

We Grieve Workshop Flow

Grieving the Loss of a Sibling-Friend

Some of the most precious relationships we have are those we grew up with or shared meaningful experiences with over a substantial amount of time. Siblings and friends usually have deep connections, and their common experiences may be both positive and negative. Losing someone who knows a lot about you, accepts you without judgment, and loves you without condition is a significant loss of intimacy in your life. As with any relationship, the quality of the bond affects the intensity and character of the grief.



Week One: *The Forgotten Mourner*

Alan Wolfelt, author, grief counselor, and founder of the Center for Loss and Life Transition describes the adult who loses a sibling or friend as the “forgotten mourner”. Traditionally when a loss occurs, those getting the most attention are parents, children, and partners. The adult sibling or friend often suffers silently. Feelings of being disenfranchised are common when a loss is felt deeply but not recognized by others. It is important to recognize your loss even if society does not.

Group Discussion:

- Tell us about the sibling-friend you lost
- How would you describe the pain you feel with losing your sibling-friend?
- In what ways has your loss been or not been recognized by others?
- In what ways have you experienced “*competitive grieving*”?

Handouts:

- Experiencing Grief Exercise
- Acknowledging Loss - Exercise
- Physical Grief - information
- You May Not Know - information
- Journaling Exercise

Homework:

- Complete the Experiencing Grief Exercise
- Complete the Acknowledging Loss Exercise
- Complete the Journaling Exercise

- Gather some happy pictures

Week Two: *Losing Ourselves*

From our earliest memories we identify ourselves in the world as “the brother of..., the sister of..., or the best friend of...”. Stories of our youth are replete with those with whom we hung out or identified strongly. So much of who we are is caught up in those we spent the most time with during our formative years. That is why losing a sibling, or a close friend can be so challenging for us. When we lose a sibling or a close friend, we lose a part of ourselves.

Group Discussion:

- What positive, happy memories do you have of your sibling-friend’s influence on you?
- In what ways have you been dependent on your sibling-friend?
- How has losing your sibling-friend changed your view of yourself?
- What do you miss most from not having access to your sibling-friend?

Handouts:

- Missing My Reflection – Article
- CORE – Exercise
- Perspectives of Grief & Loss - Info

Homework:

- Read the Missing my Reflection article
- Complete the CORE Exercise
- Reflect on your most recent Perspectives of Grief & Loss

Week Three: *Loss of Connection*

When you can be separated from someone for months or years at a time, be reconnected and instantly pick back up where you left off, finish each other’s sentences, and know what the other is thinking, you have something rare. You have a relationship many have with their siblings and close friends. To lose that relationship leaves a huge hole in your soul. This loss can feel as if you have lost an arm or a leg. This person has been one you would always turn to when you felt alone or disconnected, and the thought of never being able to hear their voice or see the smile on their face is profoundly painful.

Group Discussion:

- Which of your emotional needs did your sibling-friend meet?
- What dream died with your sibling-friend's passing?
- How did your relationship with your sibling-friend make you feel?

Handouts:

- Stronger When You Lean – Article (Circles of Influence – Exercise)
- The Journey of Grief – Exercise

Homework:

- Complete article, Stronger When You Lean, and exercise, Circles of Influence
- Complete the Journey of Grief exercise

Week Four: *Competing Thoughts & Emotions*

When you spend decades of your life with a person you cannot help but have both positive and negative stories and memories of your time together. Siblings and friends can have been inseparable growing up, but then estranged because of a falling out or disagreement and go years without speaking to each other. Conflicting thoughts and emotions will easily compete after the death of this loved one. We can experience intense feelings of love in our grief, and at the same time a profound confusion because we also feel anger, frustration, and potentially resentment at the same time.

Group Discussion:

- What are a few of your most positive memories of your sibling-friend?
- What negative, painful memories of your sibling-friend have upset you?
- How are you dealing with those painful memories?
- What are you most grateful for from your sibling-friend?

Handouts:

- The Principle of Replacement - Exercise
- Healing a Past Painful Experience – Exercise
- Domains of Resilience - Exercise

Homework:

- Complete the Principle of Replacement Exercise
- Complete the Healing a Past Painful Experience Exercise
- Complete the Domains of Resilience Exercise



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in our Grief Workshop.

All resources in the We Grieve Community are free!
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In addition to resources and free workshops,
We Grieve would like to connect you to others
who have experienced your same loss.

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We bring grieving people together to heal

My Notes:

WE GREIVE WORKSHOP



WE GRIEVE

EXPERIENCING GRIEF

"normal reactions to pain & suffering"

Thoughts

- disbelief
- confusion
- preoccupation with the death & the deceased
- sense of presence
- lack of concentration
- lack of ability to organize & process intellectually
- trouble remembering
- difficulty making decisions

Feelings

- shock, numbness
- denial, disbelief
- anxiety, fear, panic
- loss, emptiness
- loneliness
- sadness, depression
- loss of pleasure
- hurt, frustration
- helplessness
- hopelessness
- guilt, regret
- disorganization
- confusion
- relief, emancipation
- reconciliation
- re-establishment
- feeling crazy
- explosive emotions:
anger, hate, resentment,
jealousy

Behaviors

- absent-minded behavior
- crying and sobbing
- restlessness
- inability to sit still
- trying to "stay busy"
- visiting places or carrying
- treasuring objects
- avoiding reminders
- experiencing "grief bursts"
- dreams of the deceased



Relational Changes

- ___ social withdrawal
- ___ fear of being alone
- ___ dependent, clingy
- ___ busyness as a distraction
- ___ irritable, moody
- ___ argumentative
- ___ trying to replace the loss
- ___ changes in role, status, family system, identity
- ___ avoiding people to avoid conversation about the loss

Physical Factors

- ___ fatigue, lack of energy
- ___ hollowness in the stomach
- ___ stomachache, other gastrointestinal disturbances
- ___ sleep difficulties (too much/little, interrupted sleep)
- ___ feelings of emptiness and heaviness
- ___ heart palpitations, trembling, shaking
- ___ hot flashes, indications of anxiety
- ___ nervousness, tension
- ___ agitation, irritability
- ___ shortness of breath, headache, muscle aches & pains
- ___ chest pain, pressure, or discomfort

Spiritual Concerns

- ___ searching for meaning
- ___ asking the "why" questions
- ___ mystical experiences
- ___ reassessing values, beliefs, and priorities
- ___ feeling anger at God
- ___ feeling abandoned by God
- ___ experiencing comfort from God and faith community
- ___ exploring new dimensions of faith
- ___ using rituals like prayer and meditation to help the healing process



ACKNOWLEDGING YOUR LOSS

One of the first responsibilities we face with grief is to accept the reality of our loss.

Many people find they come to despise the word "accept" when it comes to grief. It has connotations of being okay with the death, or quickly moving on from the person we lost. You will need help with ways to accept your loss without the horrible feeling you are betraying your loved one's memory. We will come initially to see acceptance more as acknowledgment. Acceptance will come gradually.



I know my friend is gone. I was there. I talked to his family. I went to her service. I read the posts on social media. I know it happened. *But I just cannot believe it is real.* My brain has no trouble with the facts, but my heart will not accept that I will never see him again. The primary loss or death of a friend or sibling will be followed by waves of secondary losses just like the crashing of a boulder in a lake sends cascading waves across the water, one after another. It is these secondary losses that make the primary one so painful. Each is an agonizing reminder that we have lost so much. Acknowledgment of these losses are baby steps toward healing.

Exercise

Take out a sheet of paper and place it in a landscape orientation in front of you. Draw an arrow from left to right to across the page and write your loved one's name at the top of the page. Starting at the far left mark a place on the line representing your first memory of your sibling or friend. Move along the line creating marks on the line and labeling them as events, memories, seasons, or moments between you. Mark and label as many as you can remember, all the way to the time of their death on the far right. Above the line write a phrase or sentence describing what you like about that memory. Below the line and that same memory write what you have lost in losing your person.

This exercise helps you honor and appreciate your loved one while at the same time acknowledging why you feel so much pain. As you describe what you have loved and lost in your person there will be a corresponding pain associated with the loss. The recognition of your loss and the related pain allows you the opportunity to come to terms with what you are experiencing.

When you complete the exercise, take some time over the next few days to write down what you were thinking, feeling and doing with regard to the exercise and your memories of your loved one. You will

have a deeper understanding of what you are going through, and your thoughts, feelings and behaviors will be validated. As you become more familiar with the connection of your memories, losses, and grief experience, you will then be able to see how this loss will affect your life moving forward. The reality begins to establish itself in your thoughts, habits and daily routines as you adjust to the change.

The pain of your loss will at times interrupt this process, and you will feel the overwhelm of emptiness, loneliness, abandonment, sadness, and even hopelessness. Hold tight to your memories of your experiences together and allow them to shape you in positive ways. You have the power to create meaning from the huge loss you have experienced.

Choose to be the best version of the person your friend or sibling thought you were.



PHYSICAL GRIEF

When we think about loss and grief, we tend to think only of the emotions or feelings. It is important to understand that there are very often physical reasons that we are feeling or reacting the way we are.

To better understand what is happening to us both emotionally and physically when we are grieving, it is helpful for us to know a little more about how our bodies function under stress. This will enable us to take better care of ourselves and hopefully to prevent serious problems.

Since the loss of your loved one, have you experienced a loss of appetite or a sudden increase in appetite? Have you felt depressed and confused? Have there been times when your heart felt like it was racing, or you were short of breath? These reactions, along with many others, are very normal reactions to your loss. They are your body's attempt to get things back in balance, back to some level of equilibrium.



What is happening to you?

Whenever we go through a major change in our lives, it creates a great deal of stress. Our bodies react to that stress to prepare us to face what is ahead. This reaction is part of our very basic inborn instinct to survive. It happens automatically and involves many physical changes within our bodies. The physical changes that occur are responsible for many of the feelings and reactions that we have and believe to be purely emotional.

Let's look more closely at stress and our basic instinct for survival which is called "fight or flight" response. The "fight or flight" response triggers many automatic changes in our body. It is these physical changes that are responsible for many feelings and reactions that we may be having. Think about a time when you were frightened or startled suddenly. Your heart began to race, your hands became cold and stiff, the hair on your arms stood up, your senses became very keen, and your breathing became very deep. All these changes occurred automatically as your body was preparing to fight off the threat, whether imagined or real.



When that threat or need to adapt occurred, many things began to happen in your internal system. The production of adrenalin and noradrenalin (which are the chemicals that arouse us to action) were produced by the nervous system and this caused your heart rate to increase. Blood flow to the muscles sped up and this increased the amount of oxygen, nutrients, and energy getting to the deep muscles. As the muscles received more blood, they began to tighten, and your breathing became deeper to help you reserve oxygen for strength. The blood vessels on the surface of the skin became smaller or close up. This happens to prevent excessive bleeding if you are hurt by the threat. This is also what makes your hands feel cold and clammy. This all happened spontaneously within a matter of seconds to prepare you to meet the threat. These same chemical reactions occur every time your body is called upon to adapt to a change.

The loss of a loved one is a major change in our lives and our grief involves not one, but many changes. We face changes in roles and responsibilities. Each of these roles and responsibilities contribute to our sense of identity and sense of self. Our emotional security is compromised. We begin to feel very unstable and our stress is compounded. Our body tries to handle that too. To help us readjust, our body produces chemicals and hormones which are meant to help us readjust and return to a level of balance. Our body goes through a stage of resistance. This period is longer because the chemical and hormonal changes occur over time, some being released immediately, and others taking as long as 6 to 8 weeks to come about. During the stage of resistance, ACTH (Adrenocorticotrophic Hormone) is released by the pituitary gland, which is the gland that controls our growth and development. The ACTH stimulates the production of Aldosterone which causes salt to be absorbed in the kidneys. This can lead to a rise in blood pressure, water retention, and sometimes shortness of breath. This can cause us to feel flushed, dizzy, and have headaches. It becomes important to watch salt intake and drink plenty of water. ACTH also enhances the production of Cortisol which causes increased sugar levels in the blood.

Our body cannot handle the excess sugar in our system which leads us to feel anxious and excited. Cortisol also causes fat, protein, and vitamin B complex to break down. When this happens, our energy level drops and muscles become weaker. The immune system begins to weaken, and this makes us more susceptible to infections. We tend to catch more colds and flu bugs. You may notice that you are catching everything that is going around. This is a signal that you need to do something to reduce your stress and take better care of yourself. ACTH is also responsible for the production of Thyroxin, which is released by the thyroid gland. Thyroxin causes increased metabolism which is the rate at which chemical processes take place and fuel is burned within the body. This causes changes in our oxygen consumption, increases the rate and depth we breathe, and puts added stress on the cardiac system. Thyroxin increases the digestive activity and production of gastric juices. It is important to remember that we are unique individuals and that our bodies function very differently. For some of us, increased gastric juices or acids will cause feelings of nausea and not wanting to eat at all. We may even have bouts of unexplained diarrhea.



Thyroxin also causes anxiety, confusion, insomnia, as well as feelings of suspicion and dejection. It also causes muscle tremors and weakness. Those times when you felt like you could not shut off your mind and felt worried and excited at the same time weren't just emotional feelings but were a result of increased levels of thyroxin in your system. They are part of a very physical process that is responsible for a lot of normal grief reactions such as nervousness, sleep difficulties, and exhaustion, to name a few.

It is important to remember that these changes can last from a few minutes to several months because the chemical changes occur over time and occur each time we are faced with doing something we haven't done before. This can have a snowball effect which causes a build-up of hormones and continued weakness of the immune system which could lead to serious physical problems.

What Can You Do?

Knowing this you can begin to take better care of yourself. Express your feelings; don't hold them in. Getting your feelings out in the open releases the tension valve and helps you define alternatives and find insights into yourself that will help you begin to adjust.

- It is important for you to get 6-8 hours of sleep or rest. Sleep and rest give us more energy to help us face what is ahead. If you are having trouble sleeping, try some relaxation techniques such as deep breathing exercises, tensing and relaxing your muscles, imagining yourself in a peaceful, quiet place.
- It is important to eat well-balanced meals. Proper nutrition prevents the breakdown of muscle tissue and builds up the immune system.
- EXERCISE! Exercise helps to cleanse the system. It also helps us feel better about ourselves.
- Reorganize your day to reduce stress. Set priorities and make lists. Delegate responsibilities.
- Plan time for relaxation and enjoyment. Do something fun. Take time for yourself.

by Sherry L. Gibson, B.A., R.N.
Wisconsin Perspectives

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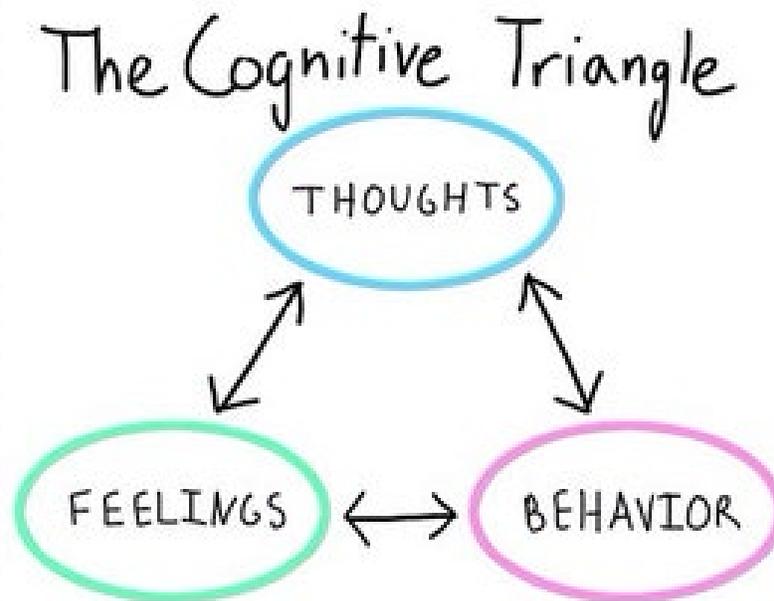
YOU MAY NOT KNOW...

You may not know...

- You don't "get over" a significant loss.
- It takes a long time to feel normal again.
- No one can tell you how to grieve.
- Healthy grieving requires the release of emotional pain.
- Grief changes you and your priorities.
- You may feel like isolating and being alone.
- Grieving is not forgetting but remembering in a new way.
- There are primary and secondary losses.
- You will discover triggers that stir your grief.
- Unresolved conflicts and issues from the past will surface.
- Not everyone you think will be there for you will be there.
- Your grief will teach you things about yourself.
- Society will not understand your grief journey.
- You can do more than you think you can.



JOURNALING EXERCISE



Journaling of Thoughts, Feelings, and Behavior

Self-Awareness is the Goal

One of the best ways to maintain awareness of what you are experiencing is a targeted journaling exercise. Using the Cognitive Therapy Triangle of thoughts, feelings and behavior, stop 3 times a day to write about your experience. In your journal or notebook write the date at the top of the page, then write the time of day. It is best to choose three times each day, such as 11:00am, 4:00pm and 9:00pm.

Writing Should Include Specific Details

Three times a day stop and ask yourself, "For the past 4-5 hours, what have I been thinking, feeling and doing?" Be specific with detailed examples. One or two-word answers will not be as helpful as descriptions and specific details. For example...



- *"I've been thinking about how I have no one to talk to about my concerns."*
- *"I've been feeling anxious and worry that with my sadness I will never feel joy again."*
- *"I've been unwilling to leave the house and find myself drinking alcohol and watching television."*

With Time You Will Begin to See Patterns

Don't worry if you miss a time or even a day. Pick up your journal and resume as soon as you can. Journal faithfully for at least three weeks and you will begin to notice patterns repeating themselves. Pay attention to these and speak with a trusted friend about what you are noticing.

Grief Writing Prompts

- Write down a list of people you can turn to for support, either in person or virtually.
- One feeling I've felt coming up a lot lately is...
- Write about where you feel your grief in your body. Where does your grief stay?
- Where does your mind go when you let it wander?
- What is one thing you could try to make today easier on yourself?
- I need more of...
- I need less of...
- What is something that makes you feel taken care of?
- Do you feel comfortable asking for help? Why or why not?
- I feel most connected to my loved one when...
- What is a way you can celebrate your loved one's memory? Can you plant something, cook something, watch something, volunteer something?
- One thing I wish I could do over with them is...
- If I could forgive them for something, it would be...
- If I could forgive myself for something, it would be...
- Write about a time you got along well with your loved one.
- Write about a time you had difficulty getting along with your loved one.
- If you could tell your loved one about your day, what would you tell them?
- How did your loved one make you feel?
- Write a mantra you can return to when you feel overwhelmed by grief.
- What is something you wish your support system would understand?
- What is something you wish your support system could help with.
- What songs make you think of them?
- Make a photo collage in your journal with some of your favorite pictures of them.
- Is there anyone else I know going through this right now? How can we support each other?



MISSING MY REFLECTION

Loss reminds us of the power held by significant people in our lives. When our loved one dies, we are overcome with emotion. We feel the deep sadness of loneliness engulf us like an impenetrable fog, and we have trouble imagining a future without our person. For those people with considerable impact on our life, there is an even deeper level of loss we may experience.

Sarah revealed much about her relationship with Josh when she told me she had lost herself when she lost Josh. As we unpacked her thoughts Sarah shared about how she felt most alive when she was with Josh, and about how being around him made her feel connected with something larger and more significant.



For Sarah, Josh was a mirror. We all have people in our lives who reflect back to us what they see in us and inspire us to become the best possible version of ourselves we can be. The way Josh spoke to Sarah; the way he looked at her, and the way he treated her was how he reflected the value he saw in Sarah. For the decade and more of years Sarah had Josh in her life she enjoyed how it felt to be known intimately, accepted without judgment, and loved without condition. *Life felt better because Josh made it better.*

Sarah became accustomed over the years to finding her worth and value in Josh as her mirror, and gradually her dependence on Josh as the source of truth for how Sarah defined herself increased. If she wanted to know the truth about Sarah, she would go to Josh for the answers. Sarah felt safe when Josh was close by and confident because Josh was consistently reflecting for Sarah the amazing person he saw in her.

Sarah's relationship with Josh was perfect until it wasn't. When Josh died suddenly, Sarah's emotional world came apart. As the overwhelming emotional pain slowly morphed into a dull ache, Sarah was left with an emptiness she had trouble recognizing at first. She began to realize that when she was with certain people, she felt more valuable, but alone she struggled and felt increasingly worthless. Sarah confided in me, *"When I lost Josh, I lost myself."* As we talked about her revelation, she concluded that maybe she had not lost herself, but that she had lost her mirror. *Living without Josh, Sarah was missing her reflection.*



Sarah asked me a thoughtful question, "How do I find my "self" again?" I assured Sarah that her "self" was intact and still where it had always been, and maybe what she needed was a new and healthier way to see it.

Deep in our core there exists a place where we hold the truth about us. For people of faith, we believe that truth was written there before we were born when our creator wrote it within us. Then on the day we were born the significant people in our lives began writing alongside our creator's truth by the way they related to us. Often what they wrote was in direct alignment with what God says is true about us, and at other times it was in direct opposition to God's truth. Consequently, we came to live with ideas and concepts about ourselves that were not all true. Our challenge became discerning which beliefs we lived by were actual truth and which were lies.

It was time for Sarah to do the hard work of going deep into her core to discern for herself what was truth and what was not. She grieved the loss of Josh who had helped her see her worth and value, and Sarah decided that getting back in touch with her creator might help her re-establish a solid foundation for worth and value. Over time she began to realize her faith could provide a trustworthy reflection template against which she could measure the reflections of others in her life.

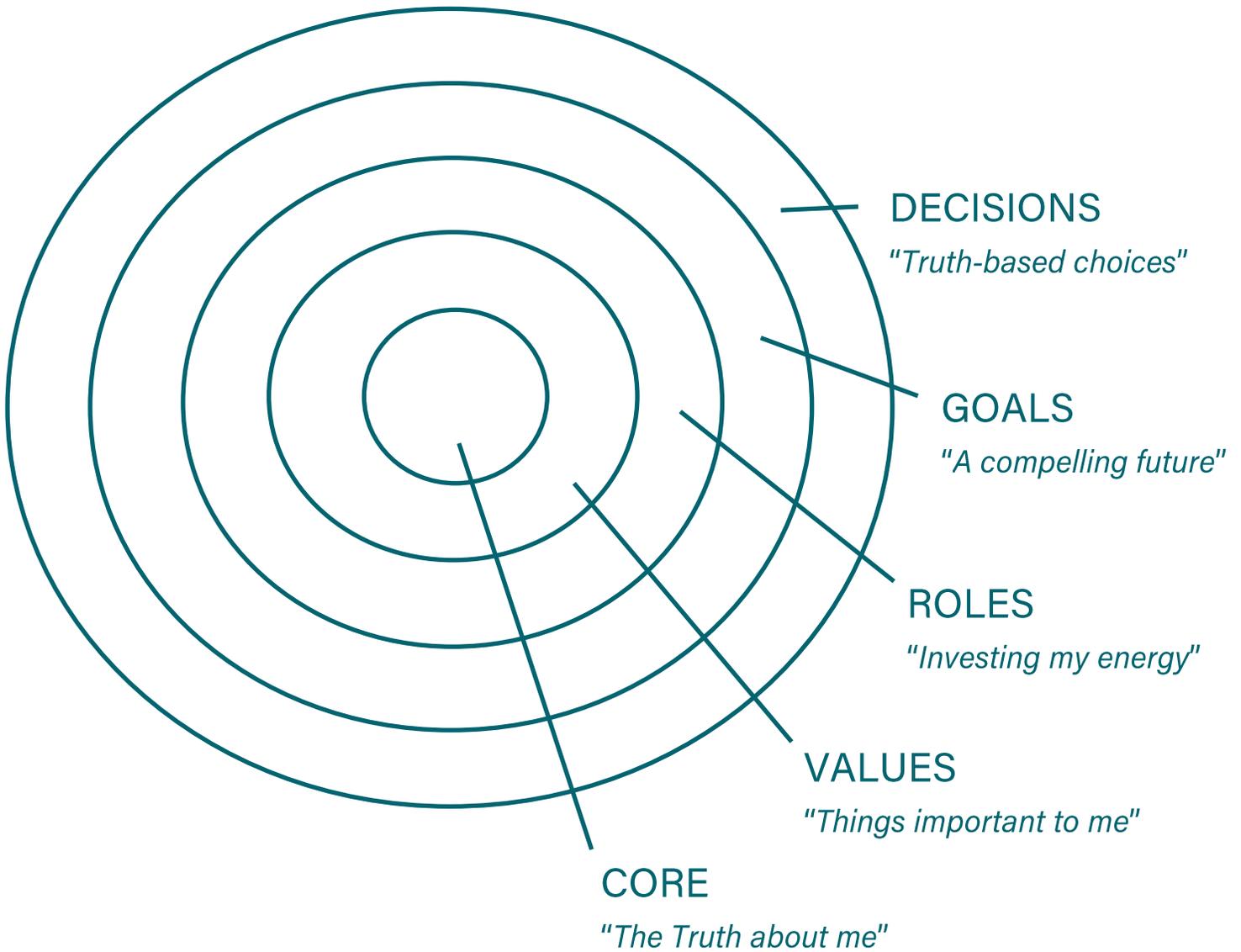
Sarah's journey of grief and loss has been painful, but it is leading her to deeper and more meaningful ways of discovering the amazing person and purpose that is Sarah. Loss changes us, but not always to destructive and meaningless ends.

Refer to the document in Resources titled, "**CORE Exercise**" for a template to do this work yourself.



CORE EXERCISE

Discovering & Accessing the Truth about Me



CORE:

- What is the truth about me, and from whom, what or where does the truth originate?
- Are there any lies that need to be exposed?

VALUES:

- What is most important to me, that flows out of the truth about me?

ROLES/ENERGY:

- Based on my various roles as child, sibling, parent, spouse, friend, co-worker, etc., what energy am I investing in each role? How do I align with my core & values?

GOALS:

- What are the goals I want to accomplish that rise from my roles/values/core?

DECISIONS:

- What are my next steps to accomplish the goals I have set?



THE PERSPECTIVES OF GRIEF

While an internet search of grief stages will reveal a variety of responses, these perspectives represent a very common set of conditions we find ourselves experiencing with loss. Remember these perspectives are not sequential and have no set time limits. You may find yourself experiencing several in a day, week, or a month. These perspectives are helpful as “handles” that help normalize what we are undergoing at any given time.



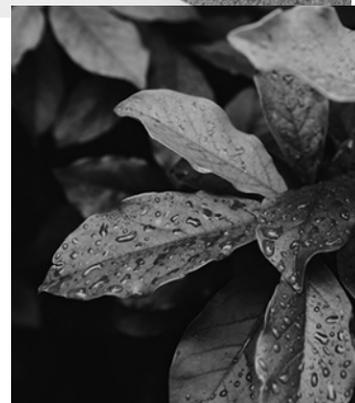
SHOCK

PROTEST

DISORGANIZATION

REORGANIZATION

NEW LIFE



SHOCK:

Whether or not the loss is sudden, and you are, or are not expecting it, the moment of death of a person you love is a powerful blow. The pain is excruciating, but reality has not quite set in at first, because of the effects of shock. Reactions to emotional shock vary, but often a person will later be told of things they said and did in the hours surrounding the death and have no memory of it.



Much like the feeling of being punched in the stomach, the death of a loved one can leave you breathless, unable to focus for more than a moment, and struggling to understand or even know what is happening to you. Feelings of denial or disbelief are strong with shock, and may return long after the initial loss as awareness of the reality begins to set in. While experiencing shock, it is important to lean on the presence of trusted friends and family for support.

ANGER:

Another common reaction to loss is an unwillingness to accept reality. You may find yourself protesting and overcome with strong overwhelming emotions. We all express our anger differently. Some carry it deep inside, the intensity hidden away from public view, while others explode internally and leave no doubt how furious they are with losing their partner. Still others experience a sort of “low boil” just under the surface, stirring feelings of resentment, frustration and even hopelessness.



At times it is hard to know exactly what you are angry about, and at other times the target is very specific. Commonly loss creates anger at a disease or healthcare organization or staff, or at a habit or addictive substance. Often there is even anger toward the person you lost for something they did or were perceived to do or not do that led to their death. Your anger does need a target with a name and a reason for why you are feeling it to be able to work through it and release it. This is an arduous process and takes time, so be kind and loving to yourself as you experience these strong, overwhelming emotions. Taking life one day at a time is truly about all you can do when you lose your person.



DISORGANIZATION:

Following the loss, a general sense of disorganization replaces the common routines you might have been used to before losing your person. Nothing seems to work the way it is supposed to. Tasks you could have done easily before now take twice as long and often are not even attempted. Projects are started but not completed, and you may feel very little energy for even the simplest of tasks. Grief is exhausting! You may feel as though you have run a marathon and have never left the house. Your partner's share of chores and responsibilities are left undone and you either have to attempt them yourself or find someone you can ask to volunteer or pay for the service. All this wrapped up in just the sheer disbelief that you are now alone to figure it out yourself is overwhelming.



One of the most frustrating elements of your grief to those close to you is your desire to isolate and just be left alone. You may dread leaving the house or being forced to have conversations with people. Many fear interactions with people they know because they will be forced to answer the "How are you doing?" questions or explain what happened for the first time over and over, or cry in front of friends and neighbors at the grocery store. Loss of a partner creates an overall unhappiness with life and the looming fear that life will never be normal again. It is important to allow yourself to grieve the death of your loved one. Feel the painful emotions, and then get out of bed, take a shower, put on clean clothes, and step into your day.

REORGANIZATION:

There is no timeline upon which grieving the loss of a partner operates. Grief comes in waves, not stages. This is somewhat encouraging because it means the pain will not be unrelenting forever. The time will come when you have better days, when there are fewer grief bursts, and the intensity of your emotion is not what it was in the beginning. You will discover you can do things you never thought you could do, and hopefully you will be surprised that from seemingly nowhere, people show up in your life with love and helpful support.

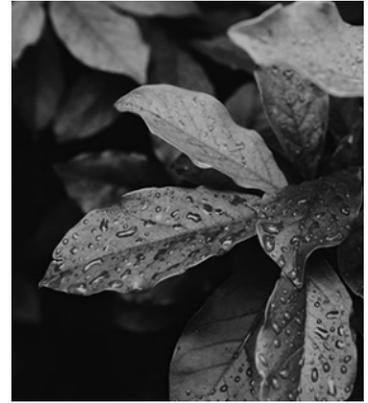


Learn to be grateful for these good days when you have a little more energy, or find yourself laughing at something funny, or choose to accept an invitation from a friend to do something interesting. They will come and go, but it is the goal of grief to honor the memory of your loved one, and accepting the reality of their death, adjust your life to the new reality of what life without your person looks like.



NEW LIFE:

Few people early in the pain of losing their person appreciate the thought of a “new life”. What you want is your loved one back, healthy and strong. The harsh aspect of reality is that bringing them back physically is not possible, so the choice must be to adjust to this new reality and find meaning and purpose in it. Acceptance does not require liking this new reality, but at first just allowing it to be. Feelings of loneliness and hopelessness are gradually replaced with a connection to others. You do not betray your beloved person when you move forward. Your love for them is not proved by how long you suffer their loss. While your loved one is no longer here, you are. And you can gradually reengage in life to live and love again.



There are many factors that will determine what your new normal will look like, and you do not have to know every detail of that picture right now. Do your best to refrain from creating rules about the future that you force yourself to live by that are based in the commitment you made to your person before they died. As much as you wish they had never left, they are gone and the rest of your life is ahead of you. Take your time, explore the new identity you now have without your person, and allow yourself to heal and grow healthy. You will always feel a sadness when you think of the person you lost, but you will feel normal again. You can do this. You will be happy again.



STRONGER WHEN YOU LEAN

Popular opinion says you can just grit your teeth, bite your lip, pull yourself up by your bootstraps and soldier on.

There is nothing wrong with being strong, but with grief that approach can leave you simply stuffing the pain deeper inside and securing a future of physical pain, poor health, anxiety, and resentment. This exercise will help you maximize your relationships to help you grieve well.



You can be stronger when you lean on others.

In Colorado we love our Aspen trees. The colors in the fall are beautiful and the quaking of the leaves you see walking one of our mountain trails is mesmerizing. A few years ago, I learned a few things about these amazing trees. They are one of the largest organisms on the planet. The largest is located in Fishlake National Forest in Sevier County, Utah. It is one root system that covers 106 acres. These beautiful aspens are all connected to each other. They are literally leaning on each other.

Loss creates a desire to isolate.

Growing stronger by leaning on each other must be intentional, or it will not be. When you allow your fear of talking with others about your loss or choose not to be around people because the energy you need is just is not available, you are placing yourself at risk. Losing a close friend and the excruciating pain associated with it can isolate us, and that is not healthy for your grief journey.

We find support from the loving and caring people in our lives. Not everyone understands grief or knows what to do and say, but with our help in educating them, we can get the help we need. And we do need help. Sometimes we have to be specific with what we need.

- *"I need you to meet me for coffee or a beer and let me talk."*
- *"I need you to do a road trip with me to attend the service."*
- *"I need you to meet me at the park and walk with me so I can get some exercise."*
- *"I need you to listen without trying to fix me."*
- *"I need you to watch my kids for me so I can get some rest. I am exhausted."*

Exercise

Take out a sheet of paper and draw five concentric circles on it like a target. Then draw a line in the middle of the circles from left to right. Think of the people in your life and how close you feel to them, and how effective they are or would be at helping you with your grief. Write the names of those you spend the most time with in the innermost circle. The most effective go above the midline and the least effective below the midline. Then move outward writing names in successive circles of people you spend less time with until you are writing the names of acquaintances in the space around the outermost circle.

What you see in front of you will be your circles of support or influence. The relationships in your life who could potentially help you, or who may not be good for you to spend time with at all so that you can begin to manage those relationships to help you grieve. How many are above, and how many are below the midline? Who are some you need to spend more time with, and some you need to spend less? Who are some that with a little effort could move in toward the center?

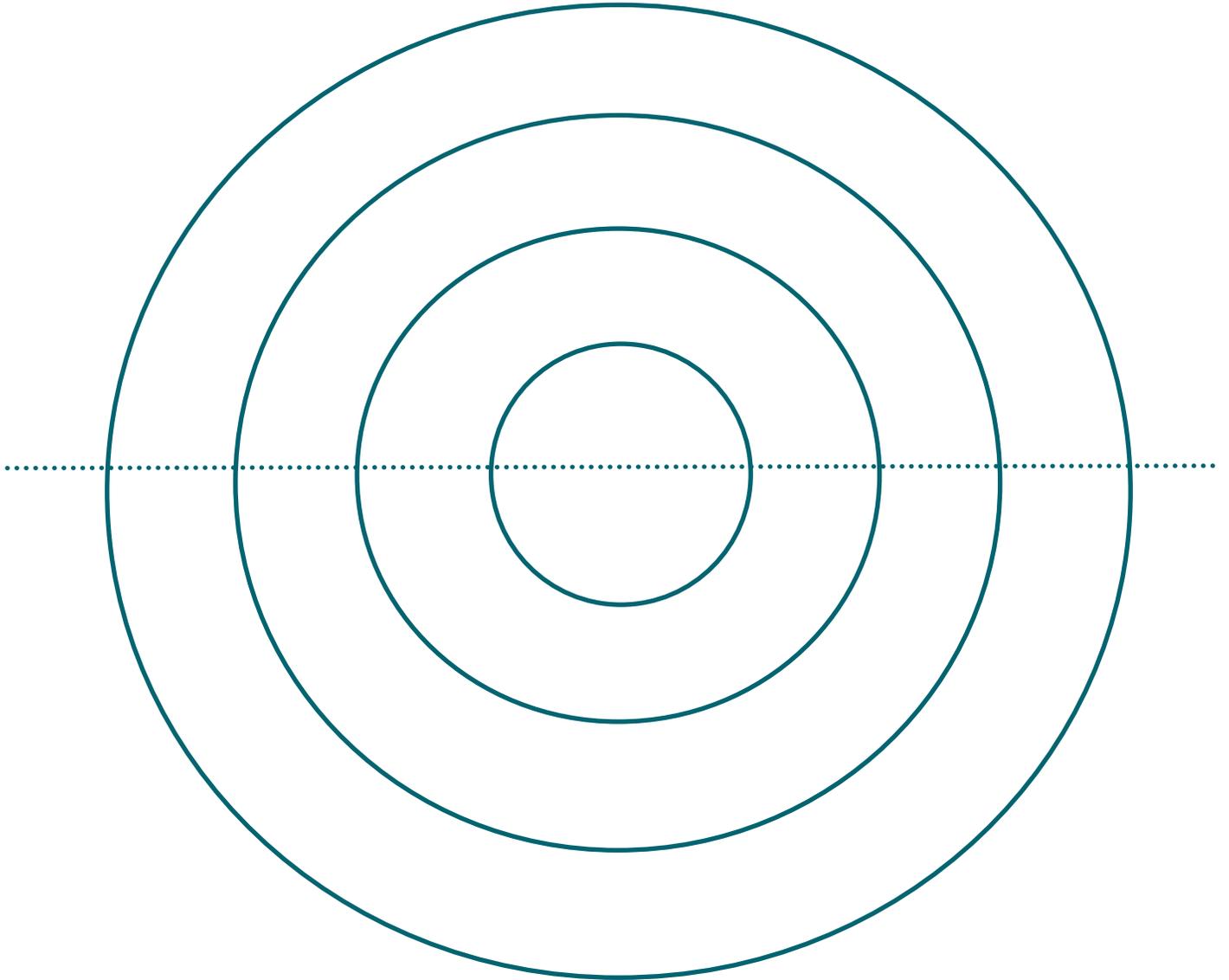
Moving toward trusted friends or family has the potential to make the difference in your grief journey.

Answering the hard existential questions of why, why now, why my sibling or friend, or why am I so devastated, is best done in a trusted relationship. Our thoughts, emotions and behaviors can be filtered through a trusted relationship and the resulting conclusions and resolve felt deeply. Most of us are hardwired for relational connection. Our basic emotional needs are met in relationship. Grieving a powerful loss like a sibling or close friend is a great opportunity to draw close and find new meaning.



CIRCLES OF INFLUENCE

An Exercise in Managing Your Support System



Write the names of people in your relationships on the graph above. Those closest to the center will be those with whom you spend the most time, and those above the line are mostly positive, filling experiences while those below the line are mostly negative, draining ones. Give thought to how to spend more time with those above the line and less time with those below.



THE JOURNEY OF GRIEF

Elements for Healthy Grieving

These elements of healthy grieving describe the journey of grief, and how to experience emotional pain in a healthy way. Each person's journey through grief is unique. Measure your success at facing each one and determine what is needed to move forward.

- **Accept the reality of the loss;** prepare to experience emotional pain
- **Feel the feelings** normal with your loss; express & release emotional pain; celebrate happy memories; refuse to stuff your emotions
- **Take care of yourself** in every way along the journey - physically, mentally, spiritually, relationally, and emotionally
- **Adjust to the new reality** created by the loss experience; relearn to live in the world
- **Remember the good** about who or what you have lost; you choose your point of focus
- **Develop a new self-identity** based on life after loss
- **Relate your loss to a context of meaning;** grief is a spiritual journey; a reexamination of core truths, values, passion, purpose & goals
- **Reinvest in life** and go on living and loving after loss

Based on the work of Alan Wolfelt and William J. Worden; edited by Karl J. Shackelford



THE PRINCIPLE OF REPLACEMENT

“I can’t turn my brain off! How do I get these painful thoughts to stop?”

Traumatic and emotionally powerful images, memories and thoughts root themselves in our brain and by force of their emotional weight create well-worn neural pathways that our brain uses to remember and recall. A problem with these thoughts is they carry with them painful emotions that make us feel like we are experiencing our loss all over again.

Sometimes the thoughts come as we are lying down to sleep, or they wake us in the middle of the night and keep us from returning to sleep again. Often, they appear with no perceptible trigger or reason at all! The resulting onslaught of painful emotions can leave us with an inability to concentrate or focus, a panic or fear of re-experiencing a painful memory, or an overwhelming sadness or hopelessness associated with significant loss.

Refuse to argue or fight with thoughts

Because arguing or fighting with painful thoughts can embed them even more deeply, an effective course of action is to use the principle of replacement to “*replace*” the thought with a new and better one.

Imagine a painful thought knocking at the door of your mind. Seeing it through the peephole with your mind’s eye, instead of welcoming it in and offering it a comfortable chair or inviting it for dinner to spend the night consuming your precious time and energy, simply refuse to open the door. If the painful thought is already deep inside and creating anxiety, choose a more desirable thought to take its place.



We cannot stop painful thoughts from knocking at the door, but we can refuse to invite them in

When you see the painful thought at the door, recognize it for what it is. There is no need to deny the reality of the pain and what caused it. Acknowledge the reality of your loss, but realize you are free to focus on whatever you want, and you do not have to be a victim to these anxiety producing thoughts. *“I see you and I recognize you, and I know that you really did happen. I am not denying you, but I am refusing to give you control of any more space in my thoughts.”*



Initiate the principle of replacement

Instead of inviting the painful thought inside, inhale and exhale a deep, slow breath and as you begin to breathe normally again, relax your breathing slightly just a little deeper and a little slower than normal. At the same time, select a thought from your library of positive, regenerative, and happy memories. Play the thought like a video, welcoming it in and enjoying it as it unfolds.

Allow for plenty of detail as you follow the story activating all your senses. Imagine how what you're experiencing feels, tastes and smells, along with vivid colors and even the sounds involved. Memorize how this feels and make a sincere attempt to hold the feeling for as long as you can.

Recognize your choice point

From this place of calm, you realize you have a choice. You do not have to be a prisoner to your painful thoughts. You have agency. There are a few things you control. You can choose the thoughts to which you give more time and attention. Making healthy choices will always be easier from this place of calm.

Keep working to collect a library of positive, regenerative videos from the stories you have in your memories. Some of those stories will involve the person you lost, and while connected to the painful memory, they are rooted in happier experiences and have the power to shift your emotions to healthy.

Create new neural paths

You will become expert over time at recognizing thoughts that demand access at the door of your mind, and skilled at replacing them with more encouraging, uplifting ones using the principle of replacement. This will create new familiar neural pathways in the brain and minimize the impact of previously painful memories. You will also find your other tools of mindfulness, being present in the moment, and grounding exercises to be helpful in replacing painful thoughts and memories.



Recovering from Past Painful Experiences

Low self-esteem can be deeply rooted, with origins in traumatic childhood experiences such as prolonged separation from parent figures, neglect, or emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. In later life, self-esteem can be undermined by ill health, negative life events such as losing a job or getting divorced, deficient or frustrating relationships, and a general sense of lack of control. This sense of lack of control may be especially marked in victims of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, or victims of discrimination.

Past painful experiences such as those described above, can continue to speak negative, hurtful messages to us deep within our emotional, psychological and spiritual core. They can hold power over our image of ourselves long after the experience has passed. For this reason, it can be helpful to go back to that painful experience and establish the truth of it in the light of day. These painful experiences can be de-mystified, and relieved of their power over us. Lies can be revealed and truth can become the new message.

Use the following template for each painful experience causing you emotional, psychological or spiritual pain today. The three examples listed in the template are there to help you understand your specific painful experience and do not necessarily have anything to do with your situation.

(Be sure to write out your thoughts in complete sentences)

1. Identify the painful experience

- When did it take place?
- Where were you?
- Who was involved?
- What was done to you, or by you?



2. Describe the pain you felt

- Use at least 5 of your own 'feeling words' in your description to describe the pain (*examples below*)
 - *wounded, attacked, alone, hopeless, judged, used, betrayed, lied to, misunderstood, isolated, devalued*

3. Discern fault and assign blame

- List all the people who were at fault in the experience and what they did wrong (*examples below*)

- *“My father was at fault for molesting me sexually”*
 - *“My spouse was at fault for cheating on me”*
 - *“I was at fault for drinking too much and getting drunk”*
-
-
-
-

- Write a statement assigning blame for each person at fault
(examples below)

- *“I blame my father for hurting me, using me for his own pleasure, not protecting me, and making me feel worthless”*
 - *“I blame my spouse for lying to me, breaking his/her promises to me, sleeping with someone else, refusing to communicate with me, and not valuing me and our relationship”*
 - *“I blame myself for not maintaining control and for making poor decisions”*
-
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4. Determine motives and the resulting false belief

- Write a statement identifying as best as you can, the motives of each person at fault
(examples below)

- *“My father’s **motive** was to satisfy his own pleasure, and to exert power and control over me and others. My father’s actions created a **false belief** that I am not worthy of love, without value, a tool to be used for someone else’s pleasure, and must always submit my needs to the needs of others”*
- *“My spouse’s **motive** was to meet his/her own needs, experience selfish pleasure, and send a destructive message of being unhappy in our relationship. My spouse’s actions created a **false belief** that I cannot ever trust again, that I am not worthy of someone working hard on a relationship with me, and that I am flawed and unable to have a happy and satisfying mutual relationship”*
- *“My **motive** was to escape my pain and let go completely. My actions created a **false belief** that struggle has no purpose, I am unable to endure pain, I do not control my life, and I am defined by the poor decisions I make in life”*

5. Decide to move forward

- Write a statement of resolution for each person at fault
 - *“I resolve that my father’s actions will be judged by a higher power, so I choose to turn over punishment to that higher power, and accept the reality that my father was a deeply flawed person, and that I am not responsible for his actions”*

 - *“I resolve that my spouse’s actions will be judged by a higher power, so I choose to turn over punishment to that higher power, and accept the reality that my spouse’s actions were a result of his/her flawed character, and that I am not responsible for his/her actions”*

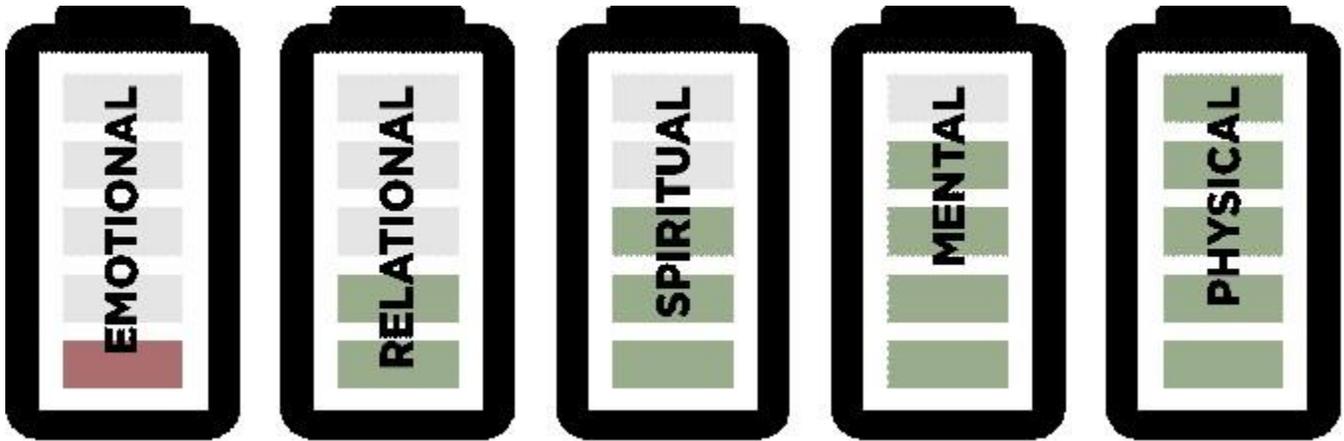
 - *“I resolve that my actions were the result of poor decisions, and placed me in a vulnerable and compromised position. I ask my higher power to forgive me, and I choose to forgive myself and learn from my painful experience. I am guilty of making poor decisions, but I will not be defined by my poor decisions. I will make better decisions in the future”*

- **Write a statement of new belief based on truth for each false belief**
 - *“I am worthy of love, a person of great value, a person who may or may not choose to bring pleasure to another, and my needs are just as important as the needs of others”*

 - *“I can learn to trust again, and to identify the signs of someone building trust with me; if necessary, I deserve someone working hard on a relationship with me because I am a person of worth and value, and because I bring value to a relationship, I can have a happy and satisfying mutual relationship with someone who sees me for who I am”*

 - *“I believe there is value in struggle and I do not have to escape pain to be happy; I am able to endure pain, and I control the decisions I make in my life, and I will be defined by the overwhelming number of good decisions I make in life”*

DOMAINS OF RESILIENCE



Domains of Resilience are internal batteries in each of us from which we use and renew energy.

Our challenge is to plug energy leaks and discover what best charges each battery in us.

Work to maintain an awareness of the energy level in each battery all the time.

EXERCISE

1. What does each battery represent in your life?
(for example: physical = exercise, quality sleep, healthy food)
2. On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being completely full, what is the level of each battery within you?
3. What drains each of your batteries the fastest?
4. What one action could you do that would raise the current level one number for each battery?

