

# 10 Steps to Heal Your Grief

## By Roe Ziccarello

Here are 10 practical self-help steps for someone going through the grieving process. These tips are excerpted from my ebook, [Evolving Through Grief](#). I am an unwitting authority on bereavement, grief, suffering and sorrow — I've lost my sister, two best friends, two brothers, mother, father, brother in law, and my son.

### 1. **Survive One Hour at a Time.**

I distinctly remember being given sound advice from my younger sister, Debbie, who is a nurse practitioner and has worked with terminally ill cancer patients that were children. She told me to get through one hour at a time. As the first day wore on, I recall realizing that I somehow managed to cope with just one hour at a time, because time needed to be experienced through smaller increments, whereas it seemed unbearably impossible to try to go on living without my son for weeks, months or years at a time. As each hour passed, I began to feel comforted that I had survived one hour without going completely mad. Each hour, I began to realize that I could actually go to the bathroom alone, refill my own coffee cup, eat a few bites of food placed before me, and even walk through one room of my house without falling apart. The pain that succumbs you is so overwhelming that everything that has to do with survival has to be broken down into tiny, manageable increments. Before you know it, a whole day has gone by and you have managed to survive.

### 2. **Survive One Day at a Time.**

Begin to live one day at a time, accepting the loving comfort that family and friends are so willing to give, but know that some down time of quiet solitude is also important. In the next few days I began to realize that although my family and friends had wonderful, sincere intentions, I had to allow myself just a few quiet moments alone to collect my thoughts and to just fall to pieces. Most people couldn't bear to watch me fall apart, and ultimately, in hindsight, that's exactly what I needed to do. What most people don't understand is that to hold in such an exorbitant amount of pain is actually detrimental to a person's physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. At the time, I felt as though my heart had been completely crushed, ripped out, shredded, and then somehow put back into my body as a hardened lump of clay. The sensation in my chest was as though I had a cement block weighing down on it all times. This coupled with intense headaches due to lack of sleep and rest made me feel like a walking zombie. But at the end of each day I'd somehow managed to drift off into sleep, and the next day would come, even if I didn't necessarily welcome it.

### 3. **Take Care of Yourself.**

Remember to eat, try to get enough rest, and keep all things that are harmful to you (such as alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, and too much stimuli) at a minimum.

Again, although my family and friends had good intentions, perhaps a few moments of complete quiet would have helped rejuvenate my spirit. It's not to say that I should have been left alone, because I probably was too unstable to be left alone, but at least I should have tried to rest more. I also should have forced myself to eat more nutritionally, and should have taken a multi-vitamin to supplement my lack of appetite. If you are fortunate enough to have a loving caregiver, tell that person to help you to remember to eat, to sleep, and not to overdo anything that can be taxing to an

already emotionally and physically depleted person.

Ultimately, the initial first few days are the hardest. Simple bodily functions are no longer second nature. After you have been a nurturing caregiver to another living, breathing human being, and that person no longer requires your guidance and care because he or she has left this earth, you are no longer the person you used to be. It's like having a stroke and you have to learn to walk and talk again, except in this case, you may remember to walk and talk, but you don't know how to eat, sleep, dream, or love. You may not even remember how to care for yourself or for anyone else. All of these have to be learned again. In essence, you begin to reinvent yourself.

When you start to feel your sanity slip, do whatever positive thing you can think of to hold on: pray, meditate, go get a full body massage at a spa, scream at a starlit sky, take a trip to a new place, stare at sunsets, lay in an open field and watch the clouds drift, or do all of these things at once: Just do something for you! And don't feel guilty about being selfish about it. You can't do anything for others if you don't take care of yourself first. You can't be loving to others if you aren't loving to yourself first. Then, when you start to feel a sense of renewal, think about extending the love you still want to express for your child in a way that will benefit others. Believe it or not, there will always be someone else who has experienced greater sadness and loss. My brother in law, Abe, sent me a wonderful book called, *Finding Purpose for Your Pain*, which conveys this same thought. If you truly understand that we are all connected, you begin to understand that the dynamics of your heartache and how you handle it can be a source of comfort and inspiration for others.

#### 4. **Have Faith.**

The first thing I want to address here is that most of the studies show that parents who have strong faith usually have stronger coping skills because of their willingness to admit that there are higher powers for which we cannot comprehend. Of course, the first thing that I did (but have always done and continue to do) was ASAP: Always Say A Prayer. I was fortunate enough to be raised by wonderful parents who taught us the power of prayer as children, and I have witnessed this power over and over again in my life experiences.

Often, it seems easier to pray when you're heartbroken and downtrodden, and sometimes we forget to pray when things are going well. If you have never been a prayerful person, maybe this is a good time to start. A silly movie comes to mind that had a wonderful quote: "Be the miracle." It was from the movie, "Bruce Almighty" and though the movie might have been more entertaining than enlightening, it still held an important message for me: We each can be a miracle no matter what situation we may find ourselves in. If we, as parents who have lost our children, can find a way to be the miracle, it will be that we can learn to carry our burden of sadness no matter how heavy laden and weak we are. ASAP: Again, believe it to be true for you and it will be. How will you know if it works if you haven't tried it?

#### 5. **Keep Yourself Busy.**

Hook or crook, find something to do to keep yourself occupied so that you aren't so caught up in that cycle of loneliness and despair. I have always been one of those people whose biggest fear is being bored. So, I have umpteen hobbies: writing poetry, reading fiction, reading self-help books, playing guitar or piano, playing computer Scrabble and Boggle, reading magazines, sketching, painting, travel, swimming, and doing various arts and crafts. Initially, I completely lost all interest in doing all of my favorite things: reading, swimming, and writing poetry. Doing my favorite things meant that I knew how to take pleasure out of day to day pastimes. How in the world can you take pleasure out of day to day pastimes when you struggle with having a will to live? So, instead, I forced myself to do things that I regularly didn't enjoy: I cleaned house, washed

windows, kept the fridge spotless. In other words: I stayed busy.

One of the main things that demanded my attention was that I still had a wonderful family that needed me: my husband, Thomas, my two teenage daughters, Chloe and Rachel, and my six year old son, Joseph. Knowing that they were taking cues from me in how to cope with our tragedy gave me some strength in getting through the routines of living week to week, and month to month. Probably one of the most positive things that happened was that a friend, Laura, had bought Joseph some children's books on grief which were so enlightening and helpful. As a small child who had lost a sibling, Joseph really needed me to guide him through the process. As a result, I gained a lot from the books as well.

Try to occupy your own time and mind with something that will make you feel useful. In the first couple of weeks, we planted trees in honor of my son that were actually gifts from good friends. A close friend, Mary, from work bought me some beautiful frames at my request, and I poured over family albums and had some of my favorite pictures of my son enlarged for framing. My brother, Rick, bought me a scrapbook, and I began to clamor through my son's belongings looking for special memorabilia to save, such as old report cards, Mother's Day and birthday cards that he had made. My principal, Barbara, from the school where I taught fifth grade, bought me a large 16 by 20 inch frame with fourteen slots in it. Picking out pictures of my son that were especially important for immortalizing into the frame took me a week to finish. When I think about having done all these things in my son's honor, I know that I was trying to show the world that my son was still alive in me and in my heart, and that I could never use the past tense of the word, "love," in referring to him.

My love for reading was rekindled when a friend of my husband's sent me a lovely book of daily devotional readings called, *Streams in the Desert*, by L.B. Cowman. Every morning, I began with reading scripture, beautiful descriptive poetry and prose on faith and hope, and found that somehow, some way, I was beginning to feel rejuvenated and reassured that God really had a purpose in taking my son from me to live with Him. Moreover, I began to feel inspired to write poetry again after two months of being a walking zombie. I found that being lonely meant that I had to become my own best friend all over again.

The opening verse in Chapter 3 is from a song, "Home to Myself." That was my personal song to sing whenever I felt lonely as a teenager. I actually began to write poetry at the age of fifteen to combat the loneliness I felt. I figured that I could always talk to myself, if there was no one else to talk to. As a teacher, I have always taught children that writing in a journal, or prose and poetry, is a wonderful way to get in touch with your thoughts, and to organize them. Thus, to combat my loneliness in the second month, I began to write my thoughts down in my journal. When I read my poetry now after a year has passed, it brings back all of the torment and sadness, yet offers a ray of hope to me. I feel like I was lost at sea and somehow swam back to shore. I felt that I was buried in the desert, somehow dug my way out and stumbled across a trickling stream.

## 6. **Keep a Journal.**

Turn your obsession with your child into something positive and concrete: Keep a journal. This will help to transmute a negative into a positive.

One of the things that people don't understand is that parents need to continue talking about their child, recounting and reliving every little thing he did or said, good or bad. Many books on grief encourage this type of conversation, so that parents can come to terms with the different relationship that they are beginning to build with the child who is gone. It is a relationship that may not include future joys, but there are so many countless moments of joy in our memories that are

precious and priceless, and these need to be preserved for posterity. Talking about them and reminiscing allows us to hold onto these precious memories.

As a poet, I tend to write down my thoughts. Even if writing has never been one of your hobbies, you must realize that what you are experiencing is incredibly unique. Outliving your own child is not the usual course of nature in a person's lifetime. This kind of grief is by far the most difficult one to cope with and the most painful. As I reminisce now about how I felt a year ago, and the calendar has just turned to September, a year and three months later, I'm shocked at how differently I view the world, my relationship with my husband, with my surviving children, with my sweet, beloved son, Gian, and ultimately with myself. This period has been the hardest to sit down and write about, because this chapter of my life a year ago (2nd trimester of grief) was by the far the hardest chapter for me to live.

Even if you don't feel that you're a good writer, it can be so healing for you to keep a journal. The phases of grief can be sporadic and have differing intensities in different circumstances. In the days following my son's birthday, I constantly referred back to the poem I had written to lift my own spirits. Then, as the Georgia weather began to turn into cool, autumn air, I became restless and upset, because fall had always been my most favorite time of the year. Then I found that I couldn't face the autumn without my son. I couldn't face the time passages, the constant memories of autumns passed. I wrote poetry to help me to collect my thoughts, give them a concrete foundation, and to help me to express my sorrow.

Eventually, though, I nose-dived into shock, which led to depression, which led to anger, and eventually led to numbness. The important thing to say here is this: I kept writing about what I was experiencing, so I wouldn't have to hold it all in. I've since found journal entries from that time that seethe with anger and blame. The pain jumped right out of the pages and grabbed me by the throat when I recently read them. The acknowledgement of that pain is what actually led me to begin writing this book. The fact that I actually survived through all of that turmoil let me know that I was managing to harness the pain that I was experiencing. As I continue to harness this pain, I know in my heart that I'm on the path to healing. Chronicling the journey has allowed me to assess my own grief work.

#### **7. Seek Out Positive Addictions.**

Positive activities such as yoga, meditation, or any form of exercise will enable you to regain a sense of centeredness. The yoga helped me to relax and continues to help me to relax, while the meditation helped me to at least not lie awake frantically for three and four hours at a time. Plus, the benefits of stretching, deep breathing and focused physical movements allow for better circulation and relief from stress. Even now, I experience these periods of insomnia, and have used meditation to at least help me to breathe and relax, succumbing to the elusiveness of not sleeping. At least my body is motionless and I open myself up to quiet solitude while experiencing insomnia.

#### **8. Give Yourself Permission to Grieve.**

Give yourself permission to grieve, irregardless of what other people need or expect of you. The best part of that long car trip to Santa Fe alone was that I finally was at liberty to grieve: not as someone's wife, mother, teacher, daughter, sister or aunt, but simply as a woman in pain, who had lost her child. When I drove away from my life, I suddenly could look at the maelstrom from a different perspective. The nights I spent in lonely hotel rooms was spent crying, writing, and watching mindless TV, without trying to tend to anyone else's needs. In other words, I wore no hats: no one's wife, no one's mother, no one's teacher, no one's daughter, no one's sister or aunt. What I saw through my own tears was not a pretty sight either. I realized that other people can't fathom your pain, so they'd rather pretend that you're being melodramatic.

**9. Survive One Day at a Time. Again.**

Anticipating holidays, your birthday, your individual family members' birthdays, and especially the birthday of your child who has died, can bring up so many bittersweet, painful memories. If you feel that you're too weak to handle them, know this: the pain you feel is a reflection of the great love you continue to have for your child. A friend of mine, Cathey, passed on this sage advice to me, and I continue to take solace in these words, as I find myself caught unaware and fall to pieces from time to time. "You hurt because you love." So be at liberty to cry, wail, bitch, and moan. You deserve to feel this way.

**10. Give of Yourself and Connect to Others Who Hurt.**

Do volunteer work, delve into a project in which you comfort others, and/or allow your love for your child to manifest itself in doing positive, creative things that can enrich other peoples' lives. The best way to cope with sorrow is to console another.

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