Here's a verse and chorus from a song that captured those feelings pretty strongly.

Now there is empty,
now there is sadness,
now there is living all alone,

Now there is wishing,
with every breath I take,
for your somehow coming home.

...I am standing,
Though I'm wracked with pain,
Though my life has been shattered,
from us, into me, all alone...

from I Remain © Howard and Andi Fischer 12/2020

We are not our grief, We are grieving...

Being our grief or becoming our grief seems to contain the idea that grief has been incorporated into who we are and has become a permanent part of us and we are somehow stuck in a new life of grief without end.

Not being our grief, being separate from our grief, to me means that grief doesn't own us or define us. It is not actually a part of who we are and so, in time, we can pass through it because *it is something that is happening to us and is not part of our selves*.

Grief can be one of the most overwhelming emotional turmoils we ever experience. It can feel and be one of the most painful things we ever go through. But, even during the worst of the pain, it's good to remember that *grief is something that is happening to us but it isn't us*. We can still be growing and learning through it all as we move towards healing and wellness.

Our grief may become all encompassing *for a while*, painful beyond relief *for a while* but with time we also begin to become ourselves again, separate from the grief, able to honor our loved ones in our memory and in our actions, While we are changed by it, *we are not our grief!*

Again, as we grieve, as we experience grief, we are indeed changed by the experience. It is not that we become the grief because we change, but that the experience of going through the intensity of our grieving changes us just as any experience changes us. We definitely do change as we grieve but those changes are how we respond to what is happening in our life. Just because we are changing, doesn't mean we become our grief. We are grieving, we are changing, but we are not our grief!

A last idea to consider here:

As we grieve, it's also important to remember that *there is no one way to grieve or mourn nor is there one way to go through grief and mourning nor is there a time table, nor a "should do" list, nor a calendar... However long it takes, that's how long it takes.*

But, while we are not our grief, we still do grieve and mourn and something important to affirm here is:

It's always OK to grieve!

Because there is no single way to do it, nor a single right way to do it or experience it, you can do it in your own way and do it in your own time. *It's not up to others to tell you how or when to grieve nor for anyone to tell you when your grieving should be ended.*

When it's time to do something on your grief journey, you will know it but it should be when it feels right for you and not when somebody or some book or something you saw on the internet says you should do something or be something.

It's just different for each of us and we need to follow our own timetable and our own hearts... *Again, how ever long it takes, that's how long it takes.*

Negative grief and mourning behaviors:

Just as a reminder here, there can also be grief or mourning behaviors or the results of anger or frustration within our grief and mourning that are loud or violent or hurtful to ourselves or others. Those types of behaviors can become intrusive on others and we should be aware of and seek professional help for when our grief or mourning becomes too intense to navigate by ourselves or within a group setting.

Questions:

- Does it help to think of being separate from your grief and not let it be who you are?
- Can you see a way to separate from your grief but still remain yourself within the grieving?
- Can you perhaps think of any examples of you and your grief being different and separate?
- What would you be willing to share about how your grief makes (made) you feel and act, especially in the early days? What does (did) it feel like for you?
- What things do you miss most and do you see it as possible to learn to live without them in your daily lives?
- How might you begin to learn to fill some of those empty spaces?

- If it is possible, and you *have* begun to learn to accommodate to living without those things, how have you been able to do that?
- Is it OK for you to grieve?
- Do you think it's ok to grieve/mourn in public? Is there really a choice?
- What can you, or do you do when grief comes over you in a public place?

Hope, Healing and Wellness - Grief to Gold

Here are two somewhat related topics to explore. They are briefly mentioned in other discussions and here's a chance to open them up and find some more things to think about. They can be important frameworks on which to build.

They can become tools that you might use and that may help you find possibilities and places to look at as you move through your bereavement journey. If it's too early for you to think about these things, just take in what you can and maybe stash them away someplace to use later if you need them.

Definitions:

These are some important words we use often as we talk about and describe our grief and how we want to have it unfold. They describe three pretty significant ideas, concepts and goals for our journeys.

Hope: A feeling of expectation and a desire for a certain thing to happen. Grounds for believing that something good may happen. *To want* something to happen or be the case.

Healing: The process of becoming sound or healthy again. To alleviate a person's distress or anguish. To correct or put right an undesirable situation. To restore a person to spiritual wellness

Wellness: The state of being in good health, especially as an actively pursued goal.

The following is a way of looking at how hope, healing and wellness might develop during our bereavement. Although it may seem like just a semantic exercise, it can really tie a lot of things we may experience together. It can be a helpful (and hopeful) way to look at how these concepts may unfold as we travel through our journeys.

A continuum of Grief to Wellness:

When we first become bereaved, our grief journeys begin. We start moving through our grief and during that time, *grief is pretty much in control of our lives.*

At some point, and it's different for each of us, *we start to gradually take control of our life.* This actively begins our healing journey. The two journeys, grief and healing, now overlap.

Over time, our grief journeys began to slowly decline and our healing journeys began to slowly increase, and the healing gradually overtakes and begins to replace the grief as the dominant part of our life. Our grief journey still continues, but our healing journey

now begins to become the major part of our life, and our grief journey becomes submerged “behind it”.

So, grief and actively grieving become much less a part of our daily lives and healing becomes much more of what we are and what we do. This transition continues as we begin to find and create the next part of our lives.

Acceptance of all that has happened in our lives is a major part of beginning to find wellness, a place where we can coexist with our grief and healing as we begin to move forward in our lives.

At some point, as healing turns into wellness, we also move more strongly towards life and living. There may always be an element of grief in our life, but it becomes less and less powerful with time. There may always be an element of healing as well since there are always new things to learn. But eventually, wellness can take over in our lives.

Visually, it might look something like this:

Grief becomes less over time.....
Healing grows over time.....
Wellness develops as healing grows stronger.....

A final thing to remember here for all of us if we experience any of these changes is that there is no time table to it! *We find each change as and when we find it and our journeys unfold as they unfold.* When we get there is when we get there! While the parts of the continuum may be similar for everyone, the details of your journey will almost always be different from the details of anyone else’s journey as well.

Grief to Gold

One of the saddest and most difficult things that can happen over and over, especially in the first year of our bereavement, is that all of our memories of our life together with our loved ones are turned to sadness as they became overlain by our grief. Looking toward the past, no matter what we think about, it almost always makes us sad or triggers our grief and can cause us to cry and hurt as it sends a grief wave crashing over us full of “missing you” in almost every instance.

A part of that grief can be triggered by seeing all the things in our homes that reminds us of our loved ones and of our life together. Each time we see them, all the memories they invoked take on a deep sadness and so it becomes very hard to even look at the material things we loved and treasured as a couple.

But at some time, a possible goal of getting through our grief and of finding healing might be finding a way to remember our life as it was and not have it all filter through our grief. If we can somehow find a way to put the sadness in the background instead of

the foreground, we should be able to learn to let the joy of our life together come back to the surface and be able to look at our loved ones picture and look at all the things and memories that were part of our life once again and feel the joy we felt when we had lived them together.

It is probably going to be incredibly hard to do. The pain of loss is often so visceral and overwhelming that it takes a lot of time to learn to make it happen. But it is a real goal to pursue, because otherwise, what would be the purpose of keeping anything from the past around us or of thinking of the past at all. If we can't find a way to change it in some way, all of those material things and all our memories become just a continuing sadness that never heals and never lets us heal.

We can change our physical space and remove all the triggers it contains and try to stop thinking about our life, or we can change the way we see them and the way they effect us and learn to remove the filter of our grief from them and see them as they truly were. Either one is ok if that's a choice you make, and people have chosen both ways of reacting, especially to the physical part of their lives.

It would, however, honor our love to be able to remember the joy of our lives together and of the things we chose to keep in our home and world if we can figure out how to allow the memories to once again bring the good feelings of the events of our life to the surface and let that slowly replace the sadness that all those things brought us in our grief.

So, what if we can learn to *turn our "Grief into Gold!"*

What if we could begin to work on finding ways that we could change that feeling, of finding ways to not have things and places and memories trigger our grief. If we could, we would be able to remember our life together as it had been. We would be able to think of our loved ones and remember the good times, the special moments and even the bad times, not with grief but as a memory of who and what we were and the life we lived together.

If we can figure it out, we can again think about our loved ones and our life together with a smile, with joy and with gratefulness for the love we shared and all the things we had been and done, and not let our past and all it contained continue to be drowned in grief and sadness.

Over time, we can come through to a place where we have separated our past and our memories from our grief. We can see our things, and we can think about our loved ones and our life and see it as we remember it and not through the filter of our grieving. The memories, possessions and pictures can no longer be automatic triggers to sadness, our grief can no longer shroud the past. The memories can regained their richness and brightness and turn into gold. We can remember it as the life it actually was.

Questions:

- Are you aware of the different parts I've described in your own grief journey?
- If so, what part(s) of the continuum do you feel you are in?
- Can you see how healing and wellness are different places?
- What does healing mean to you?
- What does wellness mean to you?
- Where does the idea of functionality fit into this discussion?
- How would you like to see this complex of journeys unfold for you?
- Do you think that there is value in going through and experiencing all the parts of the continuum?
- Do you think that actively working on finding healing and/or wellness would help to accelerate or smooth the process?
- How might it do that?
-
- Can you see a way or a path to turn your grief into gold?
- How would you work on that?
- What would it look like for you?

Struggle vs Surrender

Our early grief journeys usually begin by being pretty out of control. Here are some things to think about when you feel like it's time to take some control and to *choose* the path you take on your own unique journey towards wellness.

Definitions:

Resistance: the refusal to accept something, the attempt to prevent something by action or argument. The opposition to, hostility to, the *struggle* or unwillingness to accept something or become something.

Resistance is much the same as struggle in the context of grief and is pretty much the opposite of acceptance!

Surrender: The idea of “surrender” often holds negative connotations. By definition, surrender means “to yield to the power or domination of another.” There is also an implication of giving up in surrender.

In the context of grief, surrender can take on another meaning. “*Surrendering to your grief*” means allowing yourself to be where you are at without judgment, to allow your emotions to be felt and to accept (in small steps) the new reality of your life. It also means facing the realities and difficulties, as well as the pain and sadness of your grief journey as and when they happen to you. (Amanda Hillman, Pathways)

Surrender, in this more positive sense also means *not fighting against or resisting your grief or your needing to grieve* and becomes a *positive process* through which each person can potentially find their own unique way *when they are ready to do so*.

Setting the Stage:

Hiding our Grief, Hiding from our Grief or Facing our Grief:

We all know that grief is painful and sad. It may be amongst the hardest and most emotionally difficult things we are ever faced with in our lives. But, we *do* have choices we can make about how we will react to that pain and sadness.

1. We can choose to be (seemingly) strong and stoic and try to hide (struggle against) our feelings of grief and the emotions they contain and not express them. We can try to control them and keep them to and maybe from ourself, locked away inside.

2. We can also hide from our grief. We can get super busy and try to put the pain and feelings off by doing lots of other things because we hurt so badly. We may even think that the pain and sadness have gone away...

3. A third choice is to face our grief (surrender to it) as and when it comes over us, to not turn (run) away from the pain and sadness but to embrace it and experience it as it happens, even knowing that it will be a long and painful journey.

Grief is part of life and love and perhaps we are here to experience it all and learn from it as part of our journey through life and also as a way to honor our love.

Avoidance:

When we do any type of avoidance, like struggling against our grief, hiding our grief or hiding from our grief, my experience and that of others I've talked to, is that the feelings of grief, pain and sadness don't really go away. What we've done if we are actively avoiding our grief is to find ways to let the feelings and emotions become hidden. We may have kept so busy or acted so stoically that we didn't take the time to feel them. Because we were not really dealing with them, they remain *unresolved* and can build up inside us where they still remain even if we don't think so.

Since we haven't learned all the things we need to learn, our grief and the emotions within it may even get more intense tucked away inside us until they find a way to come out sometime later down the road. Sometimes they explode as anger, sometimes they just build up and return to the surface with even more overwhelming pain than before.

So, in light of those images, a question to ask yourself is: *should you fight your grief (struggle and resist it) or would it be better to not fight your grief, but surrender to it, and go with the flow as it unfolds?*

Some images to consider:

1. If you are washed out to sea in a riptide, a seaward moving current that goes away from shore, it is usually way stronger than you are. If you fight it, you will eventually tire and run out of energy and by fighting, sometimes people don't have enough energy to make it back to shore.

But, if you let the current take you, don't fight it, surrender to it and let it carry you with its energy and take you out towards the sea (even though that doesn't seem to be where you want to go), eventually, the current will run out of energy. Once it does, you can use the strength and energy you didn't use fighting it to swim to the edge of the current and then turn and swim back to shore.

2. In coastal areas, many of the homes built at the back of a beach are often built not on concrete pilings but on wood posts, much like telephone poles, that are driven deeply into the sand.

Because concrete is not only strong but also rigid and inflexible, in the wind, they can actually be *too* resistant. Since they don't bend much at all, they tend to just rigidly

stand there and eventually break and collapse under the force of the wind and waves because they aren't flexible.

Wood pilings, however, are like palm trees, they flex and bend in the wind and while a house built on them may sway and shift, except under the most extreme conditions, the pilings don't usually fracture or shatter, they tend to be flexible and bend under the force of the wind and waves.

3. In electrical and computer systems, resistance reduces the flow of electricity and uses up energy. Resistance to the flow of electricity is changed to heat as it moves through the hardware and that degrades the amount of usable energy that moves through the system. Since it creates a loss of energy along the way, the more resistance, the less energy is available to run the system.

This is why your computer heats up as the energy flows and it processes data. The resistance takes some of the energy input and turns it into heat. The more resistance there is, the more heat is generated and the less energy remains for the computer to do its work.

Can you see how these images might guide you as you look to move forward in your grief journey and your life? When you are ready to take some control, how will you choose to grieve? Will you choose struggle or surrender or maybe choose a little bit of both? Does it have to be all or nothing? Can you use some of each depending on the situation you find yourself in or the people you are interacting with? Since we often feel powerless in our grief, the choice to surrender to our grief offers an empowerment of movement that in itself can be healing.

Questions:

- What does struggle mean to you? How about surrender?
- Are you resisting your grief? How do you think that effects how you grieve and how you might move towards healing and wellness?
- Can you think of other places or situations where surrender is a positive force that you might use as a model for applying it to your grieving?
- What coping skills, social skills and life skills do you think you need to learn to move forward and surrender to your grief as opposed to resisting it?
- If you have not yet reached a point of choice, based on who you are, would it be better for you to be rigid and inflexible (struggling against, resisting, and/or denying your grief) and possibly fracture or would it be better for you to be more malleable and bend under the force that is applied to you by your grief (surrendering to your grief)?

- Would it be better for you to struggle or surrender?
- Where are you now? Are you hiding your grief, struggling to control it, hiding from it or facing, accepting and surrendering to it. Or are you doing some of each?
- If you are struggling, what does your avoidance look like?
- If you are surrendering to it, what do you think helped you the most to choose that path?
- Why have you chosen the path that you have? Did it just happen or did something “push” you towards the direction you are following?

Spiritual Ideas - Connections that End, Connections that Remain

The experiences and ideas included here may or may not happen to you. They are not required to happen, there are no judgements associated with whether you have experienced any of these things or not. They are just possibilities. They have been reported by many people but surely not by all. Their meaning is always open to how you interpret them if you do experience them.

This is just to suggest that if you do experience things like this, that you might consider them in a way you perhaps have not in the past. Again, if you do experience them, to suggest that they can be used to help in your growth and healing. If you do not experience them or you do not find the explanations here resonate with you, that is fine as well.

We all have to find our own way through our grief and what works for *you* is the important thing for *your* growth and healing.

Terminology as used in the discussion...

Spirit or soul: The animating force within us. Soul is that animating force when it is within a person in the material world and spirit is when that force is no longer animating a body but exists as a separate entity none-the-less.

The veil: The boundary between the material world and wherever spirits or souls exist when they are not within a body.

Ideas to consider: Connections that end, connections that remain

There are many places where the spiritual nature of life and death are discussed and written about and most religions have very strong pictures of the part spirit (soul) plays in ones life and on how the spirit (soul) behaves and where it goes after it is free of its earthly body. It is not for this discussion to talk about any of those things in a religious way.

Again, the purpose here is to share an interpretation of things people have experienced during their bereavement, and to propose some thoughts to help you perhaps recognize that a manifestation and communication of spirit might be possible within the context of your own grief. It is also a chance for you to share any of your own experiences that may be of a similar nature.

Some things to think about:

We are our spirits (souls):

If you believe that there is an animating force within us that is who we are and that it is usually called soul or spirit when we talk about it, then it seems possible that who we are isn't limited by the body that surrounds us.

If spirit is really who we are, then when our bodies die, it is possible that our spirits are then free of the constraints of the material world and are free to move onward. Again, where they go and how or why that happens is usually in the realm of religion and not for this discussion. What is important in this context is that *if who we are is not just our bodies, and if we are truly our spirits or souls, then the passing of our bodies in no way ends the existence of the essence that is ourselves.*

Love flows both ways:

For most of us, we can agree that our spouses or partners loved us as we loved them and throughout our lives together, the love that we shared may have built a spiritual connection between us.

If you believe, as it says in so many different places, that when you die, you are reunited with your loved ones, then they need to be able to recognize you, spirit to spirit, and you need to be able to recognize them, spirit to spirit when you are reunited. Through time, we learn that recognition, not only of the bodies we occupy but also of our spirits all throughout our lives together and through the love that we build and share.

Also, it is possible that our loved ones would not want us to be hurting or sad or lonely as much as we would not want to be those things ourselves. We surely would not have wanted that to be true for them if the roles were reversed.

So, should it not also be possible that they can and would want to reach back across the veil to give us reassurance if they could, to sooth us, to comfort us, to hold us with spirit arms just to let us know they are safe and at peace and that they are still with us in spirit and they are and will be a part of us forever.

Dreams, visions, voices from across the veil:

With those ideas in mind, it also seems, that the passing of a spouse or partner can often be a reality altering experience.

Sometimes, in our extreme sadness, disorientation and emotional pain, it may seem like *we can see a bit more of the universe than we normally do.* Sometimes we seem to be able to see or hear our loved ones reaching out to us in dreams or visions, voices or seeming coincidences.

Perhaps, instead of these things just being a product of our grief or imagination, we actually can experience different things during our bereavement that we may not be able to do under more ordinary circumstances. Perhaps in a sense, the veil to the spirit world thins with the passage of a soul through it and creates an increase in permeability through which *we can experience things that we may not be able to do otherwise*.

The thinning of the veil between the everyday world and the world of soul, between the material world and the world where spirits exist when they are not animating bodies, may allow us to experience dreams, visions, voices and events that are messages if you will, from our loved ones.

Suspending our disbelief, a new way to look at the world:

If we experience these moments of perceptual change, if we see or hear more than we are used to and are experiencing things we may not understand or may not have believed in, *we have a choice*. We can decide that what we are perceiving is not real and hold tight to the world as we knew it or we can *suspend our disbelief* and accept that the world is a larger and stranger place than we thought. Either way is ok..

If we choose to, we can perhaps come to see that there are things that are possible that we may not be able to explain or fit into the seemingly rational way of looking at the world we may have grown up with, been taught or have lived with all our lives to this point.

The thinning of the veil between the material world and the spirit world with the passage of a soul across it, added to the emotional turmoil of our grief, at least for a brief time, may sometimes actually allow us to experience these messages from our loved ones; not as hallucinations, but as actual transcendent experiences, as reality, not illusion.

We may not be able to explain them but by suspending our disbelief, we can take the dreams, visions, voices and coincidences and listen to them and accept that we hear, see and experience them, and be joyful and honored that our love could open these pathways and allow these messages to reach *in both directions* across the veil.

And if we do experience things outside of our normal perceptions and way of looking at the world, we can also choose how involved we want to be - we may choose to just experience them and let them go or we may choose to continue to let them into our life and encourage them to continue, to give our love the freedom to keep expressing itself or to begin to do so at any time down the road. It may be easier at the beginning when we are most open and shaken loose from the world as we believed it to be. Or not.

But please remember, if you don't experience any of these things, it doesn't mean your love wasn't or isn't strong, it just means that you didn't experience them now (or yet)... It also doesn't mean that you might not experience them at some time in the future.

There are no judgements here about good or bad, right or wrong, these are just experiences we may or may not encounter along the way.

Your stories:

If you would like to share any stories of things you may have experienced in this way, feel free to do so. If possible, please try to keep your comments in as non-religious a context as you can since others may have different views of the meaning of these events from that perspective.

It's the experiences we consider to be communications and contacts that we may have had that will be helpful and interesting to share, although it would also be interesting to know how you feel about what they mean and how they happen.

Questions:

- How do you see it?
- What does it look like to you?
- What do these types of experiences mean to you?
- If you have not had any of these experiences, how does hearing about them impact you?
- Would you be willing to try to “suspend your disbelief” if it meant you had to change how you view the world? What if it allowed you to have additional connections with your loved ones?
- If you have had any of these experiences, do you see them as hallucinations or do you think they are indeed real communications from your loved one? Even if you don't understand how that might happen.
- No matter whether you have had them or not, do you see these as possible and real or are they too strange and “out there” to believe?
- What do you think these things mean in the context of your grief?
- If you have experienced things like this, do you see them as a way to continue to have your loved ones be a presence in your life? Is that a good thing or not?
- How might we encourage these types of experiences to continue?

Waves of Grief

One of the more commonly expressed statements about grief from people who are grieving is that rather than being a constant feeling, feelings of grief rise and fall like waves in the ocean and crash like waves at the shore.

As part of that image consider the idea that *Waves of Grief = Waves of Love!* Each time a wave of grief crashes over you, mixed with the pain and feelings of loss and sadness remember that *we grieve because we love.*

Going to your knees under the onslaught of the waves. Learning to get back up:

If you've ever stood in the water on an ocean beach, especially after a storm when the waves are strong and high, the waves can knock you to your knees, they can put you on the ground and roll you over and over as they wash back off the shore. When that happens, their strength is often so much greater than yours that all you can do is let it happen, roll with it and as the wave recedes and leaves you breathless on the sand, stand and become ready for the next wave.

It's the getting back up that's the challenge, especially when wave after wave knocks you down and you become fatigued and start running out of strength and breath. But even though it might begin to feel hopeless, you have to get back up and brace for the next wave.

Hope vs. Hopelessness: looking for some light:

Grief can definitely cause feelings of hopelessness, especially early when the waves come over us hour after hour, day after day, week after week. It sometimes gets to feeling like we will never get any relief and this pain will go on forever.

People often say about their grief, that "this hurts worse than anything I've ever experienced. No one can be hurting as much as I am".

It can feel that bad, and it can feel that unique. Early in our grief journey, grief is almost totally in control and the waves come so fast and the hurt comes at such a visceral level that it is almost 100% emotional and uncontrollable. It can make us sick or sick-feeling all day long and for day after day. It will almost surely make us cry at times like we will never be able to stop. It can keep us from eating and sleeping well and generally messes with everything in our lives as wave after wave crashes over us. It can feel that bad and that hopeless!

That level of pain happens to a lot of us in our early grief and while ours feels like it's the worst ever and becomes almost an isolating thing, we can also find ways to come together and tell our stories. We can share that pain, dilute it by the sharing and find

some relief by letting it be expressed outside of ourselves and knowing that we are not alone in what we are feeling and going through.

Fortunately, for a large number of us, with time, the waves become less high, they come less often and we start being able to catch our breath between waves. We can slowly move from grief being in control of our lives to beginning to take control back into our own hands.

Further along, if not the sun, we can at least begin to see the light behind the clouds and the promise that some day, some time, some how, the clouds might actually part and some light will come back into our lives. We can start to live again and begin building the next part of our lives.

Telling your story is important:

This is why we have support groups! A valuable thing, especially in the early part of your grief journey, is to be part of a support group where you can tell your grief story and be able to listen to other people tell their grief and healing stories and the things they had learned along the way.

Having people at different places along the way, from a few months or even a number of years into the process telling what they had learned on their *healing journeys* can give you ideas and things to think about as well as new ways to understand what is happening to you.

A very important part of the group experience is that it will let you know that you aren't alone and that sharing your grief journey will help to create healing over time and that what is happening to you isn't as unique as it seems to be, and you can learn from hearing other people's stories as well.

If people have been surviving grief and sharing their journeys for as long as there have been people and grief, then we can and will survive it as well.

Becoming each others "Friends in Grief":

This may well be the most important part of what being together in a Support Group environment can do. It may not be obvious, especially early in our journeys, but as we listen and share our stories and the pain and sadness and other emotions we feel, we are also learning about each other. We are building strong bases on which friendships can develop as we help each other to work through our grief, as we build the foundations upon which the next part of our lives and the people in them will rest.

As time goes by, especially if past friends and relationships change because of our changed lives, these new "friends in grief" can become the core of the people we journey forward with.

Our social lives, our conversations, our interactions can all build out of these friendships because we always have that basic commonality of “I get it, I know how you’re feeling” that creates a comfort and familiarity no matter our backgrounds or beliefs. We all are bereaved and we can all help each other in the process of hope and healing. And we can become friends! And again, these friends can be the people we travel with into and through the next part of our lives.

Crying and Hugging are OK:

We are often brought to tears by the intensity of our emotions. We all need to feel free to express those emotions and cry when and where we need to.

One of the things our group of fellow travelers offers us when we meet is a safe place to cry where everyone knows why we cry and that we often can’t really control it and that we need to do it. And hugs are a way of saying thanks to each other for the sharing and the help and the dilution of our pain by its sharing.

Support groups and the people in them offer us a place where its ok to grieve and where no one is telling us to “get over it” or “suck it up” and move on. They are a place where we all understand that it takes time and sometimes a lot of time and we only find healing as and when we find healing, we can’t force it to happen any sooner than it does.

Connecting with others who share this journey and letting each other know we are there to help in what ever way we can is a very important gift we can give each other.

Getting other help:

Please seek out professional counseling if dealing with your grief begins to seem too overwhelming. Many of us were care-givers in some way during our lives, let someone now help you in your need as you may have helped others in theirs.

Questions:

- How do the waves of grief happen to you? What does it feel like?
- Does your grief make you feel isolated?
- Does it help to know that others share many of the same feelings and experiences during their grief?
- How do the waves come differently for you and the now if you have been grieving for a while?
- How do you react when a wave overtakes you?

- Can you cry and express your grief whenever you need to?
- What do you think about expressing or not expressing your grief in front of your family or children?
- How do you deal with other peoples reactions to your expressions of grief?
- Can you see a time when you can perhaps start to live again in a new way, perhaps with the people you are meeting and becoming friends with through this support group?
- Would you be willing to start doing other things besides the meetings and potlucks together as friends? What would that look like?
- What would you like to do if you had some friends to do or share it with?

Dealing with the Holidays and Other Stressful Events and Days

Three things to discuss:

1. *The year of firsts for holidays and other special days.*
2. *How will you go on?*
3. *Sharing holiday stories and pictures. (Note: to share pictures and mementos of the holidays, encourage people the month before this meeting to bring something special of that nature to share with the group).*

Holidays and other special event days are always important times in our lives. In our grief however, this speciality can transform into especially painful and difficult. They are often a poignant reminder of who is no longer with us to share the experience.

Particularly during our “year of firsts”, our grief is often expanded and opened wider and somehow made more unbearable at these times. In some ways, how we deal with these events can set the stage for how we proceed through our early grief and be a strong part in how we eventually make the transition to healing and wellness.

Some special days:

- Christmas
- Thanksgiving
- Other special holidays
- Their Birthday
- Their Passing day
- Your birthday
- Anniversaries
- Family weddings
- Valentines day
- Kids/grandkids birthdays
- Veterans Day
- Vacations or other trips
- ?? others

There are two times during our grief journeys when these special days come up, the *first time* and *all the rest of the times*.

There is only one first time for each event! It’s usually the most intense and poignant. We all have our firsts to deal with. We all have to go through each trial and each “special” day *without our loved ones for the first time in perhaps a very long time* and we have almost nothing to hold on to or cling to but memories as the waves begin to rise and try to sweep us away.

So this meeting is about having a chance to talk about it, to find out how we feel and if we have been there to share ways we have learned for making it through the “year of firsts” and especially through the holidays and other special days during that year. It’s also about sharing ideas for how we can grow, adapt and find peace on those days going forward.

What’s next:

How do you want to go on, especially after the first time. How we want to go forward.

Spend some time sharing stories about holiday memories, traditions and events and also share mementos and pictures from those days in our lives if you brought them.

Then we can talk about the questions below and how these days might look to us going forward.

Questions:

- What are your feelings about experiencing your first of any of these days to come or how did you feel if you are past that point.
- Do (did) you want to avoid dealing with them the first time or would you rather meet them head on or do some of both (struggle or surrender) ???
- During your year of firsts if you’ve had one, what turned out to be the most difficult day for you? Why?
- What can you do to prepare for the next time?
- Do you want to hold on to old traditions, break old traditions, make new traditions, do nothing at all? Would you rather it changed each year and adapt what you do to each season and holiday to fill your changing needs and wants.
- What do you plan this year? Is it different or the same as in the past?
- How can you also respect and possibly meet the needs of others of your family and friends who may be very strongly grief-filled as well. What if their needs are different than yours. Can you, should you, will you compromise?
- Do you have any guilt about wanting to change things or from actually making changes? If so, how will you or are you dealing with it?
- If you choose to change, how can you find your own (new) ways of honoring your loved ones on the holidays and on other special days that fill *your* new needs.

- What about travel? Can you entertain the possibility of traveling by yourself or taking (short) holiday or vacation trips with friends?

Using Intent Statements to Chart our Paths

Choosing Intent Rather than Resolution:

New years resolutions are a tradition and breaking them is also a tradition. The idea of a resolution is pretty linear, it says “I will do this”. An intent is more non-linear, it’s about how you want to live your life and focus your activities and thoughts for some period of time.

It’s pretty easy to *make* a resolution, just say I’m going to do this! It’s also just as easy to *break* it, just don’t do it and once you don’t do it, you’ve broken it and it’s done.

You can try to revisit it, but you’ve already shown that it’s not that important to not break it, you’ve probably said “I can always go back to it” but often that happens sporadically or not at all, we move on and leave the resolution behind. In a way, we have made and broken a promise to ourself and in another way it’s a small (or not so small) failure. We *didn’t* get it done!

When we *intend* to do something, it is not so much a requirement as it is a plan. It defines a path and a direction and a movement that can come and go, can be very powerful or sit in the background but it is always there to guide our thoughts and actions when we need it to. Our intent can be our blueprint for the year (or day, week, or month) to come and more of a goal to accomplish than a task to be completed.

Intention can be a big part of change too. If you intend to change, your belief in your intent and your desire to see what the outcome is can help you to find meaning and direction in your life and give you a focus for growth that seems to be more gentle than a resolution. Your intent can lead you to learn or accept or find a more calm approach to your grief journey or your intent can be whatever you want it to be. It can be your guide and help you focus as you learn what you need to learn to find your hope and healing and let it grow to become wellness within you.

Working on ourselves:

Whether we like it or not, we are now here in the world without our spouses or partners to share our days and nights with. We need to learn to grow and change and find new meaning and purpose to give our lives direction.

In many cases, that means working on ourselves, changing things about ourselves and becoming more by learning and exploring life again and using the time we have been given. As we work on ourselves, as we craft our new lives, redefining our meaning and purpose can be and often is challenging but can also be important things to consider doing.

With the passing of our spouses we are often left with broken, damaged and maybe even destroyed meaning in our lives. As we consider how we will progress into the

New Year, finding or creating new meaning and purpose can become a base we can stand on as we learn to build hope and healing moving forward. By growing and learning, we can use our growth to honor our loved ones.

Setting goals and expectations for ourselves for the new year:

So this meeting is about finding some goal and some expectation and defining it by our *intent* and letting it be our guide through out the year to help us find hope and healing and to embrace our grief and our opportunities to become more.

Let's write an intent statement for the New Year on the papers provided and share them with the group and explain what they mean to each of us going forward.

**Learning to Live Again and
Reconstruction Topics**

The Beginnings of Reconstruction

This discussion is about a mostly emotional part of grief that may be even harder to address than the physical aspects of trying to move forward. It's about building emotional foundations for the future. What constructive things we do here can set the stage and give us a strong base on which to build during the healing processes to come. Our *approach* to healing can play a large role in how our healing and our grief journey as a whole progresses as we start to reconstruct our lives.

Can we find a way to use our grief and the reconstruction that accompanies it in a positive way to grow as people and become more?

Finding meaning and purpose as we start to restructure our "new" lives:

A loss of meaning and purpose is something most spouses and partners experience as a large part of their grief. At some level, our spouse or partner and our love for each other were central to all the meaning and purpose we had in our relationship and in our lives.

Since our shared meaning and purpose has been taken from us, as part of the healing process, we now need to redefine meaning and purpose for ourselves alone. We now need to learn how to create and use a new meaning and purpose to guide us and to help fill the empty places. We need to find ways and reasons to go forward in our lives and possibly, to find what we can to dedicate ourselves to that will give us a reason to go on.

Finding a new meaning and purpose in our lives can become a "full time job".

Unfortunately, as with many parts of grief and the reconstruction process, there isn't an easy or straight forward answer that everyone can use. We all have to find our own way and our own meaning and purpose. We have to figure out how to do that by lots of self examination and questioning to see if we can identify things that would be meaningful to us now. Then we have to find ways to bring those things into our lives and make them part of who we are going forward.

Honoring our loved ones and creating meaning and purpose: Questions and possibilities to think about going forward...

How can we allow our "new" lives to still contain our love and our connections with our loved ones? How can we allow our new lives to reflect and honor our spouses or partners? Can we choose to do things and become more of the person they would have approved or affirmed us becoming? Can we change things about ourselves or become better at things we already are? Can we do these things in their honor and as a gift to them and to ourselves, believing that we will become better for our efforts?

These changes are things we may not have had time to do or the will to do in the middle of our everyday lives. In our bereavement, we have a lot of time to fill and that time may now be available for us to learn, change and grow. Choosing to do these things in a direction our spouses or partners would have loved for us to do is a very powerful way to honor them and to make our memories and our love even stronger and more a part of who we are.

What would our loved ones want us to do or be as we grieve? Can we honor our loved ones by giving them the gift of us grieving and learning and growing as graciously as possible, with as much strength as possible, with as much courage as possible, however that looks for us?

Since *we grieve because we love*, as we grieve then, we *have an opportunity to do it as another act of love*. When we are ready, we can choose to face our grief with purpose. We can choose to experience and face it in ways that honor our loved ones. We can accept it and surrender to it and move through it to honor our spouses and partners and the love we shared while we learn to stand and live again, each in our own way and in our own time.

A caution about how we think about the past and things we did or didn't do or say:

As we begin to look more deeply at our lives and ourselves, *dwelling* on the past and things we cannot change or undo is not uncommon. But, it usually does nothing constructive for us and can often be very destructive mental behavior that our grief can lead us to. It may very well cause or increase our suffering and not be a healing behavior at all.

We may need to think about those things to find out how we feel about them now. But, we can also become caught in a loop of frustration and guilt by *dwelling* on them excessively. That not only keeps us from healing, it may actually move us away from healthy thinking and healing as well.

Not that it doesn't happen. Not that we don't all dwell on things from time to time. But in life in general, as well as in grief, *coming to accept the things we can't change about the past is an important part of finding any kind of mental and emotional healing and wellness*.

Questions:

- *Have you felt the loss of meaning and purpose in your life?*
- *Does the lack of meaning and purpose make it hard to find reasons to do things?*
- *Do you think that the loss of meaning and purpose is significant in keeping you from wanting to move forward in your life?*

- *Can you begin to think of ways to create new meaning and purpose?*
- *How can you find what those new meanings and purposes might look like and be?*
- *What might you do to help you find them?*
- *How do you define meaning and purpose now?*

Looking for Positive and Effective Thoughts and Solutions

Early in our bereavements not much looks positive, not many thoughts are uplifting and solutions of any sort seem almost impossible to find. As time passes, as the waves of grief become less strong and come less often, we slowly begin to assume some control of our lives again and with that, it is important to try to look for positive ways to cope with the many things that have changed in our lives.

Semantics:

Here, as in so many parts of our grief journeys, each of us experience things differently and solve things differently. Early in our grief, we are often “controlled” by our grief. What we experience is mostly coming from our emotional self and rarely has much of our rational self involved. The thoughts, the feelings and emotions just cascade over and through us. Mostly, all we can do is “ride the wave” as best we can, let the current carry us where it will until “the tide turns” and we can begin to find ways to re-engage some active control in our lives and move towards the shore of hope and healing.

Since we don’t want to and since we won’t always be actively and painfully grieving, when we are ready, we want to begin to investigate ways to take an active part in our reconstructive process.

As we begin the process of *actively* seeking hope and healing, it’s important to remember that *grief is actually not a single feeling and emotion by itself*. When we are grieving, there are components of a large number of emotions present, usually at the same time. Our grief may be a tangible feeling within us but it is also a composite of a wide range of emotions and feelings.

As we begin to sort it out, as we tease it apart in our thoughts and try to see how we can make it better or at least make it hurt less, as we start on our reconstruction journey of hope and healing, it’s important to try to identify what we are dealing with and working on at any given time. Trying to solve the wrong problem leads to frustration and confusion and thoughts of “it’s just not working and I don’t know why”...

Particularly during the first year or so of our grief journeys, it helps tremendously if the words we use to describe our thoughts, feelings and emotions are as accurate as we can make them. For example, the sadness and the loneliness parts of our grief are different things and need to be addressed differently because they each probably need different resolutions. If you’re trying to stop feeling sad for example, and you start doing the things that make you not feel lonely, then you don’t fix the problem, you don’t fix sad because you’re working on the wrong thing! You can’t stop feeling sad if you’re working on lonely!

So, it's important to learn to identify which parts of your grief you're feeling, thinking about, and working on as closely as possible, so you can work on them in a way that actually leads to some level of healing and resolution. If possible, it is always helpful to try to identify and name as clearly as you can what it is you're trying to do.

Questions:

- Can you identify different emotions within your grief?
- Do you think it is important to use different strategies for each of the emotions you do feel?
- Do you feel that dealing with each emotion separately might help you find some healing?
- Can you look to your past and perhaps remember how you dealt with any of those emotions before, especially when they were separate and not part of the large group of tangled emotions present in your grief?
- Can you list some different emotions you are feeling and what strategies you might use to work on them?
- Can you think of words to describe what you feel in grief and how they might mean different things and require different responses from you.

Dealing with External Expectations

There are other people in the world:

If you are not totally isolated during your grieving, you will be interacting with people in all parts of your life. It often seems as though people rarely know what to say or do and that everyone has expectations of how you should be, what you should do and when you should do it.

Many people, with the best of intentions, often believing they are helping you, tend to impose their expectations on you by the way they act, how they treat you and talk to you and sometimes even by telling you what to do or when to do it.

Much of it is probably well intentioned, but there may also be situations and people who have their own agendas and want you to do or be something for their own purposes.

That also includes people just wanting you to go back to being how you were. Those people seem to want us to grieve quickly and “get over it” and become our old selves as soon as possible in a way that is maybe the least difficult for *them* to understand or deal with.

No matter what the reasons, all of these expectations are things we have to deal with and find ways to cope with or work around. Some are easy and match our own inclinations while others are much more difficult and can seem or actually be hurtful and not in our best interests.

There are no easy answers on how to recognize which of these you are dealing with but as with so many things in grief, *it's usually best if it's your way, in your own time and in what you see as your best interests*. Whenever possible, try to do things when you are ready and comfortable doing them regardless of what anyone suggests or tries to require you to do.

Get over it! NOT!

The “get over it” idea seems to be out there a lot too. Whether it's about going back to work or about just not talking or crying about it any more, there seems to be a lot of often unconscious pressure from people we deal with who have not been bereaved to have us put our grief behind us.

The non-bereaved *may very well not understand how little control we have* at times and that we would probably like to stop feeling and expressing our grief even more than *they* would like us to stop expressing it. They don't know that it's often not in our control and it just happens when it happens.

They also very likely don't understand that our talking about our grief and our loved ones is part of what we *need* to do to heal and that telling our stories, sometimes over and over is one way we have of relieving some of the intolerable stress and aching sadness that grief brings into our lives.

It is very important that we empower ourselves to grieve for as long and in what ever healthy ways we need to grieve, despite what anyone else feels is right or good for us!

Some things to consider about possible reasons people react the way they do:

When someone grieves for longer than people feel they should, when they don't "get over it" and return to normal behaviors, *many people seem to act as though they feel that we are somehow "ill" and not dealing with our bereavement in a "strong" and healthy way.*

There is a general feeling in our society that one shouldn't dwell on problems of any kind, that we should always be strong and stoic and move forward as soon as possible from any hardship and that we should certainly keep our emotions and pain to ourselves. That feeling implies that we should keep our emotions private and always appear in control at least when we are in public, if not all the time. "

Unfortunately, this fairly common attitude puts pressure in two directions. First, it gets in the way of a bereaved individual expressing their grief. But, secondly, it keeps the non-bereaved from understanding that *our expressions of grief are not usually something we can control or if we find ways to control them and suppress them, we may be doing ourselves more harm than good and prolonging the process of healing.*

At the same time, if we don't show our emotions and/or our grief, *if we don't let people see us grieving, then they get the impression that we're fine, that we're ok.* By not showing our grief, *we give a distorted picture of what grief is* and how it effects us.

And for us, *not expressing our grief makes it hard to get or ask for help later down the road* if we need it because everyone thinks we are over it and *they don't understand why suddenly, seemingly out of the blue, we "relapse" and show our grief and that maybe we are really not (and really never have been) ok.*

Questions:

- Have you encountered other peoples expectations of what you should or shouldn't be or do in you bereavement?
- Have you had people tell you to get over it? How did it make you feel? How did you react?
- Have you felt that people telling you to "get over it" was more about their own uncomfortableness and less about you than you would have liked or expected?

- Have you experienced someone trying to tell you what to do and/or trying to take over your life.
- Have you experienced people shutting your grief expressions down and not allowing you to express them?
- Have you experienced people telling you it's *not* ok to grieve?
- Have you been made to feel or had it expressed that your grieving was going on too long and that you were somehow “pathological” if you didn't get over it quickly?
- Later in your grief and healing journey, once you have gained some control of things that are happening to you and that you are feeling, what do you think would be a good way for you to help people understand and find some comfort in how you need to do your grieving and maybe change how they react or respond?

Things People Say

In the end, many people really don't know what to do for or say to a bereaved person.

Often, because they don't really know what to say or do, there can be a large disconnect between what others feel and mean to express and the way they express it and in our grief, the way we take what they express.

When listening to what people say, especially in our early grief, we are often so raw and so emotional that almost anything can start us crying. It can often make us angry when something someone says sounds insensitive or even cruel whether it was or not, whether it was meant that way or not. We also often feel hurt when people don't offer the support we were hoping for.

Maybe more importantly tonight, especially for those a little further along the road, how do you feel about what people say now compared to how things made you feel earlier in your journey. What have you learned along the way about dealing with things people say?

Also, in light of what you might have learned, what would you say now when meeting someone who is newly bereaved that might be different from what you said or would have said earlier in your life and earlier in your grief journey?

Words or phrases we would or would not want to hear:

Because there are many things that people say that make us less than pleased when we hear them and other things we would like to hear that we often don't, here is a list of things people want or don't want to hear other people say for you to talk about.

Things we don't necessarily want to hear:

How was your day? How are you doing? How are you feeling? (should we respond honestly?)

They are in a better place.

This too will pass.

If your faith had been stronger this probably wouldn't have happened.

Aren't you glad it's over?

You will meet someone else.

You just need to find/enter another relationship, get another person to fill the space and it will all be ok.

When are you moving back home?

A child from a previous relationship telling a bereaved spouse, “you don’t have any reason to be here any more.”

You’ll have so much more time now.

Well, that doesn’t surprise me.

Having people trying to or actually taking over your life, offering or even demanding to manage your finances or how and where you live.

People suggesting that it’s time to clean out the old stuff from your life/home and offering unwanted help for you to move forward. “Let me know when I can come over next weekend and we can do that.”

You should be or I thought you were over it by now.

Are you still going to those support group meetings?

Get over yourself.

People turning the conversation to how they feel and making it about them.

Things that would be helpful to hear or experience:

If someone said nothing and then just let me ramble and cry.

If someone would just hug me and hold my hand and let me talk.

What would your spouse have wanted for you.

Someone to take the time to ask you questions about your relationship and your spouse and maybe special times you want to recall.

Having understanding people in the workplace who give you the the time and space you need to grieve in.. your boss tells you to feel free to close your door and cry or what ever else you need to do.

Can you try to explain how you feel to me?

It was so nice to have had your spouse as a friend.

Have someone do something practical to help.

Don't give me advice.

I think you are doing well.

Any type of encouragement.

Any type of regular contact and offers of help.

Seeing your spouses picture and saying "they look like they were such a nice person."

People showing that they care about you and how you are doing.

Understanding that support meetings are for support. They don't necessarily make us get better.

Encourage the non-bereaved to let it be all about you!

Let's add to the list if we want to and then perhaps tell stories of things we have experienced that are still hurtful or were wonderful and maybe still make us feel good.

Questions:

- What have you heard that was insensitive, inappropriate, just plain cruel or really made you angry!
- What are the *best* things someone said or did?
- What would you like people to say and do to/for you when they encounter your bereavement for the first time?
- How has the work environment been for you if you are still working?
- ******Has how *you* might react to another bereaved person changed since you experienced your own bereavement?
- What might you say or do now that is different?

Taking Control of the Next Part of our Lives

For many of us, the beginning of our grief journey happens in a fog. The early days, weeks and months especially, are times when our grief is in control of our lives and we are just being pushed from moment to moment and thing to thing with little or no thought or control of our own.

As time passes, and our grief begins to become less demanding, we are faced with the daunting task of taking control of our lives back into our hands. Of finding reasons to do so and of learning to make (good) decisions and chart new directions.

As an affirmation, please remember that no matter how it may feel at times, you're not going crazy, everything is ok to think and feel in our grief, *but not necessarily to act upon.*

With that said, please remember that negative thoughts and places *can* exist in grief. Please turn away from them. Don't get stuck dwelling on them and don't embrace or act on them even if they do come into your mind. Please remember to find help to do so if you can't do it on your own.

Again, many of the things going through our minds during our grieving, especially in the "fog" of our early grief, may sometimes have us doubting our sanity. They may be so outside our normal experiences and ways of thinking and acting that we wonder if we will ever be able to, or want to function or think clearly or "normally" again.

Most of these things however, are direct effects of our grief and the inertia that lives within it. The good thing is, like the waves of grief, pain and sadness we experience early on, these things too tend to become less common and less severe over time.

It's also possible that grief is like an "emotional stroke" where our thinking and emotions and feelings are disconnected from their normal pathways by the trauma and pain we have experienced. As with a physical stroke, we are, in a sense, debilitated for a time until we are able to *retrain* ourselves and *find new pathways* for our thoughts and emotions to accommodate and facilitate the changes and the new ways of thinking and feeling that our grief has brought us to.

Picking up the pieces, taking on the tasks, some mostly material world things to think about:

In most marriages, things that need to be done are almost always shared out between the two spouses or partners. There is always a list of things to do in our lives but now, while that list continues, we often have little or no energy or interest to get up and do them. But, all the material tasks and jobs and repairs and that endless-seeming list of things life always gives us to do must be done by us, on our own, or we need to find help to do them.

We can find endless reasons to not do things too, including not really caring whether they get done or not. It's a time when thoughts like: I can't, I don't want to, I don't know how, I won't, and it's too hard, can take us over and keep us stagnant if we let them.

But we now have a *responsibility* to maintain both our material world and our emotional world. We have a *responsibility* to keep the material world needs of our lives moving forward and not allow them to stop or atrophy or deteriorate and fail because we can't find the energy or will to do them.

We also have the responsibility to ourselves, our families, and our friends to remain as mentally and physically healthy as we can as we find a road that leads us to healing, wellness and living.

There is also a trap here to be aware of. If we don't begin to recognize and overcome the physical and mental inertia in our lives, the longer we wait, the more habitual and ingrained the inertia becomes and the more excuses we can find to put things off.

The more we put things off, the easier it becomes to find ever-new excuses to not do things and to excuse ourselves from doing them because we are grieving, even long after our grief begins to taper off in its intensity.

The sooner we begin to fight the inertia in all its disguises and learn to overcome it, the sooner we will begin to find energy again to pursue all aspects of our lives. It can be a major part of our healing journey, of building the strength and confidence to be able to live again.

It's not an easy task and it's actually easier to *not* work on it and to let it keep us bound and static but it's a critical task we should try to take on as soon as we can. *We need to do the work and escape the hidden trap of I can't or I don't want to.... turning into I won't and I don't.*

Making decisions without our loved ones, some emotional things to think about:

This can be one of the hardest emotional and mental things we have to learn to do. In most marriages, there are not only shared tasks, there are also many shared decisions. We discuss things and we decide together what we want to do or how we want to proceed or do things. There are also individual decisions we make based on our individual roles within our marriages or partnerships.

As hard as it is now to do what had been *our own* decision making, during our bereavement, we need to learn to do *all* the decision making we used to share. Just as we need to learn to do all the material things we used to share, this becomes a major effort but also a major step we eventually have to take going forward.

Especially if the person who is no longer there was making most of the decisions about a particular part of our lives, we now have to pick up the ball and without the support or help from that person, we get to do it ourselves.

How do we do that????

It's another daunting task with no easy or convenient solutions. As it is with material tasks, it's ok to ask for help and allow, and sometimes delegate, trusted friends and family to help us do some of the tasks and make some of the decisions. It's also ok to let them help us learn how to *make* decisions (again) on our own. We need to try to make sure, however, that they are *our* decisions if we can, because in the end we have to live with them and the consequences of them.

Giving a shit!

It can sometimes be very hard in our grief to find the will to care about much of anything at all. To doubt that there is a good reason out there for us to even bother to try.

It is another part of inertia that, as we look at our shattered lives, at the loss of not only our love but of our futures, that we often can't see a reason to look toward the future *at all*. It's hard in that time to not descend into some pretty heavy hopelessness and see no reason to do much of anything.

But it's important to remember that since *we are not our grief, we are grieving*, it may well be our *grieving* that makes us feel that way. It may be another form of mental inertia.

If nothing else, our loved ones would want us to carry on, to find new reasons to live and grow and maybe more importantly, if the roles were reversed, we would want those things for them!

While we sometimes can't see much reason to face and do the myriad of tasks and chores and responsibilities of living now that we are alone, part of the hope in hope and healing is that we will slowly learn to do those things *despite* our despair and loneliness. That we will slowly learn the skills and tasks it requires for us to go on living. And that we will also actually learn to care that we learn them.

It's important to hold on through those bleak times, through the winter of our grieving, to do the work and to move forward in small steps as we can. It is important to slog through the snow no matter how tired we feel and how hopeless it looks.

And one day, out of seemingly nowhere, we may see a small fire burning in the distance that we can head toward, embrace and allow its heat and light to begin to warm us and heal us. To let us find the strength within ourselves to survive, and not just to survive, but to begin to grow and live again, to turn our "grief to gold".

It is important to do whatever it takes to build hope and healing within our shattered hearts, emotions and lives. Our loved ones would want us to do so. With time, the waves of grief become less high. They also come less often and we start to be able to catch our breaths between waves. The hopeless thoughts and days also come less often. We can slowly move from grief being in control of our lives to beginning to take control back into our own hands and let healing begin.

Further along, if not the sun, we can at least begin to see the light behind the clouds and the promise that some day, some time, some how, the clouds might actually part and some light will come back into our lives. We can begin to feel that the storm will finally pass and that gentle, calming swells of life will replace the intensity and turbulence of our grief. We can start to live again and begin building our (new) lives.

Questions:

- If you have begun to take on the tasks and make the decisions you used to share, what strategies have you used and how might you continue the process?
- What help can we offer each other about learning to do these things ourselves as we begin to actively live again?
- What have you had to learn to do that you never did before?
- How did you figure out how to do it?
- How did it make you feel when you actually did it successfully? Or not successfully?
- How are you dealing with the inertia of your grief and finding ways to do the things that you don't feel like doing that still need to be done?
- How are you doing at learning to make decisions on your own?
- Did you find you had (have) issues with self confidence?
- What might have caused them?
- How does it make you feel to have to make decisions on your own?
- How does it make you feel when you make a good decision?
- Have you felt hopelessness while trying to see a path going forward or of finding a way of dealing with the changes in your lives?
- Can you find ways to go forward despite feeling hopeless sometimes?

- How might you begin to overcome hopelessness if you are feeling it?
- Do you think your responsibility to others is an important component of the healing process?

Inertia and Moving Forward Towards Functionality

If the word healing doesn't describe what you are seeking completely enough, perhaps the word *functionality* might help express how you feel and what you are looking to become more clearly than healing does. We can use that word as an action word, as something to describe what we are trying to do in our grief journey and in our lives.

Especially in the early days, weeks and months of our grief, the weight of our grief can be so heavy that we are often immobilized by it and we can find ourselves just sitting and staring or crying or remembering or not thinking at all. At those times, any ambition to move often seems unavailable to us.

Some version of this appears to be quite common in most people's early grief. With time, however, we also need to consider making the effort and then learning the skills it takes to overcome that inertia and "get moving" once again as we begin the journey back to functionality and living in the next part of our lives.

So, inertia is a term we can use to talk about that grief fatigue, of mostly being unable to find the physical and/or mental/emotional energy or strength to do things.

Inertia: An object at rest tends to remain at rest! But, an object in motion tends to remain in motion...

In our early grief, it's simple things like getting up off the couch or getting dressed or on some days, even getting out of bed. Later on, it can manifest in many other, more complex ways, like not getting something fixed around the house, not cooking dinner or not cooking at all. And it can also manifest not just as a physical lethargy, but also in thoughts like I can't or I won't, stopping us from doing things that we might want or need to do.

The level of inertia we experience is, as with most things, individual. Personality, circumstances, needs, work, children, pets, available help and many other things affect each of us differently. The constant seems to be, at least at some level, that *our grief tends to hold us still*.

A powerful thing we can learn when we are ready, is to overcome that feeling of not wanting or being able to do things and to learn to move forward towards functionality again. Hard or easy, slow or fast, it's another part of the healing process and the return to living that seems to be a fairly common need across the community of the bereaved.

Especially in the early days, but also throughout the journey, some thoughts that might come into our minds that we may not even realize are part of the mental/emotional inertia trying to keep us immobile are: *it's too hard, it takes too long, I'm too tired, I don't want to, I'm grieving and I don't have to, it doesn't matter if I don't, I don't care* and others as well.

Overcoming these thoughts and feelings is possibly one of the most difficult but also one of the most important things we need to learn.

So, throughout our grief journeys, our minds and sometimes our bodies, keep telling us we can't do stuff and in our grief, we tend to believe it. Once we can begin to deny that, we can find ways to do pretty much everything we want or need to do, once, no matter how we feel, *we learn to stop listening to the I can't and substitute I can and I will.*

The sooner we begin to fight the inertia and learn to overcome it, the sooner we will begin to find the energy again to pursue all aspects of our lives. It is a major part of our healing journeys, of building the strength and confidence to be able to live again.

While overcoming inertia can happen on its own, it usually happens very slowly and gradually. If we work on it, we can often accelerate the process and perhaps avoid letting habits of grief develop that we later have to figure out how to break.

It's not an easy task and it's actually easier to *not* work on it and to let ourselves remain static and just drift along. But it's a critical task we should try to take on as soon as we can. *At some point, we need to escape the trap of: I can't turning into I won't and I don't.*

Overcoming the inertia: Again, it rarely or only slowly just happens on its own, we usually have to work at it to get to see significant change...

Questions:

- Are you struggling to find not just the energy but the ambition to do things?
- Do you feel something like inertia in your life?
- What types of physical inertia do you experience?
- What types of mental/emotional inertia do you feel?
- What does it sound like in your thoughts?
- What specific thoughts do you have that keep you from doing things?
- What do you do when you feel and think these things?
- Have you tried to do anything about it?
- What might that be?

Overcoming Inertia

Tonight is a continuation of last month's topic. This time, I would like us to talk about things we can do to overcome the inertia and begin to resist the urge to stay immobile.

Overcoming the inertia: It rarely or only slowly just happens on its own, we usually have to work at it to get to see significant change...

Structure to help us return to functionality:

Routines and Rituals: Establishing structure with linear patterns at first, and then when we can, becoming less structured and more non-linear in the day to day parts of our life.

A *routine* is something you do the same way, usually in the same order, time after time, to accomplish the same outcome. It's a way to build your life back one task at a time, one routine at a time, until you are able to function through the entire day.

A *ritual* is the mental/emotional/spiritual equivalent of a routine. It's the thoughts and feelings you repeat in the same way each day or every time the same situation occurs.

Once you make a routine or ritual happen once, you can use the same thoughts, actions and energy on each thing that comes up. Eventually, if you need to, you can establish routines and rituals to guide you through every part of your days. You can replace your inertia and the old patterns of your life with new patterns; the routines and rituals that become your way of getting through each day and each task that comes before you.

After time passes, (again, it's different for each of us) it is possible to slowly begin to start relaxing some of those tightly held routines and allowing yourself to become more flexible and non-linear. When you begin to be able to trust that you are thinking clearly enough to get things done no matter what order you put them in and began to see that as long as stuff gets done, you can do them in *any* order, you do not have to be so rigid and structured in your actions.

At some point you won't have to so carefully and completely lay out every detail of the path first. You can be more "improvisational" about your life if you want to be once you know you won't slip back into inertia and debilitating grief.

Using guide words or phrases to help build routines or rituals:

Using guide words, making lists and/or putting tasks on a calendar are good ways to begin to create routines and rituals. Using specific words or phrases that you can repeat over and over like a mantra can help you to focus on things you want to

accomplish and to build the habit patterns of routines and rituals in your mind and your actions.

Some simple examples are: I will..., I won't..., ie. I will be kind, I will make breakfast, I will clean the house. I won't sit on the couch all day and eat junk food. I won't get angry at things people say. I won't have just one more drink. I will go out to dinner alone! I will learn how to go to the grocery store without crying.

Can you think of some more complex examples?

Getting out and doing stuff:

Another way to work through the inertia is to get out and do things, alone if you feel comfortable with that or in small groups of friends or family. When you feel able to, spending time actively engaged in life, even if it's only for a few hours each day, is a strong and effective way to begin the process of moving forward and stepping outside your grief. It's a time when you are not *actively* grieving and when you are giving yourself a break from the intensity and inertia that constantly grieving can bring.

This is not the same as the idea of "hiding from your grief". This is an active attempt to begin the process of living again while still acknowledging your grief. In that way, it can definitely be a positive part of the reconstruction process.

Journaling: Chronicling our thoughts and our days, writing letters to our loved one; things we still want to say or new things we want to tell them now!

Journals can be a *private* place to explore your thoughts and feelings. They allow you to express things you don't want to share with anyone else but that you need to work on and find your way through as you navigate your grief journey.

They can be a way to get thoughts out of your mind when you no longer have someone physically there with you to share them with. Journals can be hand written in a book or as a computer file, or whatever you are comfortable with. Since no one will see what you wrote, they don't have to be edited either. You can just write as it comes to you and not worry about grammar!

Journaling at the end of the day can be a very healing tool. It allows you to write about and perhaps tell your loved one about your day, about your feelings, about things you learned and thought and is always a place to express memories. It can help you to remember things and help you get thoughts outside of your mind.

Writing seems to help validate those thoughts but also to release them from building up inside and clogging your mind and emotions with the often very heavy and ponderous thoughts and feelings that grief brings us each day.

Journaling also allows us to write not only for and to ourselves, it's a place and a way to express thoughts and feelings we might want to share with our loved ones. We can write as if we are "talking" to them and as if they can "hear" what we write. We can also write them as a letter to our loved ones. However we chose to do it, it can be helpful and healing to let these thoughts and feelings move outside of our minds and take on the tangible reality of being readable on paper or a computer screen.

Some other ideas for learning new things to do and occupy our minds and our time:

Taking a class, finding a sport, starting a collection, volunteering, learning to cook or to cook new things, gardening, taking on a project, learning to play an instrument and/or sing, others?

Habits of grieving:

Grieving isn't necessarily a bad thing, but over time, we can actually fall into habits of grieving as we do with any other repetitive task or way of thinking. By eventually breaking into those habits, by building routines and rituals that are *outside* of our grief or beginning to engage in life again, we can break out of our grief habits into more healing thoughts and ways of spending at least parts of our days and nights.

In our grief and inertia, there are patterns of thinking and behavior that can easily repeat themselves day after day. As with anything repetitive, they can become habits of action (or inaction), thought or feeling that can take on a life of their own and keep us locked into those patterns so that changing becomes ever more difficult.

As an example of grief habits, watching movies for hours each day, day after day, because we can't find the energy to do anything more active might be how this manifests in our physical lives. Repeating "I can't" type thoughts every day or many times a day is an example of a mental/emotional grief habit.

It's important, as our journey progresses, to periodically examine our actions and thoughts if we can. If they appear habitual and repetitive and fairly non-productive or even destructive and they are beyond healthy routines, if they go on and on and resist our efforts to change them, it would be good to try and make a greater effort to break out of them. It might be good now and again to pull the wheels of our lives out of those well-worn tracks and into new pathways of healing and growing and moving forward.

In time, *moving forward, growing and not grieving all the time* can also become (good) habits that we can take with us into how we create and live the next part of our lives. In time, it can become the other part of inertia: an object in motion tends to remain in motion!

Since grief arises out of love, and since love is normal, maybe so is grief. Maybe grief is something we need to go through, something we need to acknowledge and embrace

even though it's painful. Maybe grief is even healthy in a sense. Maybe the grief is the healing! (Eleanor Haley, Litsa Williams: whatsyourgrief.com).

Gradually, we can come to see and experience our grief transform into healing and wellness and through our grief we can open the door to the next part's of our lives and to functionality beyond the pain. We can embrace our memories and our love and allow ourselves to go forward.

People have been doing this for all of human history, so we can too!

Questions:

- Can you think of ways to overcome the inertia if you are feeling it?
- Have you done anything specific to fight the inertia?
- What might you do going forward to keep the inertia from stopping your healing and growth?
- Would establishing routines help to overcome the inertia?
- Would or does making lists and writing on calendars help?
- Do you think that establishing a routine would (or does) help you to move forward?
- How can you establish a routine?
- Would you be willing to try to establish a routine to see how it works?
- Can you think of any words or phrases that might help you to build routines?
- Can rituals help us keep a connection with our loved ones and perhaps some continuity in our lives?
- If you have created them, what are some examples of routines or rituals in your life that you have established to help you.
- Do you think you need to be “proactive” in approaching the building of your “new” life?
- How might you do that?
- Do you keep a journal? Why or why not?
- Have you begun any new activities and things to occupy yourself?

- What would it take to break out of your inertia and begin to do new things?
- What have you always wanted to do that you may not have had time to do in the past?
- Could you find a way to do that now?
- Do you feel you have established any habits of grieving in your life?
- How might you work to break them?

Anger

Experiencing, expressing and dealing with anger during our grieving:

Not everyone feels or expresses anger in grief. Not everyone has issues with anger while they are grieving. If you do feel any of these things, because they come and go and can sometimes show up when least expected this discussion is here to talk about it.

Many people talk about their anger in support group meetings. It is probably there at some level in most of us. And we probably really do have things to feel angry about considering what has happened to our lives and our loved ones. If you do feel anger, it is a legitimate emotion to feel and it is something to be felt and acknowledged and worked through in as healthy a way as possible.

There can often be a lot of lack of control involved in bereavement and lots of *unresolved questions* we may be asking like: Why, why me, why now, how come, this is so unfair, why did you let this happen, how am I going to go on, why did you leave me here alone, how can I deal with all this by myself, why did you say that, why don't you understand and many other questions like these.

Anger in our grief, if we experience it, seems to come from many places within us and the situations we find ourselves in. In addition to frustration associated with lack of control, people are often angry about things happening that were outside their plans and certainly outside their ability to change or effect.

Some fear what the future has to bring and question how they will handle it alone. How will they make good decisions without having the shared decision making process they had grown to depend on in their marriage. Some have anxiety about how they will be financially impacted, how can they continue to live at a level close to what they were used to or needed to without having their spouses income available? How will they raise children alone, especially with altered financial situations?

Some people are actually angry with their loved ones for leaving them alone, for leaving them to do so many of the things their loved ones used to do or that they did together that they now have to learn to do on their own.

These things can all lead us to frustration and pain and that can sometimes turn into anger and sometimes may make us want to verbally or sometimes physically act out or even strike out in some way to release some of our frustration at what has happened to us and to our loved ones and to our lives and futures.

Expressions of anger:

Frustrations and lack of control may also occur at a deeper level than our every day thoughts and feelings during our bereavement. They can often be submerged below

our grief. As it can when we don't let ourselves express or acknowledge our grief, they too may build up, may grow inside of us without us being aware of it.

Sometimes the first indication of their existence is when they break through to the surface and we find ourselves having an angry reaction to something seemingly not that important.

Anger, at ourselves or others, can sometimes be a way to release some of the tension our frustrations may cause. But when we turn it on ourselves or on things or people that *only seem to be the cause*, the anger itself may really be like a "smoke screen," directed outward because we can't effect the real reasons we are angry, things we really can't do anything about but maybe are what the real issue is.

Things to think about:

It's important, at least intellectually to start with, to remember that for many things, no one is or was responsible. No one may have caused them to happen. For many of them, that's just how it was and in some way, we have to learn to live with them. That is part of what we need to find and learn in our healing and growth within our grief. It's part of what we need to accept in our lives going forward.

Obviously, some things that happen in our lives *are* caused by others. Some things were indeed done by other people and we may have good reasons for our anger. It is sometimes hard during our grieving to separate our justifiable anger for wrongs done from the frustrated anger that comes from our lack of control and loss of our futures.

In contrast, the anger we are talking about here is the anger we direct towards ourselves and other people or towards our loved ones or perhaps even towards God because of *things that happened that were indeed out of anyones control, things that no one was really at fault in, or can do much about.*

Seeing those distinctions clearly and not taking our frustrations out as anger at or on ourselves or others, of not assigning blame when there was no blame either to ourselves or others, is often a very challenging but important part of our healing and of learning to live within and beyond our grief.

While we are grieving, whenever possible, if we find ourselves getting angry, if we can, we should consider trying to stop and ask ourselves why we are angry, what is it about a situation, about something that happened or what someone said or did that makes us angry and more importantly why does it make us feel that way!

If we can stop and think about *why* we are angry or why we became angry, we may find that our anger is indeed a smoke screen, we aren't really angry about the words or things someone said or did, we are actually angry that what someone said or did triggered our own feelings of lack of control, of grief and/or pain.

Maybe if we just lash out because we can't do anything about the real reasons, we are just "shooting from the hip" at a convenient target. Sometimes after the anger has passed, we may need to apologize to ourselves or to others for things we may have done or said and maybe try to explain what we learned from the outburst.

Can we find a way to not let those frustrations express as anger towards ourselves or someone or something else but instead, try to learn what we can do to resolve the unresolved feelings within ourselves by ourselves or in conversation with others who understand our feelings or are trained to help us find solutions for these deep frustrations? How might we do that?

What place do "rage rooms" or other controlled environments or counseling have in letting our anger out if it is or becomes too strong for us to handle and we can't find other ways to release or relieve it?

Questions:

- What are you feeling anger about if you are feeling it?
- How do you deal with your anger, how does it express?
- What coping skills, social skills and life skills do you think you might need to learn to deal with your anger as you move forward in your life?
- Can you see places where your anger, if you feel it, might be a smoke screen for things you can't address?
-
- How might you recognize if it is a smoke screen?
- How can you get to the real issue and try to solve it rather than being angry about it without knowing what it is you are angry about?
- Do you feel it's important to learn to stop yourself from expressing your anger?
- Can you think of a way to do that?
- Would it help to have a plan in advance to use when you feel yourself becoming angry?

Looping and Forgiveness

Looping is a term you can use for when thoughts repeat and repeat in your mind and you can't seem to break free of them. When you go around and around on the same idea without resolution and usually with little or no control.

Loops may be endlessly repeated, imaginary conversations in our heads. Loops may contain what if's, they may be (one sided) conversations we would like to have or wish we would or could have had. Loops often come at night while we are trying to get to sleep or while we are trying to return to sleep if we wake during the night.

Are there other things you loop on?

Recriminations: types of loops that express as accusations by ourselves to ourselves for actions or thoughts or lack thereof in our past.

There may be "good loops" too. Remembering a wonderful moment again and again to recapture the good feelings it brought us over and over is something we can do as well. But again, they are still loops and repetitive thoughts about the past...

Looping is something we *all* do from time to time, not only in our grief but throughout our lives. During our grief, many things from our past can find their way into these loops. Things we may regret or wish could have gone differently in the past, or things we wish we had said or not said or that our loved ones had said or not said, can become circular thoughts that we replay time and time again without being able to reach an end or a conclusion or a solution.

In our grief especially, we may not be able to resolve these thoughts and so we go over and over the same ground and sometimes even beat ourselves up trying to find some answer that will relieve or fix a situation in the past, and *because it is in the past, it is not changeable or fixable*.

Perhaps the content of our loops contain an element of denial or lack of acceptance when they are things from the past that we wish had gone differently and that we are now trying to find answers or resolutions to. So, when we can't resolve them, we end up looping them without much conscious control until they become almost habitual ways of thinking and then become so much harder to escape.

They must be trying to tell us something we need to know. There must be a message to ourselves hidden or not so hidden in the loops, in the ideas we repeat and repeat, but somehow we aren't able to find it. So we go around and around again without resolution.

If we find ourselves thinking about unchangeable situations, there may be a need to find acceptance of what the loops contain and find acceptance that they aren't changeable or fixable. We may need to find ways to let them go and accept that they

are indeed in the past and cannot be altered now and so we need to learn to move forward and stop trying to resolve the unresolvable.

How do we break into the cycles, how do we stop the looping and let our minds move on to other things?

- Finding acceptance.
 - Recognizing that they are loops but that we can control them.
 - Finding forgiveness for ourselves and others.
 - Breaking the circle by using mantras. [ie. I said what I said and I did what I did and there's nothing I can do to change it].
 - Perhaps turn on a book on tape and let it take you out of the loop.
 - Talk to close friends and family who can offer suggestions on how to break into a looped thought.
 - Being present (mindfulness).
 - Remembering that the past is like a novel, it is in a book on a shelf and cant be changed anymore, it has been captured in the book but cannot be removed or altered.
 - Doing the hard work of stopping them.
 - Others?
-
- Have you figured out how to break the cycles and end the loops?

Forgiveness:

In the end, we may need to apologize to ourselves or to our loved ones for our failings. We may need to *accept our apologies* to ourselves and to our loved ones as well so we can put the events we are sorry about in the past where they belong.

We may need to find ways to forgive ourselves for things we can't change about the past or that we are doing or thinking now. We may need to ask our loved ones for that forgiveness as well. We may need to learn to let go of those things we regret or wish we would have done differently.

And in response, can we change now? Can we become better people and perhaps be more like what our loved ones would have liked us to be? Can we change as a gift to them in their memory and their honor? Can we do, or say, or be now, what we couldn't then? Can we use these things to help us move forward, forgive ourselves, and break out of the loops, knowing that it is what we need to do and what I believe our loved ones would want us to do?

Questions:

- Do you find yourself looping thoughts?
- What types of things do you get stuck thinking in circles about?

- Have you found any ways to stop the loops and perhaps resolve the issues you are thinking about?
- Have you begun to find forgiveness in your thoughts and emotions?
- How might you deal with thoughts or emotions of things that you regret from the past?
- Can you find ways to forgive yourself for not being what you might have been, done or said in the past?
- What does forgiveness look like when we have to do it for, by and to ourselves?
- Can you become more? Can you learn ways to be better at the things you regret and loop about?

Dating, Online Dating, Being Part of a Couple, Marriage, Friendships, Living Alone, Trying Something New

Here are a number of ideas that we might want to talk about to investigate some possibilities for our social interactions going forward. Even if you are not ready or interested in these possibilities now, it's an interesting topic to talk about and think about in case you do find yourself wanting to enter a more social part of your journey.

Because of the situation we now find ourselves in, we have the opportunity to consciously decide how we want to go forward in our social lives when we are ready to do so. *We can choose to approach it anyway we want.*

In a general way, there are really two basic choices we can make in these types of interactions, the first is to try to choose something (some type of interaction or relationship) we may have done in the past or miss from the past and the other is to try something new.

Another, more specific way to look at it is, do we want or need to be part of a couple/exclusive relationship again to define ourselves and how we socialize? Do we want to be ourselves alone and have a group or groups of friends to socialize with without the need for an exclusive relationship?

Can we have a non-exclusive relationship that is mainly with a single person? Can we have a close relationship with a friend of the opposite sex that is not exclusive and is just a friendship? Do we want or need to live with someone again? If so, what would that relationship look like? Is marriage the only way to be in an exclusive or live-in relationship? Can we be ok living alone and being alone and not socialize much at all?

How do we want to go about figuring out and finding what we really want, need, or are looking for (if anything)? What criteria will we use to define and find the people we want to meet and include in the next part of our lives? Should we have a plan?

Since as with most of grief, there are no unique answers and because everyone has to find their own way through these questions, here are some of the things that we might want to ask ourselves when (or maybe before) we are ready to start entering into the social world in the context of dating and/or looking for love and/or looking for a long term, possibly exclusive, relationship, and/or looking for or finding good friendships.

Lots of questions for us to address and talk about:

- Why are we dating or wanting to date in the first place?
- What do we get out of dating?
- Is dating the only model for meeting and being with others of the opposite sex we know or want to pursue?
- What other ways are there?

- Can we go out or get together with people of the opposite sex without feeling guilty?
 - What are the implications that going out with someone of the opposite sex include?
 - Can we go out as friends with people of the opposite sex without the implications of dating and relationships and commitments?
 - How do we avoid those implications if we don't want them to be there?
- How does dating or entering a relationship effect other people in your life?
 - How will it effect your children/grandchildren?
 - How will it effect your spouses siblings and other family members?
 - How might you mitigate their discomfort or anger or hostility if they feel any?
- Can we (should we) wait to enter a relationship until we are not just filling up the loneliness with anyone who comes along?
 - How do we know if we are just rebounding into another relationship?
 - Can we actually build a real, sharing and complete relationship before we have come to acceptance of our grief and not be jumping into something with another person mainly to relieve our loneliness?
 - Is it ok to enter a relationship mainly to relieve the loneliness?
 - Did you enter into your previous relationship and/or marriage because you were lonely or for other reasons.
 - Do you want to enter another relationship for the same reasons as before or do you want to enter another relationship for different reasons?
 - Are you looking for love or are you looking to remove the emptiness and loneliness in your life and your grief?
 - Are we looking for love because that is what we are supposed to do?
- Is it ok to live alone without having a significant relationship in our lives?
 - Are we wanting another full time relationship or marriage because that is the only model of living we know?
- Can dating be a type of hiding from our grief?
 - Can finding a new person to live with or spend all our time with be hiding from our grief?
 - Can we (should we) enter into a serious relationship before we are (mostly) healed within our grieving?
- Can we be complete or fulfilled without someone special in our lives?
 - What (or who) do we need in our lives besides ourself?
 - What (or who) do we need in our lives besides the memories of our loved ones?
 - What would it be like just to have a group of friends (men and women) to spend time with and not have a single, exclusive relationship?
 - Do we want to live alone or do we want or need to live with someone?
 - What does living with another person do or not do for us?
 - What does living alone do or not do for us?
 - Now that we have been living alone for a while, do we want to bring another person into living with us?

- Are we willing to change and compromise enough to make it work if we do start living with another person?
- What do we really need or want in a relationship?
- How far down the relationship/couple road do we each want to go if we do?
- How much time and energy are we willing to invest in creating a new relationship?
- Do we want to build another relationship like our previous one?
- Can we build a relationship with someone new that is as close and connected as our previous one was in the time we have ahead of us?
- Is it ok and enough for two people to build a relationship based on the idea of having someone to be with as they get older and perhaps need someone to help them?
- Can a relationship built on those needs become something more over time?
- Can entering a new relationship “fix” your grief?
- Is it ok to enter into a marriage for the “tax break”?
- What about a roommate (housemate)?
- Can we have a roommate (housemate) of the opposite sex?
- What does the idea of a roommate with benefits imply or provide?
- Is that an ok idea?
- What criteria do we need to set up to make something like that work?

If and when we want to:

- How or where do we meet new people to possibly date?
- How do we find safe places to meet people to date if we choose to?
- How do we find safe groups to join if that is what we want to do?
- How can you tell/trust if someone who tells you stuff in an online situation, is actually who and what they represent themselves as?
- How can you actually physically meet someone you met online in a safe way?
- How long should you get to know someone before committing to a relationship especially if you are still grieving?
- Others?????

**Acceptance and Wellness
Topics**

Learning to Become More

Grief can make you feel less but it can also become an opportunity to become more.

As we begin to turn towards hope, healing and wellness, our grief journeys can become a time to learn and to grow. In a similar way, we can work to learn to find ways to look at the memories of our loved ones and our lives together without the filter of our grief coloring everything and remember and celebrate our lives as they were.

Let's look at some possibilities and ways to think about what we can do to grow as we begin the reconstruction process.

Two possibilities to start with before we talk about growing and becoming more is finding ourselves "stuck" on plateaus and perhaps having grief turn into a habitual way of thinking that may slow or stop our movement toward hope, healing and wellness.

Getting stuck on a plateau:

Our grief feelings and responses will change through time as the intensity, frequency and height of the grief waves change. Usually the waves become less intense and come less often but sometimes, we may get temporarily stuck along the way.

"Getting stuck" is actually a fairly common thing that happens from time to time along the way. Sometimes, for no apparent reason, after a period of growth there is a period of stagnation. Sometimes, especially early in our bereavement, for a time, there may seem to be no change at all.

When we seem to get stuck, to not grow or change for a while and especially if it goes on for too long, we may become frustrated by having the same feelings, the same level of grieving day after day. We may become fearful that something has gone wrong, that we have somehow done or thought something to derail our healing.

There are also many responses to these places. Some people get "super-busy" and find ways to hide their frustrations and grief behind a frenzy of activity and interaction. Others may begin to despair, become sure something is wrong, and lose all forward momentum. Still others revert to earlier stages of their grief and become relatively immobilized by inertia once again.

On a more positive note, we can recognize that plateaus are usually temporary parts of the process and learn to wait them out, do our best to stay positive and move on when it's time to do so. They are like base camps where we stop and rest for a while as we climb the mountain of our grief. We can also choose to begin to learn new things during these times and by doing so perhaps move into another channel of thinking and move off of the worn pathways of our grieving and began to chart a new direction.

As with grief in general, it seems to be pretty individual. How long it lasts, how often it happens, if it happens at all, what we do about it, all these seem to take each of us differently.

The important thing here is to know that these “plateaus” in our bereavement are just that. They are temporary, they don’t last forever and they may indeed be an essential part of the process, a time when we think about and digest what we have learned until we are ready to move again and when we have reached a place where we can move forward, we will.

Falling into habits of grief:

The second possibility is that through time, doing and thinking many of the same things our grieving brings to our minds repeatedly, finding the same patterns of thought and action over and over may bring us to a sort of “Ground Hog Day” of habitual grieving.

The circular and repetitive thoughts that lodge in our thinking early in our grief journeys when we have the least ability to effect them can become almost normal ways of thinking and even ways of life. The longer we stay in one pattern, the deeper the ruts become, the more difficult it becomes to change it. In a sense, we establish habits of grieving.

At some point, we all will have to learn to find ways to stop the repetition and patterns in our grief. We will need to begin to learn new ways of thinking and looking at life to replace those patterns. As we substitute the new for the old, we then become actively engaged in our healing journeys and in building our (new) lives.

Finally, if you are especially frustrated with being on one of the plateaus, or are stuck in a repetitive pattern, if it goes on way longer than you feel it should and especially if it makes you feel worse than you were before when it doesn’t get any better, those are times when it would be good to talk either with others who have shared the grief experience in a support group or with a friend you can trust. If you feel that you are not able to handle it in those ways, it would be good to seek out a professional counsellor to help guide you through to the understanding it takes to move to the next stage of your growth and healing.

How does that make you feel? Are these familiar feelings or places you are or have been?

Onward to becoming more!

Mental, social and spiritual gardening:

A wonderful idea from the Carlos Santana autobiography “The Universal Tone” is that of “spiritual gardening”. This is the idea of working on ourselves, of growing spiritually

and emotionally as well as intellectually and taking the time to “pull the weeds, to fertilize and water” new ideas, skills and emotions and to find ways to use our bereavement as a tool for improving our lives and ourselves.

In that context, can our grief also be a time to learn to become more? Can it be a time when we open the door to change in our lives and if we want to, a time to examine ourselves and decide what we want to do or be next. We have the time!

In the empty spaces of our grief, while we can't replace what is no longer there, maybe we can fill those spaces with soil, fertilize them and water them and where the garden of our love grew, we can grow a *new* garden, a different one, not a replacement but still one that is full of love and honor and memory as well as growth, healing and life.

We can also pull some weeds from our own garden of self, water and fertilize here too and find new things to grow in our social, mental and emotional life to make us better and help us to grow and live again.

While our grief is one of the most painful and disorienting times in our lives, because we have had all of our certainties and sure of's thrown to the wind, as we try to rebuild, we also have the opportunity to work on things, to perhaps become better people. We have the opportunity to take more time “working on ourselves” than we have ever been able to do or wanted to do before.

The empty moments, the time we no longer fill being with our spouses or partners can seem to diminish us but it can also be a gift, once we are ready, that we can use to grow in, to learn in, to change in and especially *to find ways to honor our loved ones by becoming more.*

Learning anything helps you focus and grow:

Learning anything requires our full attention. Our focus while trying to learn new things helps us to learn to concentrate again, to grow and keep our minds active and it takes us out of our grief for those parts of a day spent in the learning process.

Another idea to consider is that one pointedness, the total focus on a task, is a form of meditation. It is a calming and elevating experience. If you are totally focused, as you are when you are actively learning something, you are also totally present, you are totally in the moment.

We often talk about this idea as *mindfulness* and especially in a grief situation, our focus on a task puts us in the present and not in the past. During the time we are focusing our minds, hands, eyes and ears on a task, we are not actively grieving, we are totally present and for that time, leave our grief behind.

Of course, grief comes back. We go back to it when we stop focusing, but the relief, the time away from active grief is potentially a time of healing and growth. It is also a

very powerful way to keep our minds active, to keep them flexible and not let them atrophy.

It is very important to keep ourselves mentally healthy and mentally active as we grow older and grief can add a stagnation to our thinking and our growth. Grief can put our thoughts in a furrow and a circle of repetitive thinking and remembering full of “what if’s” that can get deeper and the ruts can become more difficult to get out of the longer it goes on and the older we become.

In some ways, a time of learning can also make our thinking more clear, possibly more clear than it’s been in a long time. We may become more able to learn, and by learning new things, rejuvenate our thinking and our ability to continue to grow and expand our understanding. It can be a critical part of moving us towards healing and finding ways to create a new life in “the wake of the flood”.

This is a line from a novel but it also applies to our grief journeys: “Once you stop learning, your life becomes so much less than it could be”.

Some things to try: learning a language, learning a new skill, learning an instrument, learning to cook, learning a craft or starting a collection, writing, journaling, taking a class in something, learn some skill that your spouse or partner used to do or be responsible for doing!

You *can* teach an old dog new tricks!

Re-finding old hobbies:

Besides finding something new to learn, re-finding old hobbies, skills and abilities is another important learning experience we can explore. Since there is now a huge amount of time in our lives, we need to fill that time with things to do once we begin to overcome our early inertia and actually want to get off the couch and do stuff. We may have to spend a lot of time soul searching and self-questioning while trying to find things we might like to do, while remembering what we had enjoyed earlier in our lives that we might bring back into it and enjoy doing now.

Spending hours a day focused and one pointed on doing something you enjoy and can get lost in can become a very important part of our growing towards hope, healing and wellness.

Honoring our loved ones by trying to live with purpose and intent as we create our new lives:

What would our loved ones want us to do or be or work on in ourselves and our lives as we move forward? Can we honor our loved ones by giving them the gift of us making these changes in ourselves?

If we are going to grow and move forward in our lives, which at some point we all have to do, if we are going to change, then *we also have an opportunity to do those things as an act of love*. We can make those changes with purpose, we can choose to change in ways that honor our loved ones.

We can choose to work at growing in ways that are perhaps what our spouses or partners would have liked for us to have been or done earlier in our lives and that perhaps circumstances did not allow us to do. We can also believe that they would be happy to see us do those things even now.

While we might wish we had done them earlier, that may not have been possible in the living of our daily, often very busy lives. Now, with all the time we have to fill, we can take the time to work on those things. As we do them, we also don't have to feel remorse for not having done them earlier, we can just make them a gift to honor our spouse or partner as we do them now.

We can also use those changes to honor the memory of our loved ones in our external dealings, we can become more of what they would have wanted us to be and more of what we would wish to be and people can see those changes and we can remind people of our love (and our loved ones) by how we change and grow and act in new and more positive ways now.

Making changes and not just talking about them. Fighting mental inertia (again):

It's usually pretty easy to think of things you want to do or be. Through our lives, we may have "great ideas", make promises to ourselves, make "resolutions" and make plans to do things, to change things and to learn things. In the business of living however, many of them never get done, something comes up or we just didn't have the will or the time to follow through or carry them out. In general, that's pretty common behavior for most people.

During our grief journeys, it may be less healthy to not follow through, to not live up to the mental promises we make and the intent we have than it had before. And we now have time and reasons to make a commitment to making those things come into being.

A very important part of making changes in our lives, of becoming better and more, of doing things to honor our loved ones, of doing things we know they would affirm and also in doing things for our own purposes, is *following through*.

It is important to not let ourselves be mentally lazy. If we say we want to do something or change something, (and maybe more so in the mental and emotional sense than in the material sense) it is important that we go forward and make it happen, that we work on it and practice it and keep at it until we master it.

If we make a promise to our loved ones or to ourselves to change something, to learn something and to become better, especially in ways we may be sorry we didn't change

earlier in our lives, or if we want forgiveness for something we might regret, we need to deserve that forgiveness and *not just think the thought but also do the act*. We need to *become the change we promise* and so honor and affirm our love and our willingness to actually become better or different and not just make noise about it. Not an easy task, but very well worth the do!

Hope and Healing:

Finding hope and healing and moving to wellness is never going to be easy. It takes time and effort to learn and grow and make something new out of our often shattered lives. If we are kind to ourselves and we help each other and encourage and support each other, we can make the journey at least a little easier by telling our stories, sharing our grief and knowing that we are not alone, others are and have been there too.

Questions:

- What types of things might we do to become more?
- What things can we focus on or work on that might be places for growth and learning?
- What can you think of that you might do to fill the time you now have available that you might not have been able to do earlier in your life?
- How might you honor your loved one with new or expanded things you do as you build your new life?
- Are there some hobbies or things you stopped doing over the years that might be interesting or fun to reintroduce into your lives?
- What can you think of to learn now that you might not have had the time to do in the past?
- What new or interesting things might you want to explore in the time you have available now, perhaps something you always wanted to do that you never got the chance to try?

Moving Forward, Not Moving On

When people tell you what you should do and when you should change or move on:

We've talked about this before but I think it's important to mention it again here. It's one of those things that people often say! The non-bereaved often feel that the way to end our grief or make it less for us is *to move on*. Sometimes we may even feel like that too.

Many times, friends and family feel that if only you could find someone else or at least start dating again, everything would get better and you would become happy again and maybe also return to being the person they knew before. That would perhaps make them more comfortable being around you, as much as it is a part of their hope that you will feel better and then fairly quickly become ok.

But, since that's not usually how it works, *instead of moving on, can we find ways to move forward?*

Changing on your own terms and in your own time is important. When it's time and right for you, it's time and right for you!

For most of us, I suspect we just want to get over our grief and put it behind us. But, we don't generally go from grief to wellness overnight. Finding healing and wellness is a long, hard process. It takes a lot of work on a lot of things but if we are willing to do the work, we can make the journey much more possible and do-able and we can work our way through our grief to a place of wellness. *We can move forward in our lives but not necessarily move on!*

Today is about ways to let ourselves grow (moving forward) while not leaving anything behind, of not wanting or trying to replace anything from the past (moving on). *It's about asking ourselves lots of questions and finding answers that fit our own personal grief and healing journeys.*

How do we identify and begin to heal our broken emotions? To move forward, do we need to establish new relationships as others often suggest? Can we learn to become whole again in a new and different way on our own, while not leaving behind or denying or removing anything we treasure from our pre-grief lives. Can we try something new? When would it be a good time to do that? Will it or should it *ever* be time? What will it look like?

Here's a potential paradox to think about:

While we really want to reach an end to our grief, we may also find ourselves feeling guilty anytime there is a lessening in the thoughts, feelings and emotions of grief we feel...

How can we think about moving forward while not feeling guilty? Guilt is not surprising in our grieving minds and emotions. We often spend a lot of time thinking about the past and our lives with our loved ones.

As we talked about at the last meeting, there are many things from our past that can haunt our thoughts and emotions as we re-live them in our minds (looping). They can be powerful sources of guilt and regret and because we can't change them, they can become those loops in our thoughts that go around and around and can trap us and hold us from finding resolution and healing.

Here are some other things we may feel guilty about as we try to move forward:

- Not thinking about our spouse or our bereavement (all the time).
- Not hurting (all the time).
- Not grieving (all the time).
- Not crying (all the time) or not crying at all.
- Smiling or laughing.
- Being happy (even for only a few moments).
- Wanting or bringing other (new) things or people into our lives.
- Changing things in our shared material space.
- Making changes in our emotional space.
- Wanting to make friends, go out to dinner with friends (men/women), find people and places to go out and have a good time with.
- Others?

Guilt isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it *is* something we need to deal with and find healthy ways to resolve without letting it create patterns of thinking that don't let us move forward.

Letting go of repetitive ideas that keep us from growing and moving forward:

There are sometimes thought patterns we establish in our grief that can hold us in place and become plateaus we can be on for a long time. When we find ourselves using the same phrases and thinking the same thoughts, not so much as continuous loops but as repeated ideas over weeks or months or longer, we may be building or have established *habits of grief* that can hold us stationary and not allow us to grow and change and find healing and wellness.

Can we learn to recognize those types of things and find ways to break those habits?

Can we instead learn to find and establish habits of growth and change that allow us to move forward?

What are some things that you might be thinking that don't seem to change much and that you may need to find ways to work on to help you to move forward and build

healing in your life. How might you do that? What suggestions can you share to help others if you have found ways to do that? What positive habits can you think of that would help you move forward?

Questions:

- What does moving on mean to you?
- What does moving forward mean to you?
- Would you be willing to change?
- Can you think of ways to do the hard work of moving forward from grief to healing and wellness?
- Do you experience guilt as you consider ways of moving forward?
- What things do you feel guilty about?
- What do you think would help you to feel less guilty about those things?
- What role does acceptance play in moving forward?

Acceptance

One of the most difficult but also one of the most important parts of the healing process is finding acceptance within ourselves of what has happened in our lives.

Unfortunately, many of the things that have happened are outside of *our ability to control or change*. We really can't do anything about them. They happened. They are unchangeable and nothing we can do will make it any different.

They certainly include in large part whatever it was that happened to our loved ones that we couldn't stop or change or fix and of course that our loved ones are not here with us any longer.

Coming to gradually and slowly understand that our loved ones are not coming home, that the place they occupied in our material lives is going to be empty of them forever and nothing we do or wish or think is going to change that, is perhaps one of the hardest and most painful things we need to do during our hope and healing journey.

However, acceptance is almost essential to building our new lives, to allow us to start to look for and find ways of thinking, of acting and of living that both honor what was and create what will be as we transition from us, to me all alone. Until we accept what has happened, it is difficult to want to even look for alternatives isn't it!

Acceptance is often a verrrry difficult place to reach. There is often regret, guilt, anger, sadness and probably most of the other emotions that live within grief that we experience and have to work through along the way. The journey is filled with uncertainty and unknowns. Some of us have really never been or lived alone in our lives.

For many of us, being with our loved ones has filled essentially all of our *adult* lives. We have no or very few memories of a time when it wasn't so. For many of us, we have very few skills or memories that we can apply to help us learn all we need to learn to craft our new lives.

Denial can also be a part of the process of reaching or not reaching acceptance. It's not necessarily a linear process or part of a list of stages we have to go through, but the magnitude of what we are experiencing is so very difficult to believe and come to terms with that sometimes its easier to deny and keep the hope alive in our hearts that we may yet somehow see things turn around and we will have our loved ones back in our lives again.

Acceptance also doesn't usually come in one single flash of insight or light. It can grow gradually within us over time as it slowly comes into focus. It can also move like our grief does, sometimes we go forward and think we've got it and sometimes we go backwards and don't have it at all and sometimes we stagnate and don't seem to be

going anywhere. These are all part of the process and kind of a “normal” way for us to learn to accommodate the huge changes that have occurred in our lives.

Once acceptance begins to appear, there seem to be times when our acceptance is strong and healing and then on some days along the way, often unexpectedly, the reality of what has happened reaches out and grabs us again and the pain of that realization triggers our grief back into full intensity, hopefully and thankfully just for a short time and then that too passes.

As with so many parts of grief, there is no timetable here either. We each reach acceptance in our own time and in our own way and when it happens for us, that’s when it happens.

A maybe “too long” list of things to consider that we may have to come to accept in our new lives:

- Being alone.
- Living alone.
- Having to do everything our spouse used to do.
- Figuring out what to change, keep or leave out in our new lives.
- Taking care of all the material world responsibilities by ourselves.
- Making decisions alone.
- Traveling alone.
- Dealing with medical issues alone.
- Dealing with loneliness.
- Dealing with sadness.
- Dealing with finance changes or issues alone.
- Dealing with living arrangement changes.
- Raising children alone
- Losing old friends.
- Knowing what to do if family and/or friends don’t know what to say or avoid us.
- Having no one to talk to, especially in the evenings.
- I can’t sleep!
- My mind keeps racing and looping.
- I can’t stop crying.
- Needing to make new friends.
- Not knowing how to make new friends.
- Enjoying being with/going out with new friends.
- Feeling guilty for being with/going out with new friends.
- Feeling guilty for changing things, for wanting to do things on my own.
- Knowing we have to move forward.
- Finding wellness.
- Being happy.
- Being ok.
- Having a good time.
- Coming to like living alone.

- Being “relieved” to not be a caregiver anymore.
- Learning how to not be a caregiver anymore.
- Taking care of and being gentle with ourselves.
- Learning to honor and remember our loved ones without grieving them.
- Realizing we are no longer actively grieving.
- Having to build a new life.
- Learning that we are strong.
- Others?

Some things we may need to accept doing without (temporarily or forever):

- Affection in both physical and emotional ways.
- Affirmations.
- Someone to share the story of our day with.
- Someone to hold us when we are sad or need to cry.
- Someone to bitch to.
- Someone to sit quietly and just be together with.
- Someone to eat dinner with.
- Someone to go out with.
- Someone to rub our feet or whose feet we can rub.
- Your shared purpose in life.
- Your future plans.
- Others?

Questions:

- *Where are you at in the process of learning to accept what has happened?*
- *Is there an aspect of denial in your thinking?*
- *What would you like to share about how you feel about acceptance and what you are having a hard time coming to grips with?*

Approval, Affirmation and Forgiveness

Affirmation and approval are powerful needs in most people throughout their lives. The need we have for someone to tell us “well done” or “good job”, “great idea”, or “you look nice today” is strong in us and for some people it can even be a driving force.

In most marriages, it is often a powerful part of what we do for each other. It’s part of our caring and our affection and why we become happy to be together. And it seems that whether it’s out front and obvious or tucked away and hidden, there is a glow that comes over us when our loved one tells us these things.

The affirmations we share with our loved ones and how often we made each other feel good with compliments and affectionate approval throughout our lives together is an important part of our love and our lives together.

It may be rare or it may be often but it always makes us feel good to hear or to know by words or actions or a special look that our loved one thought we had done a good job at some task we had undertaken or something we had done or said, something that they liked and took the time to tell us so.

And with our bereavement, that important part of our emotional lives is gone!

Loss of those affirmations seems to be an often unrecognized but potentially significant part of the “missing you” and emptiness that becomes part of our grief. Though in some ways it may have been a fairly subtle component of our lives, it may well have also been hugely important and may now be a much bigger part of the sadness and emptiness we feel than we might realize.

How much of what we do, how we act or how we interact with others in our bereavement may be a search for that missing affirmation? How much of our sadness comes from the absence of that affirmation?

Forgiveness:

There may be things we wish we had done or said or been in our lives with our spouses or partners. There are things we may wish we had *not* done or said. There are things our loved ones may have done or said that we regret as well.

Those things can often haunt our thoughts and emotions as we think about them and perhaps re-live them in our minds. They can be powerful sources of guilt and regret and since we can’t change them, they can also become loops in our thoughts that go around and around and can trap us and hold us from finding resolution and healing.

It is important to consider that if we start looping these kinds of thoughts that no matter what we feel about them or the events that caused them, no matter how things

might have been, *we can't change them*. They were what they were and we can't go back to make them any different. We have to learn to accept them.

So finding forgiveness for ourselves and for our loved ones is another important part of what we might work on in our healing journeys.

Can we find ways to forgive ourselves for things we can't change about the past? Can we ask our loved ones for that forgiveness as well? Can we learn to let go of those things we regret or wish we could have done differently? Can we change now? Can we become better as a gift to our loved ones in their memory and their honor and do or say now what we couldn't then?

Questions:

- How do the lack of affirmations play a role in your grief?
- Do you find it's absence something you've noticed?
- How important is that absence to you if you do recognize it?
- How might you deal with thoughts or emotions of things that you regret from the past?
- What does forgiveness look and feel like when we have to do it for, by and to ourselves?
- Can you find ways to forgive yourself for not being what you might have been in the past?
- Can you find ways to now forgive your loved one for things they might have done or said as part of your healing journey?

Support: Who's There for You?

This appears to be quite different for each of us and also different with each of the people we know. In a lot of instances, people who knew us as part of a couple become uncomfortable when we aren't with our spouses when we get together.

Often, either we or they or both of us are uncomfortable with that dynamic and don't know how to react, what to say or that "third wheel feeling" that something is missing enters into the interaction. Often too, if one partner was very much the more social one in a marriage, if that person is no longer there, it can be very difficult to pick up the social connections and responsibilities without them. Until we learn how to connect with people by ourselves, many of our old and certainly no new social interactions work well or in many cases are even possible for us to maintain or form.

Old friends:

As part of the grieving process and often as a result of our bereavements, many people find that old friends drop away at least in part because they don't know how to act or aren't comfortable with us as single persons when they knew us as part of a couple. Very often, they don't know what to say or if it's ok to remember and talk about our loved ones. Their discomfort and their really wanting us to go back to being the person they remember and knew sometimes makes them withdraw their company and support in our lives, either slowly or quickly depending on who they are, what the relationship was and what they feel.

There are also those old friends who stick by us and learn to listen to our stories and who are willing, no matter when or for how long it goes on, to share our journey and hug us when we need it and let us cry if that happens. They have somehow thankfully overcome any discomfort they may have had and remain the friends they have always been.

We may also find *ourselves* withdrawing from old friendships as we lose commonality with those people we knew as couples and those who have not experienced what we have and who say or do things that end up being hurtful to us even when they might only have been trying to help.

Our society doesn't often give people much help in dealing with grief and because it is often hidden or little talked about, most people really don't know what to say or do or how to act around a bereaved person. It may be especially obvious when your bereavement continues beyond a relatively short time and when people want you to stop talking about it. Then, the "get over it" thoughts begin to surface in other peoples minds and they may start to withdraw.

Under these circumstances and others we might encounter, many of us find that we can become isolated and estranged from friends and support systems in our daily lives

and sometimes even from family members who don't know what to do or say as time goes by and we are still grieving.

Making New Friends:

How do we even do that? How and where do you meet people and how do you trust your instincts about who to approach or allow into your life. How can you separate out your desires, your illusions, your loneliness and your replacement needs from your true wants for friendships?

How do you keep control of your socializing and not let it become a way to mask and hide your grief so you don't work on healing, so you just cover up the pain where unfortunately it can remain hidden but from where it can reappear more severely than ever at a later time? How do we overcome gender-based social expectations in making friends and still stay comfortable and safe in our choices?

Some places/ways that we might be able to meet people:

- Neighbors/friends of neighbors.
- Support groups/social opportunities associated with these groups.
- Social, topic or interest driven meetup groups.
- Schools.
- Gyms/yoga classes/senior centers.
- Restaurants.
- Bars, clubs, coffee houses.
- Places of worship.
- Adult learning classes.
- Online support forums and social media groups

Finding new friends is something some of us may have to try at some point if we need to find new people in our lives. We all need to find our own way to explore the possibilities that are available and to safely navigate the social requirements and patterns in each of the modalities we investigate.

There is no right way to do it, but it can be a very important growth area going forward.

The process each of us follows towards finding and making friends depends on a large number of factors in each of our individual lives. Where we live, what we have access to, our age, our gender, our personalities and more, can all play a role here. Going out alone as an older adult can be an almost insurmountable challenge that has not only social but also safety implications it would be well to consider. Women especially have the challenge of staying safe if they choose to venture out alone, but at least one other person or a small group can change the dynamics of going to new places and situations.

For many people, going out alone and meeting people in public places can be a very socially difficult and challenging thing to do. In many of our lives, once we became part of a couple, going out was almost always done as a couple and relearning to do it alone, if we ever knew how to do it as a single, is often pretty difficult to consider.

And finally, for many women, it simply isn't ever done. Being alone in a bar or restaurant may send signals of intent or situation that are either incorrect or again, not welcome. Being alone in some situations is, in many ways, an invite to attention that could become unwanted and so best avoided.

Again, as a safety issue, for women going out alone, even in apparently safe places, there is the potential of meeting people who have unwanted and possibly dangerous intentions. But, even having one other person going along on an outing can change the situation, so if going alone is not something you are comfortable with, consider adding at least one other person and see how that changes things.

Here again it's the unanswerable. There just isn't a right answer or a single answer that fits everyone. It's another place each of us needs to think about and find our comfort zone in and then proceed slowly and carefully in what ever direction we want to explore.

There is a real need in most bereaved spouses or partners to be social. If we are feeling isolated in and by our grief, we need to discover comfortable ways to get together and perhaps establish a (new) group of people to talk to and do things with to help fill the large amount of lonely time we now have to fill and to fill our needs for interaction and connections and even over time to add hugs and especially to build friendships.

Social Groups:

In the normal course of our lives we often take many months and years in the making of friends in the various places we meet people. It takes time in the short conversations we usually share to build commonality and shared experiences and open up about our lives, thoughts and feelings until, gradually, we become friends.

In most support group sessions, however, people often quickly begin to share very deep and personal and often intense parts of themselves. Through that process, they learn in a relatively short time a lot about each other, they compress perhaps years of getting to know one another into a very short time.

If people in support groups also begin meeting in more social environments, the pathway to friendship can be accelerated by both their common grief experiences and by the opening up they have done and experienced in the support group meetings.

Socializing:

Socializing or the want to socialize, like so many other parts of our grief journeys, happens at a different point and at a different rate for each of us. We each probably come to a place when we feel the need to have other people in our lives, when we want some company and a chance to interact.

It is probably best to go slowly at first, to not immediately jump into “high intensity” situations like loud, couple-filled bars and clubs, or by joining singles meetup groups or using online dating apps. Although as always, if that’s what you feel you want or need, perhaps because its something you remember from before you entered your marriage, then absolutely you should try it and see how it makes you feel now.

But going slowly and meeting people in a “low energy” situation and not in an emotionally charged environment seems to have a benefit of allowing you to talk and actually get to know and be around people for itself, for the social aspects of making new friends perhaps, and not as a “stay busy coverup” for your feelings of grief.

Social, potluck and meetup groups of fellow travelers can often be a good way to bridge the gap between our isolation and finds a gentle way to edge back into socializing that can be very helpful if groups of like-minded spouses or partners want to create and participate in them.

Questions:

- Have you experienced old friends being less willing to talk to you or spend time with you?
- Have family members begun to distance themselves from you?
- Do you feel a need to socialize?
- Can you see ways and places to meet new people if you need to that you are comfortable with?
- Do you think that other bereaved spouses or partners would be a more comfortable group than the non-bereaved to become friends and spend time with?
- Would you be willing to become part of a social group of bereaved spouses and/or partners for a potluck or conversational gathering?

Conclusion

I hope that these guides have been useful to you and have given you a way to help yourself and others on the long hope and healing journey through your grief. If they've helped you to bring groups of bereaved spouses and/or partners together for hope and healing they have fulfilled my own hopes and my new meaning and purpose of sharing what I've learned to help the community of bereaved spouses and partners navigate their grief journeys.

In Hope and Healing,

Howard