

Here are guidelines that defy conventional wisdom about grief, others that bring time-tested common sense to bear, and some that address rarely-discussed complications that can make grieving even more laborious. Awareness is the most powerful tool we have to offer. It won't make grieving easy or quick, but can make it less overwhelming. Knowing where you are headed and how to guide yourself through it your way provides confidence and reassurance that you can survive this even on the worst days.



The Ten Best-Kept Secrets of Grieving Well

Everything is new in the landscape of grief, but few seem to know it. Conventional wisdom is stalled at Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's 5 stages of grief while therapists and researchers have moved far beyond. Even Kubler-Ross reconsidered some of her notions toward the end of her life.

The problem? The researchers have been talking mainly to each other, and the therapists dole out their knowledge one person at a time, leaving the millions of people who grieve each year in the dark. It is if the real story about grief is a secret. It is time to share.



Secret # 1: There are not really 5 Stages of Grief.

Back in 1969 when doctors still largely refused to discuss death with their patients, a pioneering physician, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, was recruited by four students to help with their "crisis in human life" assignment. She agreed to ask critically ill patients to describe what they were going through while students watched, and then to lead discussions after the patient returned to his room. After 200 of those interviews, Kubler-Ross settled on the five now-familiar categories: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, and called them Stages of Grief. She shared the results with colleagues and wrote the book *On Death and Dying* that became a classic. Grief became her life's work.

Her description spread fast and soon was being applied to grieving of all kinds, even though the study had only involved a small number of critically ill patients in one hospital. Gradually, family members, divorcing couples, fired employees, people who had lost their cat or their contact lens were told they were grappling with Five Stages of Grief.

This idea entered a vacuum and became so embedded that it hasn't budged in fifty years. We all grew up on it. Fueled by belief in this idea, well-meaning neighbors, news reporters, family members, and casual bystanders gang up on a grieving person with demands that they grieve according to these stages, and push them toward the alleged final stage of acceptance.

Since Kubler-Ross's day, many other researchers have studied grief. They describe it in very different terms, different from Kubler-Ross and different from each other, but their accounts don't seem to make it into the popular discourse.

For instance, one study found that only one-third of subjects described their grief after a loved one's death in the same way that Kubler-Ross's had. Other research finds three distinct types of grievers, or a series of four tasks that grievers move through. Another emphasizes layers of loss that become revealed over time. They talk about primary and secondary losses, and spirals of grief, the central issue of yearning, and a wealth of other ideas. Their work reveals that grief isn't all that simple, and that there are many shadings to consider.



Secret # 2: You have your own theory of grief, whether you know it or not, and you'll grieve better once you find out what it is.

You didn't get this far in life without some notions about how the world works and how you fit into it, but you may not have been asked to notice them before.

In their book *The Heart and Soul of Change*, Duncan and Miller offer the concept of each person's own theory of change. I am borrowing that idea to suggest that we'll each do better grieving if we embrace our own theory of grief.

Let's start with what metaphors ring true for you. Metaphors serve as image language beyond word language, and the right one strums a particular string in our psyches that is beyond logical explanation. Here are several that I've known people to use in their grieving:

- **Scaling a mountain**
- **Sailing a rough sea**
- **Standing at the beach, a border between two worlds, amid waves that ebb and flow**
- **Taking a journey, going through trials and bringing back a valuable treasure; often called the hero's journey**
- **Being in labor, each contraction coming but then receding, and the process being natural and inevitable**
- **Traveling a spiral upward, while circling through both painful and calm territory again and again**
- **Your own unique image**
Many find that claiming their own metaphor enriches their grieving and provides far more than the one-theory-fits-all stages idea.

Take a moment of quiet and see what springs to mind. And do it again as the days roll on. Your metaphor will find you. This is a chance to let your imagination engage, not to imagine further suffering, but to imagine how you can make this unwanted process fit you the best.

Whatever the metaphor, **movement is at the heart of grief.** At times it propels you by it to places you don't want to go. At others, you are paralyzed and desperate to get moving.

- **For the physical pain of grief, the movement is from pain toward ease.**
- **For the mind that first cannot bear to take in the reality of the loss, the movement is from resistance toward mindfulness.**
- **For resuming the activities of daily life, the movement is from paralysis to action.**
- **For the emotions, the movement is from fear toward calm.**
- **For the spirit, the movement is from despair toward hope.**
But the movement is never tidy or linear. It may circle back and forth, repeat itself, and trick you into thinking it is fading away. It can be erratic and unpredictable, chaotic even. As soon as you figure you are getting over it, here it comes to knock you down. But you get up and proceed, which starts to be the best thing to know – that you will always get up and find your footing and be stronger for it in the end.

Eventually, you reach a new form of normalcy. A significant loss doesn't allow you to just crawl back across the line and resume what was once familiar and normal.

What is your destination then? You can't know exactly what it will look like, but can trust that you will be able to reinstall your peace of mind, optimism and wholeness as you incorporate this loss into the story of your life.



Secret # 3: You are not going crazy, but this may be as close to crazy as you'll ever feel.

Grief sneaks into every corner of your life, and sometimes springs up just when you least want it to. It is this surprise factor that is most infuriating – just when you feel like you are getting on top of it, a kind word, or fleeting image, or overheard song will send you reeling.

Imagine any of the following, which are quite common during grieving, under any other circumstances:

- **A constant fog over your thinking**
- **Memory and concentration problems**
- **Trouble keeping track of belongings**
- **Fatigue, muscle pain, headaches, stomach trouble, chest pain**
- **Lack of initiative, inability to perform usual functions**
- **Irritability, mood swings, anxiety**
- **Fear of performing even familiar activities**
- **Feeling hyped up, wired; exaggerated startle response**
- **Disorientation**
- **Nightmares, trouble falling asleep or staying asleep**
- **Unpredictable bouts of crying**
- **Avoiding friends and family, hiding out**
- **Despair, fears about a desolate future, helplessness**
- **Appetite changes**
- **Constant yearning, pining for what you have lost**
- **Sighing repeatedly**
- **Regret, guilt**
- **Feeling visited by a lost loved one**
- **Change in sexual interest**
- **Idealizing or waiting for return of a loved one**
- **And much more**

That's grief for you. Under any other circumstances, you'd be terrified that you were ill or going crazy. Grief captures body, mind, emotion, and spirit, and holds them hostage, lets them go, and then turns around and captures them again. You are left to cope however you can.

Of course, it is crucial to seek help for any potentially harmful signs, and not to just write them off to grieving. This is a time to accept help. Let the professionals help to sort out what will help.

Above all, if you experience thoughts or plans about suicide, call for help at once. Those thoughts may accompany many griefs, but are clear signals that you need some skilled and experienced people in your corner.

Even if your needs are not so acute, talking to a grief therapist or educator can help you navigate and deepen your experience. Grief can feel terrible, but is also temporary, and with work and time can leave you stronger than before.



Secret # 4: You can't do it alone. Grieving is a group activity that requires support people, friends, family, co-grievers.

The way grief is usually portrayed it sounds like it should be carried out behind closed doors where no one has to see any embarrassing displays of emotion or faltering mind.

In fact, grief is by definition the very essence of connection. Without attachment in the first place, there would be no grief.

And without at least a few people to see you through it and help you process it, it will obstruct you. This does not require you to become a big talker if you are not, or to make a show of emotion that is not natural to you. It does suggest letting some support people walk with you while you do it your way.

But you are not required to take all comers. Grief sometimes attracts undesirable attention from people who feast on other's sorrow, or toxic folks who don't have much to give. You are free to fire them, right after you recruit your own team of supportive people. Pick those you know you can count on, who won't discount or marginalize your feelings or try to push their views down your throat. You know who they are because thoughts of them bring comfort.

It is even okay if one or two of them has drifted out of your daily life. If they occur to you, there is no harm in being in touch. Unless they are overwhelmed by their own issues at the moment, they may appreciate renewing the connection with you. Invite them. They will either step up or not, no reflection on you.

What does such an invitation sound like? *I'm grieving over Joe leaving. I appreciate your strength and positive outlook and I want you on my team.*

Promise not to wear them out and live up to it. That is why you need a team, not just one or two people, so you don't overuse them.

In addition, it can be a good idea to **seek out a support group of people** who are in the same boat. Those who have lost a loved one to suicide, or to violent crime, or have lost a child to illness or accident may find special comfort there. If you are not big on face-to-face group meetings, check out the Internet for chat groups, or message boards where you can eavesdrop on others' conversations before you engage. [CLICK here for Resources.](#)

Next, you need to train your team in your theory of grief, and what you need from them; find out their availability to you (like who you can actually call in the middle of a tough night).

Reassure them that you are not looking for platitudes to explain it all to you and make you feel better: *I need to be able to talk about Joe sometimes. I'm not looking for explanations like "He's in a better place" or "God has a grand plan for you." I just need a listening ear.*

With your team in place, you can go ahead and **fire would-be support people who aren't helpful,** being kind but firm. The grief experience is hard enough without dragging toxic people along with you.

As for your co-grievers, do what you can for them but recognize that you can't save them from their grief, as much as you'd like to. In one way, you can help each other through as no one else can, but the details and style of your griefs will differ, and you'll each need your own team of outsiders to support you.

Beware of the seductive thought that you can't grieve openly because you have to remain strong for the others. This will backfire and simply delay your inevitable grief. Better to find a way to grieve side by side, but each in your own way. Trust your loved ones to grieve as they must, and to allow you to do the same.

So, with all of that in place, all you have to do is use your team. Be assured that you are making them wiser and more compassionate as they sit in on your grief, and stronger for their own eventual tangle with it.

It is up to you to keep active with your support people. While there may be times when you can't summon the energy to pick up the phone, there will be many more when you can. If they call or email you, answer. If you wish to talk to someone, find a way to do it. The longer you stay silent, the harder it will be to speak. When we are in distress, the most healing sound is a compassionate human voice.

And don't feel that you must discuss your grief every minute. You may get as much out of discussing the Cubs, or next week's barbeque, or hearing about your friend's latest escapade.



Secret # 5: Hold on, don't let go.

This sounds like a radical idea at first. You don't have to let go of what you are grieving for? What about the time-worn advice to let go and get on with your life, to shed your baggage and let go of your past?

You don't have to. You get to keep the keep the parts you can and transform your relationship with what remains. Hospice social worker and teacher Lorraine Hedtke offers her own family as an example. Her mother died years before Lorraine's daughter was born, yet through memory and stories, Lorraine includes her as a vital part of her daughter's life.

How can this work? It works most naturally. A usual relationship doesn't take place 100% in person. In between face-to-face visits, you carry around your experience with the person, and a deep knowledge that allows you to make predictions about what they would say to you about what is going on in any moment. In fact, you often hear their voices in your head even when you don't want to!

There is no reason to give this up. When conventional wisdom requires that you cut off your ties with a loved one, it creates what Hedtke calls "ritual severance." How much better to transform the relationship into a new form that allows you to keep the comfort and wisdom it contains. It certainly doesn't make it pain-free, because you still miss the presence and immediacy, the touch of your loved one, but it allows the substance of the relationship to remain part of your life and experience.

Let's say you lost a job you loved, one that was at the center of your self-image. Do you have to give up on the feelings of competence and mastery that you once achieved through the job? Do you have to discard the many contacts you made? Do you have to trade in the skills you developed that made you very good at the job? Certainly not. You put your resume together, adjust your list of references, and go back out there. You can suffer and grieve the loss and at the same time that you claim what is still yours.

Here's a more challenging example: Your partner of five years announces that he is not happy and leaves you, dashing your dream that you would spend your lives together.

First, you sort out what is gone and what remains. He is certainly gone and your assumptions about him have to go too. You may need to seriously revise your assessment of the person he is, and question how you missed the seeds of this breakup.

The five years you spent with him may seem wasted at first, but once you are ready you can go back and mine them for what you can still salvage. For example, how did you change in those years; how did he help you grow stronger or more confident or wiser? None of that need be erased by his departure.

Further, what did you admire about him that has become part of you too – his assertiveness, his faith, his even-temperedness? (If you are shaking your head because he was none of those things, then maybe that's helpful to notice too.)

So, you claim what still remains as your own and honor the relationship for having left it with you, and yourself for having retrieved it. This manner of turning absence into presence is part of the alchemy of grieving. What seems to be one thing becomes another. The sadness exists but is accompanied by an unexpected discovery of something precious that remains.

Anthropologist Barbara Meyeroff developed helpful language to describe this transformation. She talks about each of us having a “club of life” made up of our friends and loved ones. If we pretend that they cannot continue to live on in our minds and hearts, we squander our capacity for attachment.

In watching older folks in one community, she labeled the conventional advice to let go of a lost loved one *dis-membering*. She suggested instead that holding on to the relationship in a new form be called *re-membering*, a way of keeping the relationship close.

A concept that I'd like to see fade into obscurity is *closure*. It seems to be a combination of Kubler-Ross's final stage of acceptance and a demand to hurry up and get it over with.

For instance, a news reporter, interviewing survivors of a traumatic event even minutes after it happened, grills them about how they will achieve closure. I can forgive the reporter who is just looking for the best story for the evening news, but I cannot forgive the insistence on a premature tidy, feel-good ending. There is no switch to pull that will make it all right. The job in grieving is to reassemble a life piece by piece until it starts to make sense. Including the imprint of who and what you have held dear will help provide continuity and meaning.



Secret # 6: Grieve like there is no tomorrow, using a deliberate set of daily tools.

Every day of grief can be a challenge, but it will be a better day for your effort to engage with it. Creating a set of daily practices will strengthen you to handle it in the best possible way. Since grief affects all the parts of you, you need practices to address all of them. If that is too much to ask, choose one or two things to practice each day.

For your body, you need to become an expert in self-care. You already know what soothes you, so build it in to each day. If you work out, run, walk, do yoga or Pilates, spend at least a few minutes each day carrying through, and then increase the time when you can. Physical exercise can trigger chemicals that increase a sense of well-being, and when will you ever need that more? If it is too much to even get yourself out of the chair, recruit a member of your support team to join you.

For your mind, do what you can to clear and calm it. If you are a fan of meditation, practice a few minutes each day. Embrace mindfulness, or remaining in the present moment, no matter how you are feeling. If you feel sad, or quiet or blah, stay with it and let the present moment be what it is. Zorba the Greek and author Jon Cabot-Zinn call it “full catastrophe” living. No matter what the upheaval, stay with it, feel it. It will move on and so will you.

If meditation does not sound helpful, you may find you can quiet your mind by spending time in nature, or with a pet, or gardening; or listening to music, watching firelight, walking an art museum, your choice.

It may feel at times that your mind and emotions are in a tug of war over you, so engage with the struggle.

To tend your emotions, which may be all over the map day to day, or even minute to minute, talk with someone on your team regularly, just to stay in touch. If you can manage at least one conversation each day, even just a brief check in, you will keep your connections open for the times when you most need them. There are great benefits to putting your feeling into words. For starters, your friend can listen and truly hear you, and you can hear yourself.

For your spirit, practice expression of some sort each day, through writing, storytelling, drawing, painting or scribbling, or other activities that you might lose yourself in for a while. If you have religious practices that comfort you, set aside time for them.

Resilience is a choice, and daily actions put it in motion. The more you can manage to take positive action, the more imagination, creativity and optimism you will unleash. Some days the initiative you need won't seem to be there, and you may have to strongarm yourself to act or borrow the energy from someone else. Chances are you will feel better for the effort, and better connected to your own eventual outcome. Over the long haul, the rewards grow and you begin to feel more in charge.



Secret # 7: Each loss has its own weight.

There is a formula you can use to explain your grief:

Your grief history + this loss = this grief journey

First, your history with grief includes your own actual experience, whether you are a veteran griever who has already worked out your theory of grief and your spiritual underpinnings, or whether you are a rookie, new to all this, who needs to invent your process. Even veteran grievers may find that they have to go back and work it all out anew with each new challenge.

It also includes your own grief style. Researcher Kenneth Doka describes a continuum of grievers, and it can be very helpful to find where you and your loved ones fall. On one end are *intuitive grievers* who are emotionally oriented and expressive. On the other are *instrumental grievers*, who take a more rational non-emotional approach. In between are *blended grievers* who display aspects of each style. This viewpoint eliminates a source of considerable pain within grieving families – the idea that people who don't wear their heart on their sleeves are not grieving, or not grieving properly. While an intuitive griever might go to the cemetery and weep, an instrumental griever might tend the grave, or build a fence around it. They each grieve, but in their own way.

This loss itself is like no other. It helps to define what exactly you have lost. The company and companionship of a loved one? The hopes for the future for a relationship that just ended? The security and identity of a long-time job, now gone? The noise and life around the house before your last child took off for college, as well as the role it provided for you as chief caretaker? You are grieving the primary loss and also the secondary ones underneath it, and recognizing all of them helps keep you in balance.

Each grief comes with its own weight, and may reveal that earlier losses are still waiting to be grieved. A young woman came to see me because she couldn't seem to get over the end of a relationship eight months before. She couldn't figure it out, as she had been disenchanted with the boyfriend and was mostly

relieved to see the relationship end. When she blurted out in frustration, “I didn’t grieve like this when my own brother died,” she had her answer. This boyfriend, who she’d met right after her beloved brother’s death in an accident, was a stand-in. Her grief was really for her brother, and once that became clear, she began to grieve her real loss.

Timing matters too. No loss occurs in a vacuum. If you’ve sent four kids off to college already and couldn’t wait for the new phase of life to begin when #5 leaves, you surprise yourself by crying at 5pm when no one is about to burst through the door. If your father died three months after your mother did when you had barely begun to grieve her loss, how are you to shoulder both losses at once? If your fiancé left you the same year all your friends got married it only heightens your misery. If your last IVF failed the same month your sister-in-law got pregnant with her fifth child, how are you to pull yourself together to offer your congratulations? The best you can do is realize that the events that collide with your loss may weigh heavily, but are beyond your control. Give yourself a chance to take extra time and care to get on your feet. Take a clear view of all that you are contending with, without trying to talk yourself out of it. No, you shouldn’t be able to be happy for your sister-in-law, or for your newly-married friends without suffering for your own loss.

Certain losses bring special complications that are rarely discussed. When one’s grief is not recognized by others as legitimate, for instance, this disenfranchised grief can be tougher than it would otherwise be. The longing of a parent who gave up a child for adoption is one example, or the grief of an unmarried life partner discounted by the family, or the loss of a hoped-for child through stillbirth or miscarriage.

Catastrophic loss through violent death, the death of a child, or death by suicide can leave survivors reeling, and in need of comfort, time and focused support. Severe injuries that limit capabilities for the future also can be catastrophic, as can being the victim of a violent crime that leaves residual fears. War experiences can be catastrophic on all these levels.

The loss of memory and self found with Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias do not involve death, but psychological absence, are called ambiguous losses.

As mentioned earlier, repeated losses with little time in between can add to the challenge to do each loss justice. Grief layered upon grief requires time and energy beyond what each would require alone.

Learning how to meet the special challenges of these complications can often happen best through grief education and counseling with a grief specialist.

The combination of your own grief history and the particular issues of the current loss create a unique grief journey. The more you recognize the features of each, the better you will get through it.



Secret # 8: A loss is a spine-jangling experience that can act like an earthquake to shake loose all the things you thought you believed.

It can leave you having to recast your whole belief system and settle a score with the Universe. How did the God you tipped your hat to all your life let this happen to you? In fact, where did God go just when you needed him? This is often described by others as “being mad at God,” but that doesn’t begin to cover it.

A loss serves as a touchstone experience that takes you down to fundamentals. What do you believe is the source of tragedy? How do you make sense of a universe in which such an unwanted thing can happen to you?

Whether or not you practice a particular religion, juggling the questions that grief raises is an inevitable part of the process. Not to question at a time like this is like trying to keep a lid on a geyser. It won't work and you'll get burned trying. Let the questions flow and gather answers as you can, without guilt or criticism. You can't contain what grief unleashes.

As for spiritual guidance, I have known clients who visited their clergyperson in a time of grief and received great compassion and acceptance, and I have known others who received reproach and criticism for voicing their questions. If you receive the latter, keep searching for a better person to talk to.

If you are more comfortable outside of formal religion, you can explore the spiritual side of things independently. Give yourself permission to figure out what you believe in right now, today, given what's happened, and see where this takes you.

You may find yourself wanting answers about whether the tragedy you are facing is targeted at you, or whether you just walked in front of a random event in the universe. This starts up a ferocious debate that poses questions like:

- **If this tragedy was sent to me to teach me a lesson, what about the other poor people who are being ground up by it?**
- **If I see this as a message for me, do I need to feel guilty because I might have prevented it?**
- **If this was a random event, should I have seen it coming? Why didn't God warn me? Is there a God anyway?**

These common questions are all about two things:

- **Guilt :** Do you bear responsibility for the bad things that happen to you and your loved ones? Settling a question like this requires you to make peace with your limitations. As the Serenity Prayer suggests: Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. It asks you to find your boundaries.
- **And Safety:** How can you go on knowing that things like this can happen to you and people you love at any moment? This one requires you to face reality, mix it up with hope, and come up with something you can live with.

Looking at it from one vantage point, we have all been standing in the tragedy line, right next each other, all our lives. The question is not, "*Why me, God?*" but, "*When will it be my turn?*"

Now you know the answer – it's right now. And once you work this one out, maybe sooner, you will be getting back in line waiting for another. Nobody gets a pass, nobody can earn their way out of reality by being pious or virtuous. This reality will need to inform your revised spiritual contract.

The short version: Spiritually, you need what you need at the time. Once life raises the stakes, you need more. That doesn't mean that you failed or that your God failed. You just got sent up to the big leagues, to stretch for a sports analogy, where the pitches whiz by at 100 mph and you need to step up your game.

Many people I've worked with have transformed their notion of a higher power from a security guard standing at the gate into a master comforter and provider of perspective. And a teacher of how to combine the jarring reality that tragedy comes into every life, with the opportunity to greet every day with hope and appreciation anyway.

If you are reading this soon after a loss, this may all seem too theoretical and not immediately helpful, as you may still be sorting out the reality of what has happened and trying to figure out how to make it through the next hour or so. Please take my word for it – the universe still can sustain you and help

you through even if it may not be in the way you'd imagined. You haven't been abandoned. You have been thrust into the crucible where you will create new ways to understand the universe and how you fit into it.

For now, grab onto people, beliefs, practices that soothe and comfort you. There will be ample time later to sort out the rest.



Secret # 9: For all the sadness and suffering accompanying grief, there is also much joy and many gifts, however unwanted, to be found, too.

Whether it is embracing a long time friend and knowing they will be there for you for as long as you need them, or taking a few bites of the casserole your friend brought over when you cannot interest yourself in cooking or eating, or laughter with a co-griever about the quirks of a lost loved one, or rereading a letter, or staring out the window at a sunset your loved one would have loved too, there are moments of transcendent joy that overcome the sadness and suffering for a time. Embracing this good side of grieving is rarely spoken of, but should be. It can be a source of energy, hope, and will.

Relief has been a taboo subject for griever. Those who have ushered a loved one through a difficult illness and watched them suffer know that the end may not be the worst thing, but probably do not feel free to talk about it.

In *Liberating Losses*, authors Jennifer Elison and Chris McGonigle discuss such *altruistic relief*, where the survivors are grateful that the ordeal is over. In *dual relief*, survivors who have been caregivers and companions also experience relief for themselves, but find it hard to talk about. The authors also highlight *relationship relief*, where the deceased had been a source of criticism or worse. Being released from such ongoing hostility, abuse, or disapproval inevitably creates relief. All of these types of relief can lead to guilt in the survivors who don't think they are allowed to admit to it.

Researchers have been squabbling over the relationship between grief and relief for decades. John Bowlby, the father of family therapy, declared early on that relief in grief was "aberrant." Another early proponent of family therapy Colin Murray Parkes predicted that initial relief would morph into self doubt, guilt and remorse.

Later work by others revealed that from 50 to 85% of subjects reported feeling relief without guilt, reporting that they had paid their dues while the relative was alive. They cited positive outcomes like patience, appreciation for life, personal strength, increased closeness, not guilt. To their credit, both Bowlby and Parkes reportedly reversed their positions late in their careers.

Humor is an inevitable part of grieving and has even found its way into some funerals as mourners chuckle about the foibles of the deceased. Many families make sure that the first holiday dinner without a loved one includes story-telling that recalls the special place the deceased held in the family. Even after a catastrophic loss, eventually the affection and longing for the lost person allows stories to be recalled that bring humor and comfort along with them.

These days, divorce or the breakup of a relationship can sometimes be commemorated by a goodbye party that includes both laughs and tears. One group of parents, sending their sons and daughters off to college, shared a goodbye party after their departure.

Conversations with members of your team frequently bring warm and intimate moments of closeness and comfort. Hearing the phone ring with good wishes and loved ones who check in on you become proof that you count.

The grand prize that comes with grieving is wisdom. Given the choice, you would never have traded what you had for more wisdom, but as long as it is about to land on your doorstep, you'd be crazy to refuse it.

It is as if the grief experience sets up a **Lost** and **Found** for you. As time goes on, you rummage around in what you are left with, and discover some treasures.

For example:

LOST

**your loved one
marriage, relationship
job
health**

FOUND

**new appreciation for life
strength you didn't know you had
new direction, new mission
loving self-care**

Capturing these gifts creates a little light when the world looks pretty dark. If you can end a day with a list, however short, of moments when you were graced by a loving memory, or shared a chuckle, saw your new strengths, felt heard and understood, that day was a good one at least in part.



Secret # 10: As grief leaves you gifts, you can pay them forward.

Grief forms a natural legacy that can take many forms and creates a way to put into action all the energy you've invested in this journey. This legacy may involve carrying on the mission of a deceased loved one, or one of your own in honor of a special person. Like a hand-off at a track meet, the race goes on.

- A young man whose mother, a teacher, died of cancer, before she could bear to tell him she had it, became a baseball coach, honoring her lifelong interest in children, providing him a way to carry forward her interests and mission. He drew strength and comfort from knowing he was doing work she would have loved to see, and discovered that he also got great satisfaction from helping kids do their best.
- The father of a beloved young teen who died in a train accident headed up a rail safety movement that attempted to prevent future similar tragedies.
- A woman, startled by a sudden divorce her husband of 20 years demanded so that he could marry a new love, joined a mentoring program for young girls that emphasized job readiness and self-reliance, qualities she felt were in short supply for her after the divorce.
- A woman whose elderly dog had once saved her from a street assault, had to have the dog put to sleep. She began to volunteer at an animal shelter, initially to soothe her loneliness for her dog's companionship, but then to become an advocate in the shelter's adoption efforts to help others have the experience of companionship.
- The number of foundations that are set up by families and friends to research diseases and conditions that claimed their loved one grows each year. A stunning example is Susan G. Komen for the Cure, established by breast cancer survivor Nancy Brinker in memory of her sister Susan who died of the disease. Since 1982 the organizations has raised \$1.5 billion for research, education and services. Others establish scholarship funds, basketball tournaments, memorial gardens and a wealth of other projects.

Grief shines a bright light on your life and may show the way to goals that occur to you for the first time, as well as goals that you had long been meaning to get around to. While wisdom suggests that you not embrace radical plans for a life change immediately after a loss, many people do change course in meaningful ways as their grief journey proceeds.

Less dramatic but just as crucial are the many learnings that result from loss. Each of us knows far more about life once we weather a loss, and that knowledge informs our life from then on and causes us to carry out new ways of living day to day.

The familiar message of people who develop a serious illness often sounds like this: *Treat each day as if it is your last. Stay in the moment and you will recognize the beauty and joy to be found there.* They meditate, pray, laugh, talk, whatever form it takes for them. But they live differently than before – more fully and more mindfully.

A writer whose parents died within three months of each other created a series of poems that drew on the practical and the emotional side of her experience of their declining health and her increasing care for them, and then her emotional experience after their deaths. She brought together her art and her grief experience into a project that eclipsed her other work.

Many who survive a relationship breakup form new habits and practices – daily journaling, regular contact with friends, pursuing interests that were crowded out by the relationship for instance. This recasting of daily life is a powerful tool to reclaim the territory of your own life.

A profound loss also brings a new attention to the arc of your life. Depending on which stage of life you are in, this will be expressed in different ways. Young people, like the young coach mentioned above, find direction. Those in midlife are moved to examine how they have lived while they can still make adjustments. Older people take the opportunity to look back and make sense of their lives. All find that there are rich veins to mine in times of grief.

Finally, once you have weathered grief, facing your own eventual demise can become less fearsome. One tool that helps you build a bridge between what you've learned and your loved ones is the ethical will. Just as your will disperses your belongings and funds to your heirs, you have much wisdom and life experience that also needs to be carefully transferred from you to them. The ethical will, which gives you a chance to leave them the thoughts and principles, values and priorities that you hold most dear, what you want them to know, the way you hope to be remembered, is an exciting and sobering and, believe it or not, fun and stimulating project. It does not require great literary skills, just deciding what you want to leave in your wake. Many people write it in the form of a letter, sometimes to the whole family or group of friends, sometimes separately to each person.

For more information on ethical wills, visit www.ethicalwill.com.

A final word: Whatever form it takes for you, your grief and what you learn from it flows into your life to enrich your own and the lives of others. It can make you more you, more unique, more aware of your special place on earth and in the universe, and move you to make sure that you leave the imprint you mean to when it is your time to go.