

For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died

T★A★P★S[®]

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

SUMMER 2023

REMEMBERING
the GOOD

FINDING MEANING
After Loss


Breaking Down Grief's
"CRAZINESS"

FINDING
LOVE *Again*



HERE RESTS IN
HONORED GLORY
AN AMERICAN
SOLDIER
KNOWN AS

T★A★P★S
Families of America's
Fallen Heroes



*"Soft and subtle
rays of sunshine slowly
rising in the still morning.
That's how I think of hope.
As a sunrise at a time my
soul desperately needed light."*

- Liz Newman



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**CONNECT WITH US
24 HOURS A DAY, 7 DAYS A WEEK**

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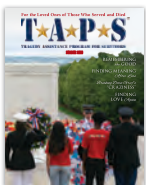
**SHARE YOUR STORY
BRING HOPE TO
FELLOW SURVIVORS**

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taps.org/shareyourstory

TAPS PROGRAMS & SERVICES

- 24/7 National Military Survivor Helpline
- Survivor Care Team
- Peer-Based Support Network
- Community-Based Care
- Casework Assistance
- Education Support
- Suicide Loss & Illness Loss Support
- Care Groups
- Online Community
- TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing®
- Survivor Seminars & Good Grief Camps
- TAPS Togethers
- Women's Empowerment
- Men's Program
- Young Adults Program
- Youth Programs
- Sports & Entertainment Events

For full descriptions, see pages 18-19.



ON THE COVER

Military Mentors, SSG Tanner Hagerty and Capt Mandy Carnes escort Good Grief Campers as they deliver the TAPS Honor Wreath to the Tomb of

the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery on Memorial Day. COVER PHOTO: TAPS ARCHIVES

About TAPS

Caring for the Families of America's Fallen Heroes

We are a family of military survivors ready to embrace and connect all who grieve the death of a military loved one with resources, services, and programs. TAPS provides support to survivors 24/7, regardless of the manner of death, the duty status at the time of death, the survivor's relationship to the deceased, or the survivor's phase in their grief journey.

At TAPS, we open our hearts and resources to the world with our award-winning programs and services to support all military bereaved. TAPS works with leading experts in the fields of grief, bereavement, trauma, and peer support to integrate decades of research on military grief into action to help heal hearts.

At TAPS, we:

Honor and Remember the lives of our military loved ones and celebrate military survivors as the living legacies of their service and sacrifice.

Empower survivors with healthy coping skills, resources, and opportunities to connect in the comfort of their home, their community, their region, and the nation to grow with their grief.

Connect all those grieving a military death to a nationwide network of peer-based, emotional survivor support and critical casework assistance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Educate using research-informed best practices in bereavement and trauma care for survivors, and we advocate on behalf of survivors with policy and legislative priorities.

Create Community with survivors to provide comprehensive comfort, care, and resources where they live, when they need it, and in a manner comfortable for them.

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NONPROFIT CHARITY**

TAPS exceeds industry standards for financial accountability and outperforms most charities. We are proud to have received many of the top nonprofit charity ratings available today. Our donors should be confident they are supporting an organization that is financially healthy, accountable, and transparent.



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PHOTO: Campers at the 29th Annual National Military Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp enjoy an afternoon walk with their group on Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall in Arlington, VA. | Credit: Ashley Cross, TAPS

To Our TAPS Family,



TAPS is your companion through grief, and it is with great care that we bring you the summer 2023 issue of *TAPS Magazine*. In these pages, you'll find articles offering comfort, practical tools to help you along your way, and inspiring stories that remind you that each member of our TAPS family bravely puts one foot in front of the other every day in pursuit of healing and honoring the life and service of their fallen hero.

TAPS is here to walk beside you. Our online groups and local Care Groups provide meaningful connections that let you know you are not alone in your grief. Through our family camps and specialized programs for young adults, women, men, and recognizing all types of loss, we offer opportunities to heal, draw meaning and purpose from pain, and create cherished memories alongside newfound friends.

We would also love to see you at one of our Regional Seminars this year. For those members of the TAPS family who were able to join us at the 29th Annual National Military Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp in Arlington, VA, over Memorial Day weekend, thank you for sharing that time with us. Thank you for telling your stories and opening your hearts. Though we've now returned home from that weekend of hope and healing, TAPS is always within reach. You can access our website, taps.org, follow us on social media, @TAPSOrg, or call our 24/7 National Military Survivor Helpline, 202-588-TAPS (8277), any time.

With care,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bonnie".

Bonnie Carroll
TAPS President and Founder



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES

Dear TAPS

GRATITUDE

“I just want to express my sincere thanks to all your volunteers who have been working with me and checking on me. It is so very much appreciated. I also want to thank you for the amazing box of goodies, books, information, and love that I received yesterday. For about 30 years, I have been counseling people who have lost loved ones — children, parents, and grandchildren. I’ve been trained to listen when tragedy hits, but not to turn to anyone else. I ‘knew’ I could handle it. Wrong! We are never really prepared. Losing parents, family members, or the love of your life just shows how vulnerable we really are. Your support has been amazing. Words cannot express my gratitude.”

Sandra Loesche

Surviving Spouse of Frederick Loesche,
U.S. Army Veteran

NEXT BIG STEP

“My week at the TAPS College Experience was a time that I believe will have continuing value for me as I finish high school and enter young adulthood. From test taking and writing admissions essays to networking and interviews, this experience provided me with skills that will not just help me in the college application process, but also other important steps further in my life, like finding internships or jobs. One of the most valuable parts of this experience was its specificity to surviving families. Gold Star Children, like myself, go through many unique processes as they prepare for college, and the College Experience provided guidance for it all. [That] is hard to find anywhere else. Ultimately, I have been part of the TAPS family for as long as I can remember, so it seems natural that the organization has had a role in the next big step in my life.”

Zoe Evans

Surviving Daughter of CW2
Mark W. Evans, Jr., U.S. Army

BAND OF BROTHERS

“I just wanted to touch base and thank you for allowing me to be a part of TAPS. I can’t imagine what my journey would look like without your amazing organization. I love my band of brothers in the Men’s Survivors Group. Every other Wednesday, my heart is filled with companionship and healing. That time together will forever be a part of my life. From my perspective, Ritchie, Matt, and Jon — and each man in that group — provide me with love, support, and strength. The team that you have built is solid in every way. Thank you for the other resources that you provide within TAPS. I have visited other Care Groups online from time to time, and Suzie and I even attended a local Buffalo-area Care Group a few times. I am very excited about our gathering in Buffalo this year and look forward to meeting my family in person.”

C. Scott McCutcheon, CDM, CFPP

Surviving Father of SPC Samuel
Christopher McCutcheon, U.S. Army



Visit taps.org/deartaps to submit your TAPS experience and share hope and encouragement with others.

LOSS *to* LEARNING *to*

Surviving Father Finds Purpose Through TAPS Workshop

Kenneth Naglak ★ Surviving Father of ABHAN Joseph Naglak, U.S. Navy

When my son, Aviation Boatswain's Mate Aircraft Handler Joseph Naglak died in September 2018 during flight operations aboard the aircraft carrier USS George H.W. Bush (CVN 77), just two weeks and a few days after he had gotten engaged, I knew more than anything I needed help. It took some time to be open to the calls from TAPS, but when I did connect, I learned that the devastating, overpowering sadness I felt was normal, that I was not, indeed, crazy, and I was not alone. This knowledge in itself helped more than can be counted.

Later, I signed up for my first Dare to Lead™ Zoom class through the TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing® at the start of the pandemic in 2020 — little did I know the impact Brené Brown's work on leadership would have on my life. It gave me a new sense of purpose — to try to help people and make

a difference to those in need, particularly those grieving and experiencing loss. But, what does learning about leadership have to do with grief, one might ask? The answer, to me, lies in understanding that leadership in its simplest form is really about connecting with people. That, to be an effective leader, the very first person you truly need to connect with is yourself. Indeed, it is only by connecting with yourself and leading yourself through the wilderness of grief that you can ever truly recover.

One of my favorite Brené Brown videos, of the many I have seen, is her “Manifesto of the Brave and Brokenhearted.” It begins, “There is no greater threat to the critics and cynics among us than those of us who are willing to fall because we have learned how to rise.” It concludes, “We are the brave and brokenhearted. We are rising strong.”

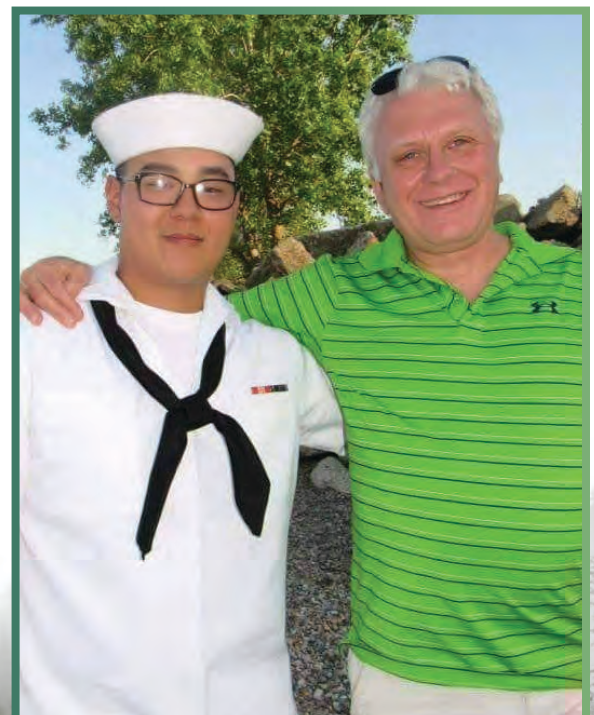
As people who have lost someone in the military, we are truly the brokenhearted, and as I have seen so many times, we are all also brave. That I have witnessed, and so here is my own manifesto, based on Brené Brown's model, for those who have lost, whatever that loss might be.

Manifesto for Those Who Have Lost

Part of our existence as humans is that, with certainty, as we age we will experience loss. Loss can take many forms with many faces. The experience is, for many of us, one of struggle, one of suffering, one of intense, sometimes varied emotions as we try to make sense of it and fill the void left behind.

As we grieve and mourn, it is our choice to own our story of struggle, feel the pain of our loss, or try to avoid it. In the

“INDEED, IT IS ONLY BY CONNECTING
WITH YOURSELF AND LEADING
YOURSELF THROUGH THE
WILDERNESS OF GRIEF THAT YOU
CAN EVER TRULY RECOVER.”



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; KENNETH NAGLAK; PEXELS.COM/GROSSGASTEIGER/BURST

TELLING MY STORY

Alexis Saizon-Cowley ★ Surviving Daughter of MSG Alvaro Samuel Cowley II, U.S. Army, Retired

The following is an excerpt of Alexis' powerful story of suicide loss that she shared at The Heroes Journey storytelling workshop hosted at TAPS' National Headquarters in January. If you or someone you know is experiencing thoughts of suicide, you can contact the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline toll-free by dialing 988. If you lost a military or veteran loved one to suicide, you are not alone. TAPS is here for you with support and resources for your unique grief. Visit taps.org/suicide to learn more.

MY STORY

On July 20, 2022, my day started with my stomach feeling like that little black, big-foreheaded alien was trying to claw its way to the surface. But, this was the first time I felt it finally found its way out.

I sat on the edge of my bed, staring at the security monitor mounted above my fridge. Lady, my mom's Volvo, was gone. My mom had already left for work. I glanced at my phone. No messages appeared saying the usual, "Have a blessed day, Lexi and Veto, I love you," in our group chat. That little black, big-foreheaded alien, now sticking out of my stomach, screamed that something was wrong. That feeling wasn't new.

I got a call from my dad to come over seconds later. He needed to talk with me. Having a large property made it possible for me to have a house built near my mom and dad. I slowly made my way to their house. My dad was standing at our dining room table. With no hesitation, he quickly said, "Your mom and I are getting a divorce." I wasn't shocked.

My dad, Alvaro Samuel Cowley II, my best friend, was an Army Ranger. He deployed multiple times, was a part of special operations, and worked for the U.S.

Embassy. He did so much for our country that I am proud of... that my mother is proud of... that my family is proud of. However, like many veterans who served their country, my father brought back wounds from war.

My dad suffered from severe PTSD and multiple TBIs. He had broken his lower back; he had broken his neck twice; and he had depression. Bad habits came from his pain — pain that kept him stuck in the dark, pain that love alone could not save him from, pain that I alone could not save him from.

In our conversation on July 20, 2022, I tried to do what I always did — fix.



"The story was truly in my bones, and the more I let my emotions flow, the more my story came alive."

I recognize our conversation was an argument, which I regret now that I know it was our last conversation. As the only daughter of my mom and dad, I felt like it was my duty to mediate. But that wasn't my place. My only job was to be their child. But, I titled myself "Dr. Phil" for them, which I wish I did not do. The last thing I got to say to my dad was, "I love you, and we'll get through this."

Love alone could not fix my dad's deep pain. He died by suicide later that day as a result of his wounds. But, as I am learning, the end of his pain became the beginning of my journey toward healing.

LEARNING TO TELL MY STORY WITH TAPS AND THE HEROES JOURNEY

During the Young Adults Heroes Journey Storytelling event, I was asked to pick an event in my life — a big moment that

changed me. The story you just read, My Story, is what I shared on the last day of the event. I never thought I would be able to tell my story. The memory was still a fresh wound. What I found in sharing that moment was a feeling of relief.

What felt like a heavy weight to bear became lighter as the words of My Story swam from my mouth. Scott Mann, and everyone who helped me during the event, made me realize that stories of our experiences — no matter the context — draw a multitude of emotions out of the people listening. But they also draw emotions out of the storyteller. Scott Mann said something that really stuck with me, "Stories are alive; you feel them in your bones."

I had written My Story and believed my emotions would not allow me to say it without looking at what I wrote, but the story was truly in my bones, and the more I let my emotions flow, the more my story came alive.

Because my father's death was so recent, my journey with grief has, so far, been extremely difficult. I am also battling depression and anxiety through my grief journey. Before this event, I felt like I was managing everything, and I felt I did not need to bring up what I was struggling with. However, the more I vocalized to those trying to help me during the event, the more I felt I was really helping myself. I grew confident in myself by the conclusion of the event. I understand now that there is nothing wrong with me, and I have the right to feel and share what I am feeling.

I realized I was not alone. Hearing the other stories made me realize that we are all hurting in some way. We are all trying to be better — to heal ourselves. And it was truly a beautiful thing to have witnessed others, as well as myself, do something believed to be impossible. In the Young Adults Heroes Journey Storytelling event, I saw it was possible to bear a wound to the world.



TAPS Young Adults Program supports military survivors, like Alexis, ages 18-30, including all manners of loss and relationships. Young adults can join monthly conversations in online group meetings and one-of-a-kind, in-person events. View and register for any upcoming events — including the Southern Experience in Austin, TX, by scanning the QR code, visiting taps.org/events, or emailing youngadults@taps.org.



Healthy Growth & Development IN BEREAVED CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

Andy McNeil, M.A. ★ Senior Advisor, TAPS Youth Programs

How can I help my child grow and develop in healthy ways even when they are grieving the death of someone in their life? It is difficult to watch our children struggle or face distress after a loss. As parents, we want our children to have healthy, happy experiences, and we worry that their grief will have long-term negative effects on their healthy growth and development. The good news is that grieving a death in childhood does not have to derail your child's or teenager's bright future. Grief is a normal reaction to the death of a parent, sibling, or another family member at any age. While grief is an added challenge in the life of bereaved children and teenagers, there are a few simple ways you can encourage continued healthy growth and development, even in the midst of grief.

Model Moderation

Balancing good nutrition, physical activity, intellectual challenge, curiosity, learning, emotional expression, and fun is important to healthy growth and development. Children

learn this balance from prominent adults in their lives — parents, grandparents, teachers, coaches, etc.

When we live with boundaries in our lives, limiting behaviors that are unhealthy, our children are more likely to do the same. Modeling a healthy balance in each of the areas listed in the previous paragraph does make a difference.

Mandate Moderation

In addition to modeling this behavior, it is important for adults to establish expectations of these behaviors in children and teenagers because they will not naturally limit themselves. Children and teenagers will play video games for hours or eat unhealthy foods over healthier options if these activities are not limited.

Recent studies show that video games in moderation can promote intelligence, but too much exposure can result in antisocial behavior, irritability, and lower grades in school.

In the same way, a poor diet has been linked to poor physical health, academic performance, psychological health, and social interactions. Limits and expectations that prioritize healthy diets, physical activity, and learning are helpful to all children and teenagers, including those grieving a death.

Validate and Support

Research has also found that children and teenagers who experience empathy and support from the adults in their lives fare better than those who do not. As a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, teacher, coach, mentor, or another adult present in a child's life, we have a special power to influence healthy growth and development through how we interact with and approach children and teenagers. While we do not have the ability to remove grief from their lives (grief is a normal reaction to a death), we do have the ability to validate their experiences, encourage them when they are struggling, and support them along the long road of grief.

During the summer months, children and teenagers spend more time at home than at other times of the year. Take this opportunity to plan meaningful experiences with your children and teens. Evaluate the balance in nutrition, physical activity, intellectual challenges, emotional expression, and fun in your home, and put moderation modeling into practice. It is never too late to begin modeling this behavior and setting boundaries in these areas for your children.



Family Activities

FAMILY COOKING NIGHT

DESCRIPTION

Having healthy food options around the house can promote healthy eating habits in your children and teenagers. Taking it a step further and teaching them how to cook healthy meals not only instills healthy habits, but it gives them tools to take into adulthood. Make the lesson interactive by planning a family cooking night one night each week.

1. Choose a night when you are all home together, and make this night your family cooking night. Traditions and routines like this are healthy and have positive effects on children and teenagers.
2. Review healthy recipes online with your children and teenagers.
3. Allow each member of the family to choose recipes that look appealing to them.
4. Mark the calendar for several weeks out with the recipes each family member chose.
5. Go shopping together to purchase the ingredients for the week's meal.
6. Divide duties, cook the meal together, and enjoy the time together eating what you have created.

HEALTHY MIND, BODY, AND RELATIONSHIPS ACTIVITY

This collaborative activity helps your children and teens identify activities that build healthy minds, bodies, and social interactions.

SUPPLIES NEEDED

- 3 pieces of poster board
- Markers
- Old magazines
- Scissors
- Glue or tape

DESCRIPTION

Make sure all family members are available to participate in the activity at the same time. Label the top of each poster board with one of the following titles: Mind, Body, Relationships. Instruct your children and teenagers (you should participate as well) to think about activities that build healthy minds, bodies, and relationships. As you come up with ideas, write them on the appropriate poster board.

You can also look through old magazines for pictures or words that reflect these healthy behaviors. Cut the picture or words out, and paste or tape them to the poster boards. At the conclusion of the activity, you will have three poster boards full of these healthy activities or behaviors. Place these somewhere prominently in the home, and encourage your family to see how many of these activities you can make regular occurrences in your home and lives.

KLINGER, A STORY OF HONOR AND HOPE

Based on *Klinger*, a real horse that serves in the U.S. Army Caisson Platoon in Arlington Cemetery, Betsy Beard's *Klinger* is an endearing story written for TAPS honoring all of America's beloved fallen heroes. The children's book illustrates a young horse dreaming of fame as a racehorse, struggling to achieve his dreams, and then finding fulfillment in honoring fallen heroes and bringing comfort to their families. A journey of loss, grief, and hope, *Klinger* is a wonderful and helpful book for young children experiencing grief over the death of a military loved one. To learn more about *Klinger*, visit taps.org/publications/2010/klinger.



TAPS YOUTH PROGRAMS

TAPS Youth Programs provide safe spaces for surviving children to honor their loved one and explore their grief all while experiencing fun, adventure, mentorship, and camaraderie with peers, mentors, and caring professionals.

Visit taps.org/youthprograms to learn more and browse events, including Good Grief Camps, family campouts, and online groups and workshops.



How Well *DO YOU KNOW* TAPS Education Support Services?

BUSTING COMMON MYTHS

MYTH: TAPS Education Support Services is just for surviving children.

MYTH BUSTED: We absolutely support surviving children entering college, but that isn't all we do! Education Support Services serves surviving family members of any age or relationship to the fallen.

MYTH: TAPS Education Support Services is just for college-bound students.

MYTH BUSTED: We know that career goals are not one-size-fits-all. So, we support surviving students with all post-secondary goals, whether a two-year degree, four-year degree, graduate degree, or a certificate or license from a trade or technical school. Based on the student's goals, we can help every step of the way — from prep and school selection to applying and affording.

In some cases, we can even help identify financial aid for K-12 expenses, like tutoring, technology costs, or private school tuition.

MYTH: TAPS Education Support Services can't help with federal education benefits.

MYTH BUSTED: Navigating Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) education benefits along with Department of Education grants can seem overwhelming, especially if you are new to your grief. We can help you simplify the financial aid and benefit puzzle, help you manage application deadlines, and help minimize the stress of this exciting step forward. No question is too big or too small for our team.

MYTH: TAPS Education Support Services isn't for me.

MYTH BUSTED: If you are reading this and you have lost a loved one in the military, then TAPS Education Support Services can help you with your education goals or the goals of a surviving child in your life. You might not be eligible for everything, but everyone is eligible for something.

If you have an education-related concern or question, let TAPS Education Support Services help. Email education@taps.org, call 202-588-TAPS(8277), or visit taps.org/edu to learn more.

LET US HELP

- College prep guidance — SAT/ACT practice resources, essays, applications, and exams
- Online education portal that simplifies identifying applicable benefits and resources
- Assistance with federal education benefits, state tuition waivers, and private scholarships
- Education Care Packages for graduating high school seniors, which include a personalized resource report for each connected student



Incoming and current college freshmen, apply for your own Education Care Package!
taps.org/educationcarepackage



Family Album

MOMENTS CAPTURED AT THE 29TH ANNUAL NATIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR AND GOOD GRIEF CAMP IN ARLINGTON, VA



We were honored to spend Memorial Day weekend with so many members of our TAPS Family. Thank you for sharing stories about your loved ones and opening your hearts to healing. We know that you don't wait until Memorial Day to remember and honor your fallen hero. You carry out their legacy every day; you honor them with your words and actions; and you miss them always. Together we made incredible memories amongst our family of peers and gracious celebrity guests. We learned from experts in grief and loss and absorbed words of gratitude from leaders from the defense and veteran communities and Congress.

For hearts grieving the loss of a military or veteran loved one — whether new to loss or several years out from loss — there is no safer space to spend the Memorial Day weekend than with a family who truly understands the dimensions of your loss, your TAPS Family. With us, it is OK to cry, ask for help, lean on each other, and find your smile again. We hope to see you next year as we come together for the 30th year!

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES



2023 TAPS

Family Album





PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES



TAPS.ORG/PROGRAMS-SERVICES

For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died

TAPS®

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES



TAPS NATIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR HELPLINE • 202-588-TAPS (8277)

A caring network of peer professionals is standing by to provide emotional support, connection to resources and programs, a listening ear, and open access to all that TAPS provides. Survivors can call any time, day or night. We always answer, we always have time, and we always care.



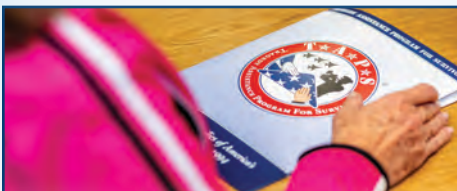
PEER-BASED EMOTIONAL SUPPORT • TAPS.ORG/PEERMENTORS

At TAPS, survivors help survivors heal. Survivors at least 18 months out from their loss can receive training and join our national network of Peer Mentors. Newly bereaved survivors are closely matched with a Peer Mentor based on manner of loss and relationship to their loved one to help them navigate their unique needs in the aftermath of loss.



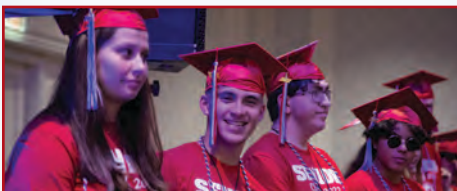
COMMUNITY-BASED GRIEF SUPPORT • TAPS.ORG/GRIEFCOUNSELING

The right mental health or grief professional can guide military survivors to discover their strengths, develop coping skills, navigate relationships, and explore secondary losses. TAPS carefully connects survivors to the right mental health professional, trauma resources, and support groups, all within their local community.



CASEWORK ASSISTANCE • TAPS.ORG/CASEWORK

Our casework team provides compassionate, customized support to surviving families in alignment with TAPS partners and third-party resources. Caseworkers can connect survivors to pro-bono legal assistance, emergency financial resources, state and federal benefit information, and private social-services support to guide families toward long-term stability and self-sufficiency.



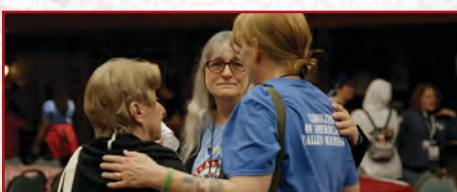
EDUCATION SUPPORT SERVICES • TAPS.ORG/EDU

TAPS Education Support Services empowers survivors in pursuit of post-secondary education by connecting them to benefits, resources, and scholarship information that meet their financial needs and educational goals.



SURVIVOR CARE TEAM • TAPS.ORG/SURVIVORCARETEAM

Survivor Care Team members are surviving military family members with extensive professional training in peer-based support, traumatic death, suicide prevention and postvention, and grief support. These skilled listeners assess the needs of the newly bereaved, create safe spaces for sharing, and empower the pursuit of the healthy coping skills and long-term support systems TAPS can provide.



SUICIDE LOSS SUPPORT • TAPS.ORG/SUICIDE

Death by suicide can leave behind a wake of powerful, complicated emotions and questions that shape a unique grief journey. TAPS provides compassionate support and hope for all suicide-loss survivors and safe spaces to honor and grieve. Survivors are gently guided toward a path of healthy grieving, healing, and growth.

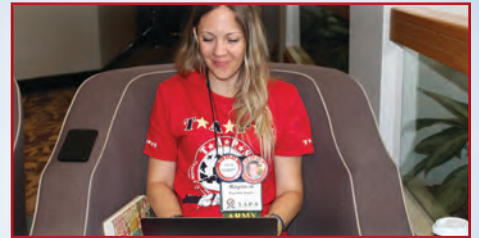
ILLNESS LOSS SUPPORT • TAPS.ORG/CAREGIVER

TAPS ensures families whose loved one died from illness are recognized, cared for, and aware of pertinent benefits. We advocate for improvements in caregiver support and raise critical awareness about the unique needs and situations of military caregiving families, including the effects of toxic exposure. TAPS also provides healing peer connections and programs that support healthy next steps for caregiving survivors.



ONLINE COMMUNITY • TAPS.ORG/ONLINECOMMUNITY

Our online community brings the meaningful connections of TAPS directly to survivors, wherever they are. Online groups are peer-led, facilitated sessions where there's never pressure to share, but always an opportunity. TAPS workshops and online series build supportive communities that learn and process new information together and create space to share perspectives in an effort to find inspiration, clarity, and connection.



WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT • TAPS.ORG/EMPOWERMENT

TAPS Women's Empowerment programming provides surviving women with the tools and confidence to shape their identity, spirituality, and goal setting in their lives after loss. A combination of in-person and online events foster a vibrant, compassionate community where participants treasure opportunities to be each other's teachers, confidants, cheerleaders, and friends.



MEN'S PROGRAM • TAPS.ORG/MEN

The TAPS Men's Program was designed by men, for men. It paves the way for men to grieve their way, at their own pace. Surviving men lean on each other, share perspectives, grow stronger by elevating one another, and honor the legacy of their military and veteran loved ones.



YOUTH PROGRAMS • TAPS.ORG/YOUTHPROGRAMS

Though their lives are impacted by grief, young TAPS survivors know their lives will also be marked by camaraderie, mentorship, emotional maturity, adventure, and fun. TAPS Youth Programs — led by experts in child development, children's grief and loss, mental health, and education — provide safe spaces for surviving military children (ages 5-18) to explore grief and embrace healing at Good Grief Camps and Family Camps. Online programming is also available for parents and guardians of grieving children.



YOUNG ADULTS PROGRAM • TAPS.ORG/YOUNGADULTS

Five pillars of growth — Personal Development, Financial Stability, Communication, Career Development, and Service to Others — guide military survivors, ages 18-30, as they grow with their grief. Through in-person, multi-day experiences, and online group discussions, young adult survivors connect and engage with others to create a well-rounded life full of hope, healing, and growth.



TAPS INSTITUTE FOR HOPE AND HEALING® • TAPS.ORG/INSTITUTE

The TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing® is a leader in training and education for grief professionals and bereaved individuals and families. The institute provides no-cost grief and bereavement programming through webinars, webcasts, and other events on a variety of topics, such as understanding and responding to suicide; children's grief; coping with loss; wellness workshops; and preserving memories of lost loved ones. Professionals can access academic programs and a wide range of continuing education credits.



SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT • TAPS.ORG/ENTERTAINMENT

Stars4TAPS and teams4taps collaborate with the entertainment industry and sports organizations across the country and in the U.K. to bring joy, healing, and incredible memories to surviving military families as they honor their fallen heroes.



LOVING TWO MEN AT ONCE

Heather Gray Blalock ✨ Surviving Spouse of Maj. Walter David Gray, U.S. Air Force



I assessed my hair and makeup in the rearview mirror one last time and took a deep breath as we exited the car. The kids had scribbled “Welcome Home” on the back side of a roll of wrapping paper and were taking turns whacking each other with it. In the mad dash for the airport, we had forgotten the American flags we normally bring to homecomings, and I chided myself for not being better prepared. My fiancé was coming home from deployment, and we were weeks away from joining our two families together as one. I had envisioned elated pomp and circumstance, so I really wasn’t certain what was happening in my heart and mind instead.

The kids unrolled their “banner” and stood waiting for Jack to come out of the airport

terminal. With six kids between the two of us, it struck me as odd that only my two youngest were present...two were in Montana with extended family, and two were at piano camp. Right before his soon-to-be stepdad walked out, my son looked up at me, eyes glistening with tears, and said, “I wish Daddy had come home too.” There it was. The arrival of the stabbing pain of grief made tangible the reason I couldn’t be as joyful as I wanted to be at Jack’s homecoming. This homecoming couldn’t replace the one we never got to have. Four years prior, my husband, Air Force Major David Gray, was killed by a suicide bomber while deployed to Afghanistan. Our reunion would have to wait until we were all in heaven one day. Jack, also an Air Force officer, exited the terminal looking handsome in his uniform. We all hugged and smiled, and strangers thanked us for our service. It was at that moment I fully recognized my new reality. I’m in love with two men at once.

While there is a definitive start to the grief process, most widows or widowers will tell you there is no definitive end — even when you find yourself having feelings for someone new. Even now, almost 11 years after my husband’s death and having been remarried for six years, something that reminds me of David can trigger a grief response. Grief has a way of sneaking up on you like a bad surprise party when you least expect it. But there is hope. While the intensity of grief doesn’t necessarily change, time has allowed me the ability to simultaneously grieve the loss, joyfully cherish the memories, as well as grow and

expand my heart to accommodate new love for another.

Though the crisis or trauma itself passes, the emotions that trigger grief and their impact do not. We must work to normalize this occurrence. Marriage and family counselor, Lindsay Pipes, underscores the importance of recognizing and validating the emotions widows and widowers experience after loss. She encourages those seeking to come alongside the grieving to take an approach that is conducive to the expression of varied grief responses. “Support networks should understand that emotions are there for a good reason,” she told me in a recent conversation. “Give the bereaved person the space to ask for what they need, but also be aware that they may not know what they need, and anything you do might possibly trigger a grief reaction. But that’s OK. There is no ordered process. It looks different for everyone.”



PHOTOS: CHRISTOPHER GROSS; HEATHER GRAY BLALOCK

This varied emotional response also applies to romantic feelings. Some may be tempted to feel it is a betrayal to their deceased loved one to engage in new romantic relationships or worry that others will interpret new intimacy to mean they no longer love the deceased. For most Gold Star Spouses, neither of those assumptions is true. Because I was widowed at age 32 with three small children, I think I knew in my heart that I would one day want to remarry. Not because I was “over” David — I’ll never stop loving him, but because I believed my heart would one day grow to love another in addition to David because our marriage taught me how to love well, and I couldn’t help but do so. I knew that if I chose to remarry, the man would need to not be threatened by or uncomfortable with my continued love for David. I also knew that could be a potentially complicated tangle of emotions and logistics.

Remarriage for young, abruptly bereaved widows or widowers presents dilemmas not experienced in other types of loss and remarriage. The death of a partner often involves placing that person on a pedestal or remembering only the good. Romanticizing the reality of the past relationship has the potential to create an intimidating third figure in the subsequent romantic relationships of the surviving partner. Indeed, most post-bereavement relationships take on a triadic nature, with the bereaved spouse continuing bonds with the deceased. Those bonds may look like the continued use of the deceased’s last name in addition to the new married name, wearing the wedding ring on the opposite hand, or the continued display of photos of the deceased in the new home. These are more symbolic means of expressing the bond of love that even death cannot break, yet, amazingly, they don’t inhibit the ability to experience new love. That is exactly what I discovered during Jack’s homecoming.

My heart swelled, and I felt complete when Jack embraced me in that airport terminal. But my heart simultaneously ached to feel David’s strong arms around me again too. I couldn’t speak the entire way home as I drove us to the house we had recently purchased together — the house I had been working feverishly to have ready before Jack’s return. But when we got to the doorstep, I couldn’t hold it in any longer. The grief slammed me like a tidal wave.

Countless times I’ve said to others that Jack will never replace David. Just like I will never take the place of beautiful Aana, the wife of Jack’s youth. She fought a valiant, but losing, battle against the cancer that eventually robbed them of the life they had envisioned. That became incredibly apparent as I wept in Jack’s arms, unable to cross the threshold until the grief ebbed. When a grief wave hits, all you can do is cling to those around you and hold on till it subsides. Once I caught my breath, I looked up into Jack’s beautiful blue eyes, and all felt right again. The sharp ache over David’s loss began to dull and receded back to its normal state of being. I call it that because the ache of loss never goes away completely.

Lindsay Pipes stressed that the suppression of emotions can block intimacy in future relationships, and that includes the feeling of continued affection for the deceased loved one. “We need to work to dispel the stigma that tends to be attached to those who remarry, especially if it’s a quick process,” she said. “We should also recognize that an emotion, such as the love for a deceased spouse, should be welcome and does not diminish the love for a new spouse.” With post-bereavement remarried couples, instead of feeling certain about their importance, new spouses might question it, leaving the widowed spouse feeling stuck between their desire to honor the deceased and the desire to reassure their new partner. This brings up another important point: It is not just the widowed spouse who has special needs in a new relationship. It is paramount for the new partner to feel equally affirmed and loved. “The bond of the widow [or widower] and new partner needs constant support and reassurance in order for that type of triadic relationship to be healthy and both partners fulfilled,” Lindsay concludes.

I must be intentional about the way I love Jack to ensure that he never feels he is living in the shadow of David. Intentionality is necessary because when Jack lifted me into his arms and carried me over the threshold of our new home, he really carried four people. As we move forward with rebuilding our lives together, we carry David and Aana with us. Everyone handles loss differently. But many of us will carry all the emotions and memories of the deceased always, like a scar that serves as



a reminder of something significant that happened and left you forever changed. Staying sensitive to the preferences of the new couple, friends and family can support by both honoring the deceased through memorials, recalling memories together, and by actively participating in the growth and support of the new relationship. Having the understanding and encouragement of friends and family through life’s evolving narrative is vital to the successful navigation of such a challenging, yet rewarding, process.



About the Author

Gold Star Spouse, Heather Gray Blalock, lost her husband, Maj. David Gray, on Aug. 8, 2012, when he was killed by a suicide bomber in Afghanistan. She is the author of *Faith, Hope, Love & Deployment*, and has been featured on the Focus on the Family radio broadcast, *Lifeway’s Journey Magazine*, and the Dallas Morning News. Heather holds a master’s degree from Liberty University and is a certified Prepare/Enrich premarital and marital counseling assessment facilitator. She has been married to Jack Blalock (USAF Ret.) for almost seven years and is the homeschool mom of six children.

COMING UP

2023 TAPS

Join your TAPS family at one of our upcoming in-person events. Visit taps.org/events for even more opportunities, including in-person Care Group and online group meetings happening all year. Check back often — we will continue adding events throughout the year.



MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINARS & GOOD GRIEF CAMPS

AUGUST 25-27
NORTHEAST REGIONAL
Hyatt Regency
Buffalo, New York

OCTOBER 6-8
15TH ANNUAL NATIONAL MILITARY SUICIDE
SURVIVOR SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP
DoubleTree Boston North Shore
Boston, Massachusetts

JULY 7-9
NORTHWEST REGIONAL
Davenport Grand
Spokane, Washington

SEPTEMBER 15-17
SOUTHERN REGIONAL
Marriott Riverwalk
San Antonio, Texas

OCTOBER 27-29
WESTERN REGIONAL
The Westin
Long Beach, California

» IF YOU NEED ASSISTANCE WITH REGISTRATION, CONTACT OUR TAPS HELPLINE AT 800-959-TAPS (8277).



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVE

EVENTS

CAMPS, RETREATS & EXPERIENCES



AUGUST 9-13
GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS
PARENTS RETREAT
Bryson City, North Carolina



NOVEMBER 3-6
CALIFORNIA
FAMILY CAMP
Portola, California



AUGUST 16-20
YOUNG ADULTS
PARALYMPIC EXPERIENCE
Lake Placid, New York



NOVEMBER 9-12
YOUNG ADULTS
SOUTHERN EXPERIENCE
Austin, Texas



AUGUST 18-21
PENNSYLVANIA
FAMILY CAMP
Green Lane, Pennsylvania



SEPTEMBER 21-24
YOUNG ADULTS
MIDWEST EXPERIENCE
Chicago, Illinois



OCTOBER 23-27
SEDONA WOMEN'S
EMPOWERMENT RETREAT
Sedona, Arizona



NOVEMBER 1-5
MIDWEST OUTDOOR
FAMILY RETREAT
Carbondale, Illinois



Remembering J.R. DAVIS

Theresa Davis ★ Surviving Spouse of SGT Barry Lee Davis, Jr., U.S. Army Veteran

Barry Lee Davis, Jr., or J. R. as he was affectionately known to his family and friends, was just 18 years old when he chose to join the Army and serve his country. His service took him to far-off places, like the Persian Gulf and Karlsruhe, Germany, before eventually settling near Fort Stewart, Georgia.

J.R. was a hardworking, dedicated, and kind man — traits that earned him Bronze Stars, medals of achievement, and even the title of Soldier of the Month at the 703rd Main Support Battalion at Fort Stewart.

He was also extremely funny and had nicknames for just about everyone he knew, including his mom, Cara, who he lovingly referred to as “Yarn Woman,” because she liked to crochet. He meant no disrespect to her, and when he said Yarn Woman, we all knew who he meant. Even though J.R. is gone now, Cara and I stay in touch — speaking nearly every day at times. We both

miss him so much and always mention him in our conversations and talk about the small pranks he would play.

His sense of humor was a force to be reckoned with at times. He absolutely loved shooting rubber bands at me and would lie in the hallway of the tiny trailer we rented and shoot rubber bands under the door while I was in the bathroom. Any time his pranks would get on my nerves, Cara reminded me there were “no takebacks,” meaning I married him, and I couldn’t send him back to her.

J. R. and I were married for 20 years when he passed away. He died at the age of 43 from pancreatic cancer with a lot of life left to live, but it was God’s will, and we all miss him every day.

I remember J.R. for his love of family and his country. Whenever he put on that uniform, he was just so happy and full of pride. Any chance I get to share his story with other soldiers I meet, I talk about him, his service to our country, and — of course — his wit and sense of humor.

I remember J.R. for being an avid dog lover, despite the fact that he also nicknamed his mom’s dusting wand “Dusty on a stick” because — according to J.R. — it bore a striking resemblance to Cara’s dog, Dusty. At the end of J.R.’s life, his dog, Shirley, was by his side every day seemingly helping him while he fought his cancer. Any time I was hesitant to leave him — even for a moment, he would say, “It’s OK, Shirley and I got this.”

I remember J.R. was a fighter. He fought bravely against his cancer. Unfortunately, it was a battle he couldn’t win.

I remember that he passed away at home with me by his side.

I remember those early morning hours, after the emergency personnel left, the house got quiet, and a calm came over me.

I remember when the funeral home came to get him. I watched the hearse reach the end of the street and drive out of sight.

I remember walking back into the house, shutting the front door, walking through



the house to the back door, opening it, and letting out a blood-curdling cry. And, when I was done, I shut the back door and walked calmly to the living room, and sat in my chair.

It is so heartbreaking to watch someone that you love suffer and not be able to do anything about it but care for them and love them. As I type this, on what would have been our 30th wedding anniversary, I remember J.R. for the love and laughs we shared, for his love of family, friends, and his country. The memories (and nicknames) he left us with ensure he will never be forgotten.

Through his loss, J.R. left me with one more thing to always remember: Tomorrow is not promised to any of us. Tell and show your loved ones how much they mean to you every day. Don't let the rush of daily life convince you that hugs, I love you, and — yes — even playful rubberband shooting can wait till tomorrow.



HOW CAN I HELP TAPS?

The comfort, resources, and support TAPS offers to everyone grieving the loss of a military or veteran service member are only possible thanks to generous donations that fund our programs. If you are reading this, TAPS has touched your life in some way, and we invite you to pay it forward and support the survivors who will follow the path of grief you have walked through.



There are so many creative ways to support our mission and the many members of our TAPS family, and your generosity makes a difference in the lives of your fellow survivors. Let our knowledgeable team help you find the perfect way to support TAPS and honor your hero.

Send questions and ideas to development@taps.org.

ESTATE PLANNING

Donate appreciated stocks, securities, or mutual fund shares, or name TAPS as a beneficiary of your life insurance plan.

FUNDRAISING

Make TAPS the beneficiary of your golf tournament, bowl-a-thon, or other event. Raise funds for TAPS during your next race through Team TAPS. Host a local fundraising pop-up event, car wash, or lemonade stand.

EMPLOYER PROGRAMS

Inquire about or establish a gift-matching program at your place of business.

You're not crazy —

Intense Grief is Normal and Often Necessary

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D. ★ TAPS Advisory Board

I have been a grief counselor and educator for more than 40 years, and “crazy” is the most common way in which people describe their early grief to me. Let me assure you straight off: It is normal to feel crazy after a significant loss. But you're actually not going crazy in the way you may think. What you're doing is grieving.

This six-part article series is a reminder that crazy is normal and is adapted from my new book You're Not Crazy — You're Grieving. These articles will, I hope, help you understand your grief experience and encourage you to seek and accept the support you need and deserve.

Yes, it is normal to feel crazy after a shattering loss.

What I invite you to consider is that it is actually the loss that's not normal. This loss came along uninvited and turned your life upside-down. Human beings are born to live and love. That's why we are here. When a life ends, we're simply not prepared. We can't be fully prepared, even when a death is anticipated. It's human nature to want and expect life and love to continue. We're just not made to easily welcome death into our daily lives.

True, death is also normal and natural. But still, love is the foundational experience of our lives. And when we experience the death of a loving relationship, we often feel like we are going crazy. Of course we do.

What I Mean by Crazy

Let's talk about the word crazy. It's no longer considered acceptable in mental health circles — rightfully so. It stigmatizes mental health issues and places blame and shame on those who suffer from mental health challenges.

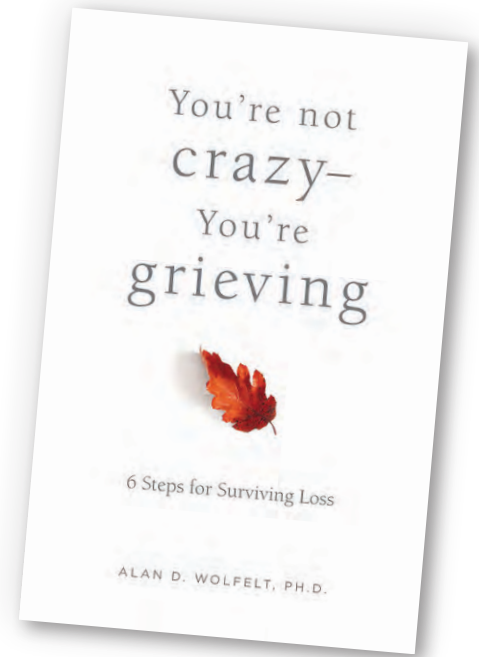
Yet, crazy is in fact the term I've heard grieving people use most often to describe

their own early grief experiences of shock, disorientation, protest emotions, and more. Actually, I've found they almost always use the word crazy to collectively label all their early grief symptoms. Have you described your own grief responses as crazy?

The word crazy comes to us from the 14th-century Germanic word *crasen*, which meant “to shatter, crush, break into pieces.” Before that existed, there was the Old Norse *krasa*, which also meant “to shatter.”

If you pick up an old piece of fine china, you might see a web of fine lines on its surface. This is called “crazing.” The glaze, normally transparent and invisible, has shattered into tiny sections. Early grief is equally shattering. It crushes us and breaks us into a million pieces. This experience tends to make us feel — well — crazed for weeks, months, and sometimes even years.

So, despite the admonitions, I decided to feature the term crazy. I agree it's not an appropriate term for mental illness because it carries too much baggage and stigma. But grief, which is not an illness, often feels crazy in the truest sense of the word because it can shatter people, crush them, and make them feel like they're broken into pieces.



Intense Early Thoughts

The intensity and strangeness of early grief tend to make people feel crazy. Let's review some of the most powerful symptoms and affirm that they are common and normal.

Shock and Numbness

Shock is a universal, automatic human reaction to traumatic experiences. It is how our bodies instinctively respond in an effort to protect our minds and hearts from shattering new realities.

Shock is an anesthetic. It partially numbs us to the crushing pain. Without the initial protection of shock and numbness, we couldn't survive a major loss. Thank goodness for shock!

You're grieving

In the early days after the loss, you may have experienced physical shock symptoms, such as lightheadedness, nausea, heart palpitations, and difficulty functioning. Emotional shock symptoms include numbness, confusion, and dissociation.

During your period of shock, you may find yourself intensely crying, having angry outbursts, shaking uncontrollably, or even laughing or fainting. You might experience manic behaviors, such as cleaning out closets or pacing and talking nonstop. Rest assured that these are all normal shock responses.

Unfortunately, some people may try to discourage or judge your “shocky” behaviors, believing them to be hysterical or out of control. They may try to inappropriately quiet and placate you because they would feel more comfortable if griever appeared composed.

The reality is that the early days and weeks after a major loss are often an uncontrollable, crazy time. Trying to control yourself could mean suppressing your instinctive responses to the loss. As long as you're not hurting yourself or someone else or destroying property, it is OK to feel and act out of control in early grief.

Dissociation and Surrealness

Dissociation is a feeling of separation or distance from what is happening around you. This is when you feel like you are there, but not there, or that you are somehow disconnected from experiences you're right in the middle of.

Dissociation can be an aspect of shock. It may feel strange and even scary sometimes, but it's common and normal. In early grief, you may also feel a sense of surrealness. Surreal means bizarre, irrational, even make-believe. Your mind can interpret that what is happening can't actually be happening because it is not possible for it to be real.

“It feels like a dream,” griever often say. “I feel like I might wake up and none of this will have happened.” That dreamlike aspect of early grief is surrealness. It often feels overwhelming and can be naturally disconcerting, but it happens to almost everyone right after a major loss.

Trouble Thinking

It is almost impossible to think clearly in early grief. Brain fog is common, and so are problems with short-term memory. You might have conversations with others, but not remember what they said to you. You are hearing, but can't listen well.

In addition, you may feel like you can't get anything done. It is difficult to concentrate long enough to complete tasks. You may struggle with basic daily activities.

Be patient and kind with yourself if your brain doesn't seem to be working well. It is completely normal. Avoid taking on any cognitively challenging tasks right now if possible. And ask for help when you need it.





Fatigue

In general, you might find yourself tiring more quickly — sometimes even at the start of the day. You might wake up feeling fatigued.

This is called the lethargy of grief. It might seem crazy to feel so tired, especially when you're not doing anything strenuous. However, it's a natural mechanism intended to slow you down and encourage you to get extra rest and care for your body, mind, and soul.

Whenever possible, lay your body down for 20 minutes a few times a day. Sleep if you can sleep, but simply rest if you can't. Put on some soothing music or watch a lighthearted TV show — anything that helps you relax.

Don't expect too much of yourself. If you are not getting anything done because you're too tired, it's OK. If you need help getting essential tasks taken care of, ask for it.

Acknowledging the Reality of What Happened

The crazily intense and surreal thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in the very early days after a major loss mostly have to do with one super-challenging need of mourning: acknowledging the reality of the death.

When you are confronted with thoughts and reminders of the death, your mind likely says, "What? This can't be!" And that's often when the crazy-intense grief symptoms come up. You experience shock, dissociation, and time distortion. You may feel like you're being hysterical. You might not be able to think or sleep. You may experience a level of fatigue beyond anything you've ever felt before.

You might think of these symptoms like aches and pains caused by the cognitive grief work your mind is doing. Yes, work. Acknowledging the death of someone close to you is difficult work for your brain.

Searching and Yearning

After someone you love dies, it is normal to look for them or expect them to reappear. Every time you hear your front door or garage door open, your breath might catch, and you might think, "There they are!" This searching behavior is a sign that your mind is trying to process the reality of the death. It can also make you feel crazy because, while you know that they have died, you don't yet fully know.

The intense yearning of early grief is similar. You want the person who died back. You miss them intensely. You yearn for them to be present again. The yearning can make you feel crazy because once again, you know it's impossible for them to return, but you desperately want it anyway. Yearning is painful and normal.

Time Distortion

We are creatures of habit. We move through our days and lives with the comforting, predictable structure of routines. So when our routines are thrown into disarray by a death, we tend to get disoriented to the passage of time.

In early grief, time often seems to race by. On other days, it crawls. You may not be able to keep track of what day it is. You may find yourself uncertain of the month or season.

Calculating how much time has elapsed since the death or funeral may feel impossible. Special days, such as birthdays or holidays, might escape your notice or pass by in a blur.

**In early grief, time often seems to race by. On other days, it crawls.
You may not be able to keep track of what day it is.**

Befriending one's pain can seem like a challenging — even antagonistic — notion in early grief. But it is a truth.

I don't think we're born being able to easily grasp death. It is instinctive to love, and it is instinctive to grieve when we're separated from the people we love. But it is not instinctive or innate to think, "Oh, it's just death. One minute alive, the next dead. It's just forever. It's natural. It's fine."

If you were able to see and spend time with the body after the death, acknowledging the reality often happens a little more readily. It's still hard work — don't get me wrong. But seeing and touching the body that gave form to the precious person who died can help your mind understand the fact of the death. I know that this isn't always possible or appropriate. So if you didn't see or spend time with the body, don't shame yourself. Talking openly about the death and seeking answers to any lingering questions you might have can also help satisfy your mind.

Acknowledging the Pain

In the early days, shock protects you from some of the pain. For your mind and body, numbness and dissociation are forms of

pain management. Thank goodness for these natural anesthetics.

But still, some of the pain naturally hit you right away. And the pain keeps seeping in every time you think about the death. Even with the protection of shock, you may have experienced moments in the very early days when the pain took your breath away and dropped you to your knees.

The pain of new grief can feel unbearable. How on earth are you supposed to live and function while this pain is going on? After all, when we experience physical pain, we are used to going to the doctor or pharmacy to get pain relief. There are entire industries and professions devoted to relieving bodily pain. We're not expected to suffer. Yet grief comes along, and we are supposed to just take the pain day after day?

First, I want to affirm that you are right — the pain seems unbearable. It is, I believe, among the worst experiences of our lives here on earth. Second, I want to assure you that your pain will ease over time.

Befriending one's pain can seem like a challenging — even antagonistic — notion in early grief. But it is a truth. Your pain is there for a reason. So, for now, I hope you will simply acknowledge that the pain is normal and find ways to soothe it as best you can.

About the Author



Dr. Alan Wolfelt is recognized as one of North America's leading death educators and grief counselors. His books on grief for both caregivers and grieving people — including You're Not Crazy — You're Grieving, from which this article series is adapted — have sold more than a million copies worldwide and are translated into many languages. He is the founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and a TAPS Advisory Board Member. To learn more, visit centerforloss.com.

Finding Meaning AFTER LOSS

Michelle Collins ★ Surviving Spouse of LT Glen Collins, U.S. Navy, Retired

On the one-year anniversary of my husband Glen's death by suicide, I spread his ashes off a distinctive rocky outcropping into a small cove in south Maui. I gazed at the water, remembering our time together in this exact spot. Even after 22 years in service, most of which was spent in the SEAL teams, he referred to that little rocky cove as the place he performed "the most heroic act" of his life. He loved entertaining our friends by telling the story of how, in murky churned-up

water, he saved me from a turtle that was trying to "kill" me.

We had chosen this spot to snorkel because the surf shop employee guaranteed we would see a turtle here, and my SEAL was on a mission to swim with one.

"Just so you know," the surfer cautioned as he rented us our snorkel gear, "the surf can get very rough; yesterday a woman drowned in that cove."

Glen had no problem with this, "As long as we get to swim with a turtle, I'm up for it!" he said, always excited by any challenge — the more dangerous, the better. Meanwhile, I wanted to snorkel anywhere but there.

"You two look young and healthy. I'm sure you'll be fine," the surfer reassured us, looking us up and down. Glen was built like a SEAL, not for floating so much as carrying heavy things. While in the teams, he told me he had not been a great swimmer (I barely believed this), but in retirement, he had overcome numerous injuries and improved his swimming skills while training for and completing triathlons — even an Iron Man, so he had become pretty confident in his swimming skills.

As we navigated the gritty green water, getting tossed around by waves, I spotted a turtle and followed it closely to keep it in view. Suddenly, I was startled by a cloud

of bubbles from underneath me. Glen appeared and guided me to the surface. As I popped out my snorkel, coughing, I grumped at him, "I was following a turtle. Now I've lost it!" Unbeknownst to me, Glen noticed I was headed toward a long, narrow lava tube extending deep into the rocky point. The turtle was likely going in there to rest, but Glen insisted it was plotting to lead me to my doom, and — as his story went — he rescued me just in time.

"I saved your life! That turtle was trying to kill you!" I laughed at him as we slowly made our way back safely to shore.

Exactly two years after that rough, windy day, I sat on the rocks, overlooking that same cove, now perfectly calm and clear, deep blue. As I released his ashes and my tears into the sea, I felt crushed by the weight of so many feelings — anger, sorrow, pain, fear, regret, and even a tiny bit of gratitude and pride in the fact that he chose me to marry him. But one feeling, which was certainly unexpected, was a little bubble of joy from the memory of his proud retellings of how he saved me from that murderous turtle. I smiled as I remembered his warm, loving, boundless energy and infectious laughter. For a brief moment, on this terrible anniversary, I felt joy that I had the chance to share a too-short part of my life with him.

That brief moment of joy was one item on a long list of things that gave his life meaning.



The key for me HAS BEEN UNDERSTANDING THAT MEANING DOESN'T NEED TO BE FOUND IN HIS DEATH; INSTEAD, I MUST FIND IT IN THE LIFE HE LIVED AND THE LIFE I CONTINUE LIVING.

WHY IS FINDING MEANING IMPORTANT?

When our lives have changed in innumerable ways because of our lost loved ones, just getting through each day is challenging enough. Do we really need to take it further? And how can we find meaning in death, even a heroic one?

According to Victor Frankl, who wrote *Man's Search For Meaning*, having meaning in your life is fundamental to persevering through challenging times. Frankl survived a Nazi concentration camp, and his work about this experience is one of the most extreme examples of the lifesaving power of meaning. He attributes his survival partly to his commitment to finishing the manuscript he was working on. The purpose his project provided and his motivation to finish it kept him going through horrific experiences.

HOW DOES MEANING-MAKING HELP US, AS GRIEVERS, TO SURVIVE & THRIVE AFTER LOSS?

While working with over 500 terminally ill patients, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross developed and shared the Five Stages of Dying in her book, *On Death and Dying*. World-renowned grief expert David Kessler later worked with Elisabeth to transform those stages into the popularly known Five Stages of Grief. The stages include anger, denial, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These five stages have been discussed and debated for years. Some of them may feel familiar to you, some not. Some you may experience daily, others never. There's no wrong way or right order; the five stages are just a formula to try to explain what you may experience during the grief process in general.



Years after creating and teaching these stages, David's oldest son died suddenly. The difficult grief experience that followed inspired him to create a sixth stage of grieving: finding meaning. He describes it as another step in the healing journey. In 2019, he released the book, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*.

Though, David writes, "It's not necessary to understand why someone died in order to find meaning." I still struggle with complicated feelings about Glen's death by suicide. The key for me has been understanding that meaning doesn't need to be found in his death; instead, I must find it in the life he lived and the life I continue living.

After spreading Glen's ashes, I cried and cursed in traffic on my drive back to my little rented condo. I was struck by an inner awareness that launched my journey

to find meaning and healing. I thought I was having some grief-induced hallucination at the time; I clearly heard a voice say, "You have to write a book about your experiences: *Ten Things to Do When Your Husband Dies by Suicide*." I nearly drove off the road in shock.

You would think hearing the voice of God, a spirit, or an angel, I would have been honored and inspired, but my immediate response was, "NO WAY!" I didn't feel qualified or able to write a book only one year after Glen's death.

After nearly six years, lots of studies, and dedication to assemble a manuscript that I felt would support others who suffered losses like mine, I answered this call. Writing is a way I found meaning through my loss, but many other ways exist. Try Googling "the gift of grief." You'll find so

EVEN IF YOU DON'T THINK YOU'RE GRIEVING "RIGHT,"

you are



many inspiring stories and possibly even recognize yourself in some of them. New grievors start their journey every day, and you are farther along than many. Simply by being, you are an inspiration to those who follow, giving your life and loss meaning.

About nine months after Glen died, one of his close buddies died by suicide. His wife called me immediately. I was still so deep in my grief that I didn't think I could say anything to help, but understanding that she needed me, I found the courage to connect with her. During the call, I discovered I didn't need to say anything to support her. I just needed to be on the

other end of the call to listen and reassure her she could survive. What she needed from me — something only I could do for her then — was existence. She needed an example of someone who lived with that same pain longer than she had. She got the support and confirmation she needed just by my existence; my simple hello on the phone reassured her that what she was going through was survivable. That phone call gave my life and my loss meaning. It is the same for you. Whether you know it or not, you support others by being you. As you sit here and read these words, you are giving your life and your loved one's meaning.

The fact that your loss is further behind you than others makes you an inspiration to those brand new to loss. You don't have to do anything more than experience living while grieving. Even if you don't think you're grieving "right," you are. Remember, there is no wrong way to grieve, so please be kind to yourself. You may not even know you are supporting someone else. You may mention your loss to someone who needs to hear your story and not even realize you are helping them. You never know who you may inspire or when you may experience new meaning in your life.

By surviving, reading this article, or participating in any of the beautiful offerings we are so fortunate to have from TAPS, you choose new meaning in your life and add meaning to the life of your loved one. The strength it took to get you where you are today, no matter where you are on your journey, inspires others. You are strong, resilient, and important to our community.

About the Author



Michelle Ann Collins, Surviving Spouse of LT Glen S. Collins, U.S. Navy, Retired, is an author, grief coach, and yoga therapist. She partners with individuals who have suffered grief, injury, or other types of loss as they recover, reclaim their wholeness, and build resilience for life's inevitable challenges. She is a TAPS Peer Mentor and a volunteer grief group moderator for Grief.com. You can find Michelle and her most recent publications at www.inhabitjoy.com.



FIND MEANING IN MENTORSHIP

What you have learned about grief and yourself in life after loss is valuable to someone new to their own loss. Supporting a fellow survivor as a TAPS Peer Mentor can bring new meaning into your life and help you honor your loved one through service while supporting a grieving heart. Visit taps.org/peermentors to apply.



WEARING YOUR *Heart* ON YOUR *Sleeve*

Matt Daud ★ Surviving Father of Cpl Christopher Daud, U.S. Marine Corps Reserves and TAPS Survivor Care Team Associate

TAPS seminars and events are always full of colorful and distinct shirts — red, black, white, green, teal, purple, blue, gray, yellow, and burgundy. We wear them to show our connection to TAPS and to each other.

When I am at the airport, I am always on the lookout for anyone wearing one of the unmistakable TAPS shirts as I walk through the terminal. I pass thousands of passengers during busy times and see all

manner of shirts, but TAPS shirts have been elusive.

Proudly displaying TAPS shirts, jackets, luggage tags, hats, and bracelets opens the door to inquiries from other travelers, like “What is TAPS?” And just like that, you have a chance to share who we are and all we do. These questions can also become “Remember the Dash” moments, allowing you to talk about your loved one.

I have found people to be receptive to these stories. You never know when your shirt and your story will recruit a new TAPS supporter, teach someone about our mission, or help a survivor who had no idea this organization existed for them.

There is a strong message attached to our shirts. They say that we belong to a family unlike any other. I will be keeping an eye out at the airport for those familiar TAPS shirts and the meaningful connections they create.

“THERE IS A STRONG MESSAGE ATTACHED TO OUR SHIRTS. THEY SAY THAT WE BELONG TO A FAMILY UNLIKE ANY OTHER.”

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES





Don't MOURN MY LOSS, Remember THE GOOD THINGS

Charles A. Corr, Ph.D. ★ TAPS Advisory Board Member

Army MAJ Andrew Olmsted was killed in Iraq on Jan. 3, 2008, at the age of 38. In anticipation of his possible death, MAJ Olmsted wrote out some of his thoughts. On Jan. 13, 2008, the *Saint Petersburg Times* published a portion of what MAJ Olmsted wrote, including the following sentence: “I would prefer that people remember the good things about me rather than mourning my loss.”

Many of us might share the same thought. We hope that the person we have been and the things we have done would be judged by others to be good. And we would like those who survive our deaths to remember us for those good qualities.

But it is unrealistic to think that survivors do not have a need to mourn the loss of a good person. They need to mourn the

loss to the world, to our society, to them, and to their family that is represented in the death of someone like MAJ Olmsted.

Whatever survivors may think about service to the country, sacrifice, and tragedy inherent in the death of someone in the military, they are likely to be most affected by what they, themselves, have lost. Even those who believe that a

“I WOULD PREFER THAT PEOPLE REMEMBER THE GOOD THINGS ABOUT ME RATHER THAN MOURNING MY LOSS.”





“OUR TASKS AFTER THE DEATH OF SOMEONE WE LOVED ARE BOTH TO MOURN HIS OR HER LOSS AND TO KEEP INSIDE OUR HEARTS THE MEMORIES AND LEGACIES OF THE GOOD THAT PERSON LEFT BEHIND.”

person who has died is no longer suffering and is in a better place, still mourn what is lost to them.

In fact, mourning always has two primary faces: one that looks backward at what has been lost and another that looks forward to the life that remains to be lived. Looking forward involves coping with the new challenges in this changed life and adapting to the world as it now is without the physical presence of the person who died.

There are many aspects of this forward-looking dimension of mourning. One has to do with finding or constructing meaning in the life — and especially in the death — of the loved one. Another has to do with preserving and enriching memories of the loved one. Still, another involves maintaining a continuing bond or an ongoing connection with the loved one.

Certainly, mourning involves processes of restructuring the relationship with the loved one. Developing this new relationship is required by the harsh, objective facts of death. If we do not develop a new relationship with the person who died, we would be pretending that he or she is still with us in the same way as before the death.

In short, our tasks after the death of someone we loved are both to mourn his or her loss and to keep inside our hearts the memories and legacies of the good that person left behind. Grieving over the loss and remembering the life, crying and celebrating, lamenting the absence, and being grateful for the time we had together are all part of healthy bereavement and mourning.

Even those of us who did not know MAJ Andrew Olmsted in person can realize and appreciate some of the good things about him as we mourn his loss.

About the Author



Dr. Corr is a TAPS Advisory Board member; professor emeritus, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville; former chair of the International Work Group

on Death, Dying, and Bereavement; a longtime member of the Association for Death Education and Counseling; and he is the senior editor of the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization's Pediatric eJournal. His work is widely published in professional journals and books, most recently appearing in the eighth edition of Death & Dying, Life & Living.

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The Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors offers comfort, care, and resources to all those grieving the death of a military loved one.



TAPS is a participant organization in the Combined Federal Campaign, No. 11309

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“One day you will tell your story of how you overcame what you went through and it will be someone else’s survival guide.”

— Brené Brown

AT TAPS, SURVIVORS SUPPORT SURVIVORS THROUGH GRIEF.

- Share your story with TAPS by emailing editor@taps.org
- Learn more about Peer Mentorship at taps.org/peermentors
- Learn more about Military or Legacy Mentorship at taps.org/militarymentor



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