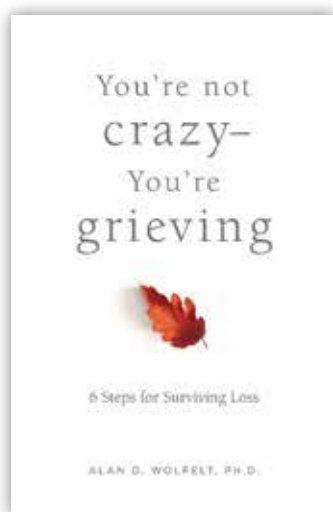


Grieving Together – Part 5: Embracing Spirituality

By Alan D Wolfelt Ph.D

Regardless of the beliefs of those grieving, spiritual practices can help them survive the early months of grief as well as profoundly enrich the remainder of their days.

This is the fifth article in a six-part article series by Alan D Wolfelt, author, educator and consultant to the funeral industry adapted from his new book *You're Not Crazy – You're Grieving* as a reminder that crazy is normal in new grief and to help funeral staff support families through their intense grief during the early hours, days and weeks following the death of a loved one.



In early grief, existential questions tend to naturally arise. Why did the person have to die? Why now? Why in this way? Why does anyone live and die? Why are we here? I often say “why” questions naturally precede “how” questions. “Why did this happen?” instinctively comes before “How will I survive that it did happen?”

It is normal for those grieving to try to make sense of things, to try to understand. It is normal to wonder about and search for the meaning of life – their life, the life of the person who died, and life in general.

Most “why” questions and concerns after a death are esoteric in nature. In other words, they’re spiritual. They’re spiritual because they can’t be answered with concrete facts and hard sciences. Instead, they have to do with our innate sense that there may be something bigger or greater than us at work in our lives and in the universe.

It is important to acknowledge that spirituality and religiosity are not synonymous. In some people’s lives they overlap completely – their religious life is their spiritual life. Other people have a rich spiritual life with few or no ties to an organised religion. Still others may not consider themselves ‘spiritual’ but have a philosophy of life they live by.

Searching for answers

In the early weeks of grief, many people struggle with finding reasons to get out of bed in the morning. This is mostly a practical, not spiritual, kind of searching. The more spiritual kind of searching in grief, however, is the main theme of this article. There generally aren’t easy answers to the grand why questions. That’s one of our chief challenges in grief, in fact – learning to live with not knowing and uncertainty. But even if there aren’t answers, there is still a lot of value in the search.

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Simply by talking to other people about their search, exploring their questions, looking for answers, those grieving are allowing themselves to mourn authentically. You can help those grieving by being open to whatever spiritual and/or religious impulses and ideas they bring to your funeral home. If they want to integrate certain spiritual concepts into the funeral experience, you can help them do so.

Caring for the spiritual self

When I’m counselling someone who’s grieving, I always encourage them to build spiritual practices into their everyday routines. Even just ten minutes a day devoted to caring for their spirit can have a profound impact on their healing and wellbeing.

The spiritual practices which will clear their head, help them feel grounded, and nurture their divine spark will differ between each grieving person but if you are ever asked to give ideas for spiritual nurturing and exploration, here’s a list you can use:

- Go for a walk in nature
- Attend religious or spiritual services
- Speak with a clergyperson or other spiritual leader
- Sit outdoors somewhere beautiful
- Breathe deeply
- Listen to music that speaks to your soul
- Do something good for your body
- Write in a journal
- Pay attention to your five senses in this moment
- Pray
- Meditate
- Make something
- Spend time with someone who loves you
- Do something that makes you feel hopeful
- Help someone else

- Watch the sun rise or set
- Read a spiritual text
- Practice yoga
- Garden
- Get a massage
- Give a gift
- Read or write poetry
- Express gratitude.

Embracing mystical experiences

After a death, a number of those grieving have mystical experiences, which often give comfort and sometimes, because they fall into the realm of the supernatural, these experiences make some people who are grieving feel crazy! You can help assure those grieving that they are not crazy and that these encounters are common and normal.

It is not unusual for people experiencing grief to feel they are being contacted by the person who died, for example. Sometimes, this sign comes in the form of a bird or animal. When a butterfly, for example, suddenly appears in their yard or path they might take it as a sign from the person who died that they are safe and well. Such synchronicities often feel mystical when we are searching for meaning.

Finding healing in rituals

I often find that additional rituals after the funeral can be helpful in surviving early grief. By rituals, I simply mean actions that we



perform in a certain way and in a certain sequence. We perform them for a purpose that has emotional and spiritual meaning and is greater than the sum of its parts.

As you know, the funeral is a foundational grief ritual. It helps those grieving begin to acknowledge the reality of loss, remember the person who died, activate social support, express feelings and search for meaning. Grief rituals don't have to be formal ceremonies, though. In fact, most of them can be brief, informal, and simple.

One example is what I call the 'Ten-Minute Grief Encounter Ritual'. Here's how those grieving might use it:

- First, find a quiet space and centre yourself.
- Then set your intention for the ritual on that day. For example, it might be to feel calmer or to appreciate the love you still have for the person who died. It can be anything you want.
- Next, while holding or looking at a symbol of the person who died (such as a photo or article of clothing), name the grief feelings

you are having in that moment and acknowledge their normalcy.

- As you name each new thought and feeling, place your free hand over your heart, pressing gently, then allow your hand to fall to a resting position again.
- If you're someone who prays, you can pray these thoughts and feelings instead as you step through the ritual.
- Continue feeling, naming, and exploring your emotions for five to ten minutes. When the time is up, take a moment to express your gratitude for anything authentic you thought, felt, and acknowledged during the ritual.
- Close with an affirmation that restates the intention you set at the beginning of the ritual but this time as a present truth. For example, "I love [name of person who died]. I am capable of grieving and loving and healing at the same time."

An amazing thing about small grief rituals is that they naturally facilitate healing. This is especially true when they're done regularly, day in and day out. I have seen them work effectively many times in the lives and hearts of grieving people. For those not already comfortable with spiritual practices, the idea of grief rituals might sound a little crazy. But learning to embrace the crazy is what this article series is all about.

About the Author

Dr Alan Wolfelt is recognised as one of North America's leading death educators and grief counsellors. His books on grief for both caregivers and grieving people – including *You're Not Crazy – You're Grieving*, from which this article is adapted – have sold more than a million copies worldwide. He is founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition www.centerforloss.com.

