

Myths about Grief ~ Alan Wolfelt, PhD

If you are to heal, it may be helpful to become aware of and dispel a few common myths about grief and mourning. Don't condemn yourself or others if, as you read this, you realize you believe in some of these myths. Instead, make use of any new insights to help you accomplish your work of mourning in a healthier way.

Myth #1 Grief and mourning are the same.

Most people use the words "grieving" and "mourning" interchangeably. Actually, grief is the composite of thoughts and feelings about a loss you experience within yourself. Mourning, on the other hand, is the external expression of that grief. Crying, talking about the person who died, or celebrating special anniversary dates are just a few examples of mourning. After someone loved dies, friends may encourage you to keep your grief to yourself. Healing begins, however, only when you begin to mourn publicly in the presence of understanding, caring people who will not judge you.

Myth #2 There are predictable stages to grief.

You may have heard about the "stages of grief". Somehow the notion of stages comforts people as they try to make sense of death. "If only I can get through these first two stages, they might think to themselves, "I'll be okay". While grief often manifests itself in similar ways, and at times there is a logical progression of emotion, grief is not predictable. It is tempestuous and fickle, revisiting its earlier emotions without warning, bounding here and there, and sometimes skipping "stages" altogether. Let your own personal experience with grief guide you.

Myth #3 We should avoid the painful parts of grieving.

Our society encourages prematurely moving away from grief instead of toward it. The result is too many bereaved people either grieve in isolation or run away from their grief. Far too many people view grief as something to be overcome rather than experienced. When you avoid the pain of grief, you avoid healing. Instead, you must learn to slowly embrace the full force of this pain so that someday you can again embrace happiness.

Myth #4 We should "get over" our grief as soon as possible.

Instead of the traditional term used to describe the final "stage" of grief – resolution or recovery – I prefer the word reconciliation. Reconciliation does not mean getting over your grief, it means growing through it. With reconciliation – which typically takes weeks or even years to achieve – you will feel a renewed sense of energy and confidence, an ability to fully acknowledge the reality of the death, and the capacity to become reinvolved with the activities of living. You will also come to acknowledge that pain and grief are difficult but necessary parts of living.