

Contents of this ELetter

- The Teeter Totter of Resilience
- Unanswered Prayers
- Nan's Journal - Survivor's Perspective on Grief
- Cooking - Cook It-For One
- President George HW Bush
- Inspirational Story: Not Forgotten
- Grief Group/Seminars
- Grief Tip - Summer Grief Tips
- Reader Feedback - What You Remember He/She Did or Said
- Understanding Grief Myths
- Poems, Verses and Quotes
- On the Lighter Side
- Featured Book
- When the Holidays Hurt Gathering

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The Teeter-Totter of Resilience and Vulnerability in Grief

By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

*"To share your weakness is to make
yourself vulnerable;
to make yourself vulnerable
is to show your strength."
— Criss Jami*

As you journey through your grief, you are probably being buoyed by—and perhaps also dismayed by—your natural resilience. After all, here you are. You may not have thought it possible at first, but you have indeed survived.

The most profound change that you could ever experience has happened, and you've picked yourself up, dusted yourself off, and kept putting one foot in front of the other. And you may have felt dismay sometimes at your own resilience, too. The fact that life goes on has probably made you feel distressed or anxious now and then.

Pay attention to those inklings of distress. When it comes to grief, it's wise to beware of your resilience. Why? Because it may tell you to "suck it up," "let go," and put your loss behind you. It may suggest that you need to be strong and in control. Yet what

all grievers actually need is to embrace their normal and necessary thoughts and feelings and give them the time and attention they deserve. What they need to do is relinquish control of their grief.

Allowing yourself to be vulnerable is just as important as cultivating resilience. Think of them as the two sides of a teeter-totter. You want the teeter-totter to balance sometimes, yes, but you also want it to go up and down. On some days you will need to open yourself to your naturally painful grief. The vulnerable side of the teeter-totter will tilt down. On other days you will marshal your resilience to help you navigate new challenges and approach life openly as it moves toward you. The resilient side of the teeter-totter will tilt down.

Both vulnerability and resilience are required for you to mourn. Mourning is the work of grief. It is expressing your inner grief outside of yourself. Mourning is talking about your grief and the person who died. It's crying. It's participating in a support group. It's journaling. It's volunteering and walking alongside other grievers. It's actively participating in whatever means of expression feel right to you in the moment and suit you best. It is through mourning that you will continue

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TEETER TOTTER OF GRIEF...CONTINUED

to heal and find renewed meaning in life and living.

Mourning requires you to be vulnerable to your deepest pain and your most challenging thoughts and feelings. It asks you to encounter then fully and express whatever they bring up for you. It asks you not to suppress or deny or distract but instead to immerse. This immersion is necessary, because it is the truth.

But here comes resilience! And resilience asks you to dose yourself with your grief and mourning. It says, “Yes, encounter your necessary grief for a while, then let’s go engage in life for a while. We’ll keep going like that, back and forth, back and forth.”

It’s this back-and-forth of grief, in fact, that provides momentum for the journey. I call it evade-encounter. It’s healthy to take part in non-grief-focused activities part of the time (though your loss always lives inside you). It’s healthy to evade your grief sometimes. Then it’s also healthy, and necessary, to return to encounter your grief sometimes.

Earlier I asked you to picture a teeter-totter representing resilience and vulnerability. Now I want you to imagine one of those old-fashioned handcars that railroad workers used in the 1800s and 1900s to traverse train tracks. Two people would stand on either side of the handcar’s small platform, and by taking turns pumping the teeter-totter-like lever back and forth, back and forth, they could quickly convey themselves down the track with their own muscle power.

The handcar metaphor captures the reciprocating power of evade-encounter as well as vulnerability and resilience in grief. When you consciously activate and rely on both as you journey through grief, and you work to keep them in healthy balance, you create divine momentum toward healing. If, however, you neglect one side or the other, you get stuck, and you go nowhere.

The Wikipedia entry on handcars says, “While depictions on TV and in movies might suggest that being a member of a handcar crew was a joyride, in fact pumping a traditional handcar...could be very hard work.” Likewise, the back-and-forth of resilience and vulnerability in grief is very hard work. Remind yourself that there are no rewards for speed. If your handcar moves at a snail’s pace, so be it. If it goes backward sometimes, so be it. As long as it’s moving, you’re on the right track.

And don’t forget to take good care of yourself every day. You won’t have the energy to muster the back-and-forth of vulnerability and resilience if you’re not getting ample rest, nutrition, hydration, exercise, and health care. You will also need help pumping the handcart sometimes. Healing in grief is not a solo activity. Vulnerability and resilience in grief definitely require seeking out and accepting the support of friends, family members, neighbors, and others along the way.

I’ve been a grief counselor for four decades now, and I’ve been privileged to bear witness to the power and momentum created by vulnerability and resilience hundreds of times. So I wish you vulnerability and resilience both. Godspeed.

About the Author

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is a respected author and educator on the topic of healing in grief. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School’s Department of Family Medicine. Dr. Wolfelt has written many compassionate, bestselling books designed to help people mourn well so they can continue to love and live well, including *Understanding Your Grief* and *Grief One Day at a Time*.

— Shared with permission from Dr. Alan Wolfelt

