

For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died

T★A★P★S®

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

FALL 2025



“Lift the weight from your shoulders
Allow me to hold it for you...
[Leave] some of your heaviness...
Between these pages
Perhaps my...heart
Can keep yours company”

– Whitney Hanson, Harmony





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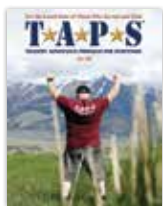
Men's Program

Young Adults Program

Youth Programs

Sports & Entertainment Events

* For full descriptions, see pages 18-19.



ON THE COVER: Surviving Father Raymond Evans savors a moment of reflection and strength at the TAPS Montana Men's Retreat in May. This retreat is one of the many specialized events TAPS hosts

to create community and empower healing.

COVER PHOTO: TAPS ARCHIVES

About TAPS

Caring for the Families of America's Fallen Heroes

TAPS is the national nonprofit organization providing compassionate care and comprehensive resources to all those grieving a death in the military and veteran community. 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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PHOTO: TAPS ARCHIVES

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More than grief support, TAPS creates space to make meaningful, happy moments





To Our TAPS Family,

As we welcome the fall season, we are reminded how nature reflects the rhythms of our own hearts. Just as the leaves turn and fall gently to the ground, we, too, carry the weight of change — of love and loss, of memory and healing. For many in our TAPS Family, autumn's crisp air and vibrant hues of red, orange, and gold bring moments of quiet reflection and an ache for the presence of someone we miss dearly.

Woven within these pages, we hope you find reminders that you are not alone. This issue of *TAPS Magazine* holds the stories, voices, and experiences of fellow survivors who walk this journey beside you and experts reaching out a hand of support. Each contribution is a reflection of the courage it takes to grieve and to love, and a testament to the heroes who continue to inspire us long after they're gone.

This fall, as we gather at events across the country — from seminars and retreats to races and remembrance ceremonies — we are strengthened by the deep connections we share. Whether you've just found TAPS or have been part of this family for years, you are part of a legacy of love that holds space for both sorrow and joy. Every hand held, every story told, every name spoken keeps our loved ones close and our community strong.

Here, at TAPS, we believe that healing happens in community — in the quiet moments shared over coffee, in the laughter of Good Grief Camp, in the long walks taken with a Peer Mentor who truly understands. We meet you wherever you are in your grief, and we walk alongside you with the promise that you never have to face this path alone. We come together in person and through our Online Community to listen, learn from one another, lean in, and lift each other up. Each hug, story shared, and hero's name spoken in remembrance symbolizes the power of our compassionate community.

From understanding tough emotions under grief's umbrella to embracing the healing of the outdoors — calling us with its vibrant colors this season — and many topics in between, let this issue gently guide you and remind you that, just like the stories within these pages, you are an important member of the TAPS Family, and your story matters.

Thank you for trusting us to share the path with you. Thank you for trusting your loved one's legacy to TAPS. Thank you for sharing your heart and your story with us. Together, we grow, remember, heal, find hope and give it, and we carry love and legacies, grief and gratitude, each step of the way. May this season bring moments of peace and connection. And may you always know that we are here for you — with steady care, with open hearts, and with the deep belief that love lives on.

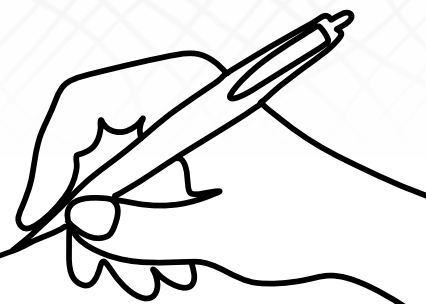
With love and my heartfelt support,

Bonnie Carroll
TAPS President and Founder



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES

DEAR TAPS



IN MY CORNER

“Thank you for all the phone calls. While I admit, I many times ignored them, resolving not to confront the pain as the moment dictated, your reaching out nonetheless had me believe someone was in my corner. And after our final phone call today, I still believe you are. I take comfort in knowing that there is someone out there living through the loss of a great son, just like me...”

Brandon Clark ★ Surviving Father of Navy IT2 Jaxon Clark

MEANS THE WORLD

“I know we haven’t talked for too long, but thank you for sitting and talking with me. It has meant the world.”

Javier Carbajal ★ Surviving Father of Army SGT Anahi Arjon

HONORING ALL HEROES

“It means so much to share my story — and my sister’s — with the TAPS community. I’m deeply grateful for your support and care throughout this process. Thank you again to TAPS for helping us remember and honor my sister and all our heroes.”

Tatiana Mendoza ★ Surviving Sister of Retired Army SFC Wilshxer Mendoza

JUST THE RIGHT TIME

“You just seem to call at just the right time. Talking to you today has brought a smile to my face and hope to my heart. You just don’t know what it means to me. I read everything you send. And the care package — I’ve used the journal and the photo album; I carry them with me wherever I go.”

Tricia Crosby ★ Surviving Spouse of Air Force Veteran Frankie Crosby Sr.

WRAPPED UP IN SUPPORT

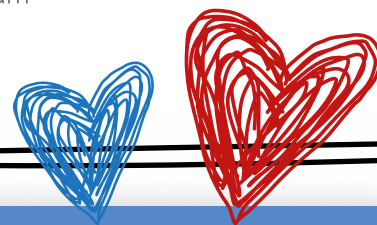
“It’s so tough and tiring trying to figure out living and loving my life without my hubby. I’ve reread your email a couple of times, and it is so supportive and wraps around me when I need it. Thank you for all your support and love.”

Terasia Olsen ★ Surviving Spouse of Space Force CMSgt Willie Frazier II

HEALING, LIVING, THRIVING

“When you called, I was actually giving a speech about postvention. With the support of TAPS and Dog Tag, I am in a place I never thought I’d be seven months ago. I am healing and living and thriving. There are moments and days I have to remind myself of that, but I am. Thank you for helping me on this journey. You are priceless!”

Jeannie Windham ★ Surviving Spouse of Army National Guardsman Jason Windham



WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

Your TAPS Family wants to hear from you. Share your healing journey with us and how TAPS has supported you along the way. Your experience could be featured in a future issue of *TAPS Magazine*. Email editor@taps.org or visit taps.org/deartaps to share your own Dear TAPS story.

[>> taps.org/deartaps](https://taps.org/deartaps)

FINDING MY PEACE THROUGH THE ANGER

Stacy Anne Case Bartle ★ Surviving Spouse of Army SGT Willard Jason Case

I've always been a person who uses every minute and every action to serve some purpose — a multitasking queen, some might say. If I have a minute to watch TV, I can also fold clothes. During our 20-minute commute to town or school, I'll have a meeting with the kids about who needs to be where and when, or I can return that phone call on my to-do list. So, what is the purpose of writing about my husband, Jason's, suicide? It will help me unpack the anger — a monster that isn't often talked about, the

grief, love, and forgiveness. It will help keep me moving forward with purpose, and — just maybe — my story can help someone else.

Outwardly, I have it all together — even in the days and months after Jason's death — stoic, intentional. At the time, I was raising four kids: a charismatic, rebellious 15-year-old; an 11-year-old searching for his place while trying his best to be invisible; an enthusiastic, energetic 5-year-old

who wanted only for me to watch him play t-ball; and a beautiful 9-month-old baby girl who stole everyone's heart. I was a professor on the path to apply for tenure and promotion. And, I had a home to run — a home Jason designed but was a stranger to between deployments and contract work that would take him away for months at a time. I had no choice but to keep moving, keep working, keep going through the motions.

He marched to the
beat of his own drum,
was quick-witted,
and extremely
sensitive to
others' pain. I was
always jealous
of his ability
to empathize;
how was he
so sympathetic
and forgiving?
***I would later
take a lesson
from him.***



PHOTOS: BUJIE PHOTOGRAPHY



I knew he could not control the deployment, but I wanted him to be as devastated as I was that he was **leaving our little family just as it was starting.**

For the 19 years Jason was in my life, he was never comfortable. He always showed a level of angst — a chameleon-type, who fit in with those around him. He was a caveman — dragging off his game alongside fellow hunters in northern Louisiana; a hipster who could sing the lyrics of any 80s or 90s song; and a cultural man who could engage with my academic friends about Ernest Hemingway. He marched to the beat of his own drum, was quick-witted, and

extremely sensitive to others' pain. I was always jealous of his ability to empathize; how was he so sympathetic and forgiving? I would later take a lesson from him.

We met at a half-marathon in 1999, had a whirlwind romance, and were married by July 2001. He was in the special forces qualification course, and I was just beginning a career as a college professor. When we met, he told me special forces life

could be tough on a family, which was why he chose to go into the Guard after completing the Delta course. He was using his GI Bill and going back to school at the university where I worked, and we began to settle into our newlywed life. Then came 9/11.

Most special forces soldiers deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq at some point post-9/11, and Jason was no exception. He was torn between feeling a sense of duty to his country and his new life as a young, married man. A seed of anger was planted then somewhere deep in my core. I knew he could not control the deployment, but I wanted him to be as devastated as I was that he was leaving our little family just as it was starting.



During that deployment, I was ecstatic to discover I was pregnant. He made it back in time to see his baby boy come into the world, but he came back a changed person. No matter how much I tried to create a home for us, he never quite found his place. He deployed again, this time to Iraq. We added another baby boy to our family, and while Jason loved us, he grew more distant and closed off. I had the house running like a well-oiled machine, but he couldn't find his role in that machine. Unhappy with his job as a paramedic, which kept him on a regular schedule, he shifted to contract work that took him away for two weeks to three months at a time. He turned to alcohol to numb his pain and developed an addiction.

Although things at home were not good, I did my best to hold all the pieces together. We were blessed with our third boy; some part of me thought more children would force him to become the family man I so desperately wanted. But Jason's addiction got worse — somehow functioning when working on-site in Iraq and fighting demons at home. While home, I encouraged him to rest and spend time with our kids, but he would pass out soon after the kids and I returned from school and work, and wake up at 3 a.m. only to repeat the pattern.

When I got pregnant for the fourth time, I realized Jason was not getting better, and I was enabling him. He supported our family and loved the kids, but the demons were controlling him. I set a boundary with the drinking, and he chose to move out. No one really talks about what happens when you set a boundary, and the other person walks away. I was eight months pregnant with our baby girl, and he was living in a sketchy motel 15 miles away. I wanted to believe he was going to get better, seek help, move back in, and be the dad our kids deserved. But he couldn't overcome his disease, and ultimately, it took his life.

The next few months were a blur, but my family, church, and work friends were a wonderful support system. Life kept moving somehow — plans were already in place for the kids to join me on a monthlong study abroad program in Spain, and we still went. My oldest, 15 by then, immediately stepped into the

man-of-the-house role for his siblings. I felt incredible, heavy sadness followed by intense anger — the most difficult part of this journey.

After every parenting challenge, an inner voice would say, "If their father were here..." followed by, "Why am I doing this alone..." and, "He was so selfish to do this to me." Reading *TAPS Magazine* articles made me jealous, angrier — those survivors felt unconditional love for their partner.

Then came the guilt. I would tell myself, "It was a disease just like cancer," and "You can't control..." and "You have the privilege to be here for your kids that he will never have."

Five years later, I've concluded that my key to peace is forgiveness — something Jason could give so naturally. It is realizing the anger will not give me the family man I tried so hard to make Jason; it will not give the kids the kind of dad who spins his little girl around or throws the baseball in the backyard with his sons; it will not comfort me or make me feel any better.

Jason's loss still feels like an extra limb I will always have to carry with me. But, as I always have, I want my experience of losing a spouse and navigating anger, grief, pain, and finally, forgiveness to mean something. I want my story to have a purpose — to achieve my own peace while comforting fellow suicide-loss survivors. Give grace, forgive, and make peace with the anger.



PHOTO: BUJIE PHOTOGRAPHY

SUICIDE-LOSS SUPPORT

At TAPS, we understand that suicide grief can hold a range of complex issues, emotions, and questions. You have a safe place with us. Our suicide-loss support is tailored to meet your unique grief, and fellow suicide-loss survivors in the TAPS Family are here to walk alongside you. Visit taps.org/suicide to connect with our suicide-loss support and begin your journey toward healing.

>> taps.org/suicide

Understanding the Anger of Grief

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

"Anger is like flowing water; there's nothing wrong with it as long as you let it flow. Hate is like stagnant water — anger that you denied yourself the freedom to feel. Allow yourself to feel anger, allow your waters to flow... Be human."

- C. JoyBell C.

If you're feeling angry after the death of someone loved, I want to assure you that all your emotions are normal — even unpleasant and sometimes scary feelings, like anger, rage, hate, blame, resentment, bitterness, and envy. There's nothing wrong with you.

Unfortunately, there is a social stigma associated with anger. It implies that angry people are out of control or

emotionally immature. It shames people experiencing anger. While it's true that behaviors associated with anger can be out of control and harmful, the anger itself is a natural human emotion that almost everyone experiences at some point. It is often trying to teach you something about the loss and yourself.

The Utility of Anger

Anger exists. Accepting it as a normal human emotion is the first step toward integrating it into your life story. It's a form of protest — when we don't like something that's happened, especially if we think it's unfair, we naturally get mad. It's built into our biology. Think of the toddler whose favorite toy is yanked out of their hands. This toddler wants the toy; when it's taken, their instinctive reaction is to scream, cry, or hit. When you experience a significant loss or someone loved is taken from you, your instinctive reaction may be similar.

Relatedly, anger is rooted in the concept of fairness. Whenever we believe that something should be a certain way, we often feel angry if it doesn't turn out that way. Again, our anger is in protest against what we perceive as an injustice. It's an emotion based on our expectations and understanding of social norms. If a child dies of cancer, for example, we feel that the death is unfair. Young people should not die. We might rage over this

injustice. Smoldering anger — also called bitterness — may set in.

But anger is also functional. As a "fight" response to an immediate threat, anger's evolutionary purpose is to spur us to respond aggressively when we need to in order to save our lives or the lives of those we love. In the modern world, we rarely have to fight for our lives, but still, anger can move us to take necessary action. If we use anger to motivate us toward effective problem solving, for example, we're putting the evolutionary utility of anger to good use.

What's more — and this is important to understand — in grief, anger is a bit like the numbness and denial we naturally experience right after a loss. In the early days, numbness and denial protect us from the full force of what happened, allowing us to absorb the reality bit by bit; I often call them the shock absorbers of grief. They help us survive. Thank goodness for shock and denial! Similarly, after a loss, our anger often protects us from more helpless, painful feelings, like fear, guilt, and sadness. I often call the explosive emotions "survival-oriented protest."

We can honor and thank our anger, for a time. But, just as we must work to soften our numbness and denial in grief, we must also work to soften our anger, so that we can fully encounter the necessary pain it has done such a good job of guarding against.



The more you befriend your anger, the more you'll learn why it's such a prominent part of your unique grief experience and *what may lie beneath it.*

The Dangers of Anger

Physical

While anger can feel powerful, active, and even good, your body isn't meant to sustain it for a long period of time. Evolutionarily, it's meant to give you a quick burst of energy. Prolonged anger, on the other hand, stresses the body. Studies have shown strong correlations between anger and high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease, and a weakened immune system. Anger makes people sick, and it even kills them.

Emotional

Scientists have found that anger is linked to anxiety and depression. Again, anger is a normal human emotion, but feeling angry all the time is not normal. A tendency toward volatile, angry outbursts is also physically, emotionally, and socially damaging.

Social

Anger can be off-putting to others. Because it is often blameful, aggressive, and even violent, it tends to harm relationships and can traumatize others in its path. It's hard to be around someone who's angry all the time. And it's scary to be around someone who's volatile — who may explode at the slightest trigger at any moment. In these ways, pronounced anger can throw up significant roadblocks to love and connection.

Spiritual

Spiritual health requires devoting time regularly to searching for and connecting with those things that feel most meaningful to you here on Earth (and, depending on your beliefs, beyond that). To a large degree, wrestling with anger is about wrestling with the big whys of human existence. Why do bad things have to happen? Why are we here? In this way, anger and spirituality may naturally go hand-in-hand. But ongoing, unrelenting anger can also get in the way of spiritual experiences, like awe, gratitude, and joy.

What's Beneath Your Anger?

The more you befriend your anger, the more you'll learn why it's such a prominent part of your unique grief experience and what may lie beneath it. Think of your anger like a protective sibling or friend. When you're in a bad situation, they may come to your rescue and stand between you and whatever's threatening you. They may even get aggressive in an attempt to save you from being hurt. Your anger is similarly shielding you. If it wasn't there to rage and bluster and protect you, what thoughts and feelings might hurt you? Feeling this through is part of your journey through anger.

Helplessness in the aftermath of a major loss can be really painful. So, instead of acknowledging our thoughts and feelings of helplessness, we might get angry. But as we work through our explosive emotions, we often find that as part of the healing process, we must reconcile ourselves to our lack of control in life.

Relatedly, *fear* is a common emotion that anger guards against. After a big loss, it's perfectly natural to feel afraid. Life can be so scary and overwhelming! When we are fearful, anxious, or worried, we feel vulnerable. Fear makes us want to hide or run away. It's both the "freeze" and "flight" parts of the fight, flight, or freeze response to danger. When powerful, action-oriented anger steps aside, we often find the normal fears of grief cowering behind it.



Regret and guilt often underlie anger as well. People in grief commonly experience regret and guilt because of the finality of death and other types of losses. We naturally wonder if we could have done things differently. We agonize over mistakes made and opportunities missed. Yet for all our normal what-ifs and regrets, it's too late to make amends or undo past decisions.

Sadness and loss are the other main emotions that anger can protect us from. I believe sadness to be the most challenging emotion to acknowledge, embrace, and reconcile in grief. It saps all the color and pleasure from our lives. It makes it hard to get out of bed in the morning, and it can even cause us to question whether we want to continue living. Like helplessness, fear, and guilt, sadness and loss are also vulnerable, passive emotions. And they're

particularly painful — a pain anger doesn't want us to feel and often protects us from. But if we are to reconcile our grief, we must also acknowledge and embrace our sadness. We can't do that if anger keeps sheltering us.

Restoratively Expressing Your Anger

To move toward reconciling your grief, you absolutely need to express your anger. There is no healing without mourning. But, as you explore ways to befriend and express your anger, keep in mind the difference between damaging expression and restorative expression.

Damaging expression harms you or others. It hurts feelings, injures relationships, or causes physical harm to something or someone. It can cause secondary trauma to others who may

not be trained or equipped to make space for and process the traumatic experiences and explosive emotions of others. Restorative expression, on the other hand, allows you to fully share feelings in ways and places that are safe, nonviolent, and not traumatizing to others. It restores your sense of equilibrium, at least temporarily, and over time can strengthen relationships and restore inner peace.



About the Author

Longtime TAPS supporter Dr. Alan Wolfelt serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is a member of the TAPS Advisory Board. He has written many books that help people mourn, including *Healing Your Grieving Heart After a Military Death* (coauthored with TAPS President Bonnie Carroll) and *The Anger of Grief: How to Understand, Embrace, and Restoratively Express Explosive Emotions after a Loss*, from which this article was excerpted. Visit centerforloss.com to learn more about grief and to order Dr. Wolfelt's books.

HELPING HAND

If you need support working through anger after your loss, TAPS can help. Visit taps.org/griefcounseling to learn more about our local Care Groups and request a Community Resource Report, which connects you to individual counselors and support organizations in your local community.

>> taps.org/griefcounseling

Like Widows Long Ago

Colleen Reynolds ★ Surviving Spouse of Marine Corps Veteran Paul E. Reynolds Jr.

**I want to drape myself in black
like widows long ago,
to walk alone in somber dress
so acquaintances will know**

**my sorrow and my hurt,
my injury inside,
why I stood in church on Sunday
and amid the singing, cried.**

**I want to drape myself in black
as in times gone by,
to hide my face behind a veil
so no one will wonder why**

**I say goodnight so early
with words few and low
And move as if encumbered
by limbs made heavy, slow.**

**I want to drape myself in black
to show the world I mourn
and among my other daily cares
nurse a heart forlorn.**

**By my garments, all will know
I lament a life too brief
as I don a daily testament
my love lives on through grief.**



PHOTOS: COLLEEN REYNOLDS ★ PEXELS.COM/OCTOCAT

GRIEF CAUSING PHYSICAL PAIN?

Turns Out, That's Pretty Normal.

Kathleen Ferraro

In the weeks after my father died, I was numb. And then one day, about two months later, bam. My neck muscles were so tight I couldn't turn my head, my stomach churned in ways unrelated to hunger, my jaw was clenched shut, and my limbs were heavy with exhaustion. The physical effects of grief had finally caught up with me.

Over the next few years, these physical health issues came in waves — sometimes a headache so sharp I had to lie down, other times a tightness in my throat as if I were perpetually on the verge of tears. This response to loss isn't unusual: A National Library of Medicine study found that nearly 26 percent of adults with severe grief reported negative effects not just on their mental health, but also physical. These can be trouble sleeping, illness, infection, and even heart problems. If your grief literally hurts, know that it's normal. But that doesn't make it any less difficult to navigate.

Grief can trigger physical symptoms.

When you experience a deep loss, the link between your emotions and physical sensations isn't just metaphorical — it's biological. "The intense emotional stress of loss activates your body's 'fight-or-flight' response, also known as your sympathetic nervous system," says psychologist Dr. Mikki Lee. "This releases stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, which can cause physical symptoms of grief, such as chest tightness, fatigue, changes in digestion, and immune suppression."

The vagus nerve — the part of your nervous system responsible for regulating various unconscious bodily functions, like your heart rate, immune response, and digestion — plays a major role in these symptoms. After all, its job is

to counteract the stress response and help the body return to a sense of calm. When the nervous system perceives grief as a threat, it can impair the vagus nerve's ability to regulate these critical processes, further contributing to physical symptoms, Juliet Kuehnle, LCMHC, shares. I experienced this firsthand, dropping nearly 20 pounds in my first year of grief from appetite loss and relentless nausea.

What's more, "experiencing grief can even increase inflammation and weaken the immune system, making you more susceptible to illness," says Dr. Lee. Other physical symptoms of grief include:

- Nausea or upset stomach
- Muscle pain, tension, or weakness
- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Difficulty breathing
- Lethargy
- Increased heart rate
- Irregular heartbeat
- Increased blood pressure
- Insomnia
- Appetite loss or excessive eating
- Acid reflux

These symptoms don't just randomly occur — they're your body's way of processing deep emotional pain.



Research shows that emotional pain activates the parts of your brain associated with physical pain, “making grief literally feel painful,” says Dr. Lee.

“Broken heart syndrome” is another common physical manifestation of grief that I experienced. For me, that meant chest tightness and difficulty breathing during particularly intense bouts of grief. For others, it’s been linked to serious complications like stroke, heart attack, and heart failure. And there’s a biological reason for it: Broken heart syndrome occurs when intense emotional stress causes your heart to temporarily stop pumping properly, leading to symptoms like chest pain, shortness of breath, and fainting.

There are a few ways to tell that your physical pain is connected to grief.

Because grief symptoms can be so physical and vary from person to person, it’s easy to mistake them for unrelated health issues. Were my nonstop bouts of cold and flu the result of early grief, or were they a seasonal coincidence? Was my neck pain from emotional turmoil and restless sleep, or was I just lying at an odd angle?

“Context matters,” says Kuehnle. “If you experience the sensations when you have

a reminder of your loss or during times of sadness, it’s likely tied to grief. You might also find that these physical sensations are accompanied by emotional responses, like sadness or yearning.”

According to Dr. Lee, here are some other clues your bodily ailments are grief-related:

- **They began shortly after loss.**
- **They fluctuate in intensity and come in waves.**
- **There’s no obvious medical explanation.**
- **They improve with self-care.**

Addressing both the mental and physical parts of grief is critical for healing.

There’s no doubt that grief is emotionally and physically painful, and shying away from that pain is a common response. When I shelved grief to get through a busy workday, social event, or even just errands, physical symptoms like muscle pain, headache, appetite loss, and nausea would flare more than usual.

It’s essential to address the emotional and physical sides of grief in tandem — ignore one, and the other suffers. Suppress the emotions, and your body will remind

you. Disregard the physical symptoms, and the emotional load becomes harder to bear. Dr. Lee notes that unprocessed grief can eventually lead to actual health problems, including chronic stress, burnout, and health conditions such as high blood pressure and heart disease. In fact, many of the physical consequences of grief arise when you don’t listen to and address your body’s needs, she says.

Of course, giving your body what it needs to actually process loss and stress is much easier said than done. Work, everyday obligations, and my once-busy social life demanded my time and attention long before I was able to give it. Forcing myself back into these “normal” routines and behaviors came at a steep cost, leaving me with lingering physical and emotional pain that I’ve only just started to recover from more than two years after the fact. If you’ve been sidelining your grief, make it your top priority now. To help, experts recommend the following strategies.

1. **Tend to the basics.** This includes filling your body with nutritious food, staying well-hydrated, and doing your best to get adequate rest. Though this may seem obvious, grief made even the simplest tasks feel overwhelming or pointless for me. But focusing on meeting your essential needs first will lay the foundation for eventually finding the physical ability to do more.
2. **Engage in mindful body awareness.** Not sure how to do this? One simple way is to tune in to your



WHEN YOU EXPERIENCE
A DEEP LOSS, THE LINK
BETWEEN YOUR EMOTIONS
AND PHYSICAL SENSATIONS
ISN'T JUST METAPHORICAL
— IT'S BIOLOGICAL.

body and notice any sensations, Erica Schwartzberg, LMSW, shares. Want to take it a step further? You may want to explore somatic therapy, a type of therapy based on the understanding that trauma resides not only in your mind, but also your body. The core idea is to identify the sensations of trauma and learn how to move through them. This allows you to release physical stress rather than just desensitizing yourself to it.

3. Support your nervous system.

Because grief causes an intense physical stress response, engaging in activities that soothe your nervous system can help. Kuehnle recommends practices like:

- **Breathing** with long exhales to release chest tightness
- **Using acupressure points** to relieve tightness; try lightly tugging on your earlobes or gently rubbing the side of your neck around your pulse
- **Humming or gargling** for one minute to soothe your vagus nerve

4. Move your body gently.

Grief can cause physical stagnation and lethargy. Dr. Lee recommends gentle activities, like yoga, walking, or stretching, to help your body release stress and get yourself in motion without overdoing it.

5. Seek support. Whether somatic therapy, one-on-one counseling, or support groups, talking to a professional can help you understand and heal the emotional and physical aspects of

loss. The same goes for other medical professionals. If you're dealing with chronic symptoms, like digestive issues, insomnia, or muscle pain, visit your doctor to see if there are additional treatment options to address the toll that grief has taken on your mind and body.

IT'S ESSENTIAL TO ADDRESS THE EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL SIDES OF GRIEF IN TANDEM — IGNORE ONE, AND THE OTHER SUFFERS

Healing from grief takes time: While these steps can help lighten the load, there's no timeline for feeling "better." I'm nearly three years out from my loss and still feel its weight, though these strategies have helped it evolve into something I can carry. Be patient and gentle with yourself as you grow into the new version of who you are — one shaped by the depth of what you've felt and the strength it takes to keep moving forward.

This article was originally published by SELF Magazine on April 15, 2025, and was modified slightly for the TAPS community. Kathleen Ferraro's article, "Grieving My Father's Death Left Me in Physical Pain. Turns Out, That's Pretty Normal," and bio are available on Self.com.

TOOLS FOR HEALTH, TOOLS FOR HEALING

The TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing® has a wide selection of live and archived webinars and courses — all at no cost to you. From guiding you through a somatic approach to growing with grief to discussing the physical and mental impacts of stress and so many topics in between, the institute can support your pursuit of mental and physical wellness.

>> taps.org/institute

*For the Loved Ones
of Those Who
Served and Died*

>> taps.org/programs-services



PROGRAMS AND SERVICES



TAPS NATIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR HELPLINE • 800-959-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](https://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](https://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](https://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](https://taps.org/edu)

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



SURVIVOR CARE TEAM • [TAPS.ORG/SURVIVORCARETEAM](https://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](https://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](https://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](https://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](https://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](https://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](https://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](https://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](https://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](https://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.





GRIEF RUMINATION SPIRAL

PART 1: *Softening the Cycle*

Heather Stang, MA, C-IAYT ★ TAPS Advisory Board

Have you ever noticed your thoughts circling around the same painful place? You're washing dishes or driving or trying to sleep, and suddenly — there it is again: the same what-if, the same image, the same sentence you've already replayed a hundred times.

WHEN GRIEF GETS STUCK IN A LOOP

Grief has a way of pulling us into loops. It's not because we're doing anything wrong. It's because loss is confusing and disorienting. Our minds naturally want to make sense of something that doesn't make sense. Yet sometimes, the way we try to find answers actually deepens our pain.

This is what researchers call grief rumination — a kind of repetitive, stuck thinking that often shows up in the wake of loss. These thoughts can feel urgent and important. However, instead of offering insight or comfort, they tend to tighten the grip of sorrow, guilt, or fear. And, they're surprisingly common.

WHAT IS GRIEF RUMINATION?

Grief rumination is different from reflecting, remembering, or honoring your loved one. Those are meaningful and healthy parts of the grieving process. Rumination, on the other hand, is when thoughts start spinning in place — especially around things you can't change:

- *Why did this happen?*
- *What could I have done differently?*
- *Will I ever feel normal again?*

It can feel like trying to solve a puzzle that has no solution. While this is a very human response

to loss, research shows that persistent grief rumination is linked to prolonged grief disorder, depression after bereavement, and posttraumatic stress symptoms.

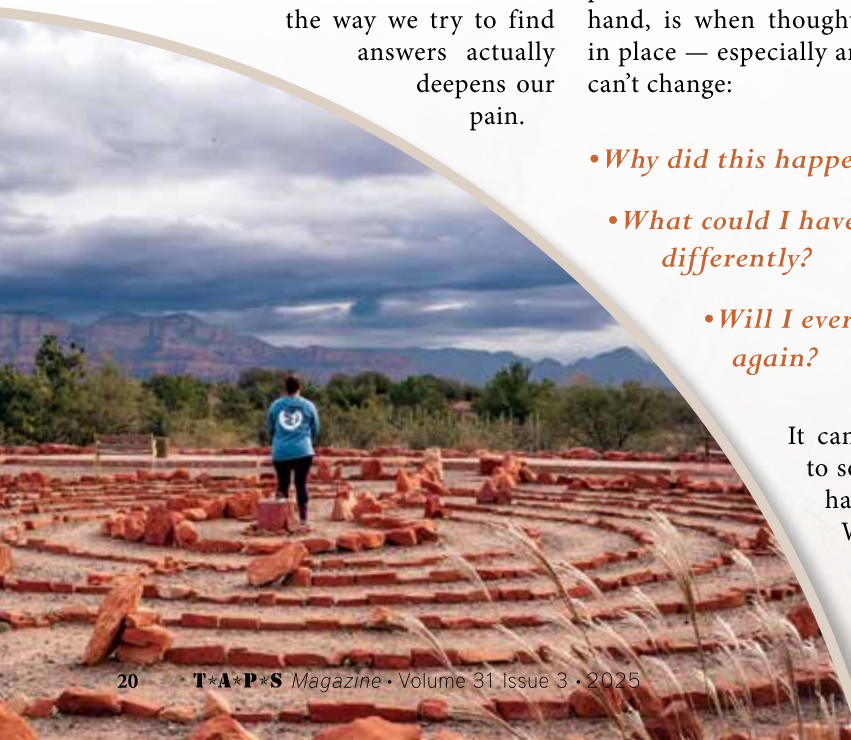
WHY DO WE RUMINATE?

Our brains are built to search for meaning and control. When we lose someone we love, especially suddenly or traumatically, the mind often goes into overdrive. It tries to protect us or make sense of what happened. That's why it might replay the events leading up to the loss, question every decision, or imagine how things could have gone differently.

This can be a way of staying close to the person we lost — or trying to regain a sense of control. Over time, though, these mental loops can become exhausting and isolating.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THINKING AND SPINNING

It's important to say this: Not all repetitive thoughts are bad. Some help us process. Others help us heal. The key is noticing the tone and direction of the thought:



Grief rumination is different from reflecting, remembering, or honoring your loved one.

- *Is it making space for your grief — or trying to make it go away?*
- *Is it helping you understand your feelings — or just keeping them stirred up?*
- *Is it pointing you toward something new — or pulling you back into what already happened?*

When your thoughts are circling without leading to new insight, gentleness, or release, you might be caught in a rumination spiral.

YOU'RE NOT ALONE IN THIS

If this sounds familiar, you're in good company. Rumination is one of the most common ways grief shows up. But, it's something we can learn to work with, rather than against. In the next article

in this four-part series, I'll share how to recognize the kinds of thoughts that support healing versus those that keep us stuck. I'll also offer ways to meet them with awareness, not judgment.

Here's something to try while you await the second article: Bring awareness to one thought that feels heavy or repetitive. Instead of following it down the same path, ask yourself how it's making you feel. Is it offering comfort or insight — or just keeping the pain stirred up?

This isn't about spiritual bypassing. You don't have to feel differently than you do. But, noticing the impact of your thoughts — without piling on more pressure — can be a small act of self-kindness, a way of reclaiming even a little steadiness in the storm.

This is the first installment in a four-part series, "Grief Rumination Spiral," that was originally published on HeatherStang.com in May 2025 and is reprinted with permission. Part two will be published in the winter 2025 issue of TAPS Magazine.



About the Author

Heather Stang, MA, C-IAYT, and 2025 Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC) Clinical Practice Award Recipient, is the author of several publications, including Navigating Loss: Wisdom and Self-Care for Times of Grief and creator of the 8-step Mindfulness & Grief System. A certified yoga therapist and thanatologist, she blends mindfulness, expressive arts, and evidence-based grief care. Heather hosts the Mindfulness & Grief Podcast, serves on the TAPS Advisory Board, and offers grief support and training for professionals.

EMPOWERMENT IN COMMUNITY

Surround yourself with support as you navigate life after your loss and rediscover personal strength. Through guided self-inquiry, shared experience, mindfulness, movement, and more, participants in the TAPS Women's Empowerment program gain tools to help them step out of mental loops and strengthen resilience within a supportive community. Learn more about the unique opportunities available through the Women's Empowerment program.

>> taps.org/empowerment

RUCKING THROUGH GRIEF

Gregory T. Jacobs ★ Surviving Father of Army SPC David M. Jacobs



Hoisting my REI pack onto my back, I feel every bit of the 42 pounds inside. The seams hold together, resilient against the strain. I once again say hello to David as I start my three-mile ruck at the cemetery where he is buried. He doesn't audibly return the gesture, but I know he is there with me. It is almost as if he winks at me each time, acknowledging, "Dad, I see you have my backpack on again, and I am glad you are getting use out of it."

I first heard about "rucking" — the action of walking with weight on your back — through Mike Rowe's podcast, and it inspired me. I bought some weights on Amazon and dug David's green REI backpack out of a Rubbermaid tub in the basement. I find great peace and tranquility in systematically doing functions that honor my son. Some are public, but I would venture to say that most are private.

David was in the Army and was killed in an auto accident in December 2020. I started rucking in November of 2024. I don't do it every day, but most days, I feel the urge to sling his pack over my shoulder and do what most don't. The Navy SEALs have a motto that "the only easy day was yesterday." I try not to stay

content with what I have already done, but strive to push myself to tackle something new and challenging.

MOTIVATION

Like most things in life, we need to find what motivates us to accomplish certain tasks. For example, I have no desire to climb Mt. Everest, nor do I think I have the fortitude or physical stamina at this stage. However, through baby steps, I have found that I can work on accomplishing feats — like rucking — that six months ago I never thought possible. My motivation for rucking is to honor David. I don't call attention to myself, but rather quietly drive to the cemetery, throw his old backpack over my shoulders, and move. I find that moving forward is the secret of life. Once we slow down and eventually stop, we stop growing and overcoming life's obstacles.

CHALLENGE

Life is fraught with challenges. We don't always choose to confront and push through them; sometimes we put on the brakes or go around them. My challenge





in rucking was working my way up to 42 pounds; it didn't happen overnight. My challenge is continuing to ruck with that weight while increasing time and distance, but challenges — especially in grief — aren't always physical.

Recently, I was communicating with a grieving dad in a group setting, and I stopped to ask if he would like to share about his deceased son. He looked at me with flooding tears in his eyes and quivering lips, unable to muster the words. I assured him that it was OK and that I wasn't uncomfortable with emotion or silence, but sometimes we must be patient so others can share.

Patience and listening with a supportive hand on his shoulder might be what this surviving dad needed in that moment — emphasizing the need for communicating

rather than just talking. I equate it to the sound barrier Chuck Yeager punched through in “Glamorous Glennis” on Oct. 14, 1947. You must punch through the challenges in life, or they will hold you back. Eventually, after a few minutes of choking back the emotion and tears, this dad looked at me and said, “What next?”

Suppose I glossed over what was perceived as the inability to communicate about his deceased son. In that case, he might not have been able to punch through that grief barrier — overcome his challenge — and express his fears, anxiety, and uncertainty about the future.

DO SOMETHING FOR YOU

A Rotary Club member for years, I lived my life by the motto: “Service Above Self.” However, there is a difference between selfishness and self-care. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines selfishness as “a concern for one’s own welfare or advantage at the expense or disregard of others: excessive interest in oneself.” In contrast, self-care is simply “care for oneself” — it’s essential to moving forward on our grief journey. Life is always going to call on us to do things for others, but we

must take care of ourselves before we can support someone else.

It is easy to read this article and think it is about rucking. It is not. Rucking is the method by which I cope with my grief journey. The underlying facet is that it is hard. Most days, I don’t want to do it. Sometimes, I struggle with the heavy burden. Nobody understands what I am shouldering; they think I’m OK — this applies to rucking and grief.

Recently, a retired Army lieutenant colonel asked to visit David’s grave with me. He was shocked at how I could walk over to David’s grave and communicate with him like he was standing there. Rucking at the cemetery gives me a chance to walk most days in a beautifully manicured, serene location with very little traffic, but it also allows me to overcome any ominous feeling I might have about going to the cemetery. It lets me put in the work daily while bringing normalcy to my grief journey.

Just as I found inspiration, motivation, challenge, and self-care in rucking, I hope you can find your own meaningful way to challenge yourself to do something you never thought possible while honoring your loved one. Along the way, know that you are loved and you are not alone.

TAPS MEN’S PROGRAM

The TAPS Men’s Program creates space for men to grieve in a way that feels authentic to them. Surrounded by other surviving men who truly understand the unique weight of military loss and free from any expectations, men form bonds and begin to heal.

>> taps.org/men

Your Lifetime

Rachel Hunsell ★ Program Manager, TAPS Outdoor Engagement
Surviving Sister of Marine Corps LCpl J. Kyle Price

As a child, a lifetime, I thought, was being “old” — gray hair, wrinkles, an always-growing family, and decades of stories, triumphs, and challenges. It was great-grandchildren at your feet, unfiltered conversations and collections of photos, knick-knacks, and recipes. A lifetime was old barns with generations of tools, totes of heirloom seeds, and changing technologies. A lifetime was holding hands into your 80s and 90s, arthritic, scarred, and firm in your commitment. A lifetime was always...more time. My brother, Kyle's, lifetime was just 19 years (100 days shy of his 20th birthday) — that's 7,025 days to learn, grow, struggle, succeed, play, explore, laugh, cry, argue, rest, and love.

I was 14 at the time of his death, and I remember all the adults who wept at the

lifetime stripped away by death — he was so young...just a kid...he had everything ahead of him. It took me years to comprehend the concept of a lifetime. To me, my brother was already an adult — a high school graduate who found love, joined the Marine Corps, and went off to war. He was a man, and not just the boy who held a key to our childhood memories and dreams.

Five siblings, all spread throughout the years, made for wild adventures and an array of lifetime dreams. The oldest, my sister, back then was mom's right hand in wrangling the kids and keeping the peace. Kyle, five years younger, was the instigator and mastermind of mischief who always had tricks up his sleeve and a way to make you smile. We lost the

next brother, born 18 months after Kyle, before I was even born to a rare birth defect; he was nearly 3 at the time. A spirited Rachel, 3 ½ years younger, next joined the fold. Our little brother, the most curious of us all — a true artist and philosopher — was born 2 ½ years later.

Like most rural Midwestern children, we spent our days outside collecting rocks, mosquito bites, and memories. Childhood was full of games and play, largely led by Kyle. He took us outside where we'd adventure in the woods, climb trees, build tunnels in the snow, and search for treasures. The amount of times my younger brother and I lost to Kyle in capture the flag solidified his future career in the Marine Corps in my mind. As the days of bike-riding and games in the yard began to fade, and Kyle spent more and



PHOTOS: RACHEL HUNSELL; PEXELS.COM/ANNIROENKAE

AND A LIFETIME OF YOUR LEGACY

more time with friends, I desperately wanted time to stop and speed up all at once. I dreamt of us as grown-ups, living our lives as neighbors with big families — “doing life,” but still together.

Like most big brothers, Kyle drove me absolutely crazy on a daily basis. One likely struggled to discern if we were mortal enemies or siblings, but I was so proud to be his little sister and proud of him: earning his Eagle Scout, umpiring softball and baseball games, and volunteering at church. He made people feel loved, even befriending the friendless kids. After an argument, he apologized first (even if he wasn't in the wrong) because connection, to him, meant more than being right. Reflecting upon his lifetime, I'm struck by the lifetime of legacy he left behind. On Oct. 5, 2025, he will be gone just as long as he lived, 7,025 days.

In those 19 years, our family's bond with Kyle has continued. We talk about him at every family gathering; consider things he might love (or loathe) today; and lead a foundation in his honor — raising money for veterans and students in our community. I've spent nearly nine of the last 19 years on the TAPS staff, honoring and remembering my brother by providing peer-based emotional support to my fellow survivors in incredible spaces and healing in nature.

The most profound moments have been encounters with people Kyle has impacted in this lifetime, whether or not they knew him. A friend and fellow Marine, my husband served alongside Kyle. The memories he shares are nearly always ones of laughter on the beach, honesty in conversation, and genuine connection — even in war. Old friends from our small hometown reflect on a willful, passionate youngster, always ready to lend a hand or crack a joke. Relatives remember his unwavering values and commitment to ensuring children in the family always had someone to play with and a reason to smile. Fellow survivors remark on the impact of his life, leading me to this work, where I can foster a place for them to heal.

There will be more days in the lifetime of my brother's legacy than days in his life for — a tearful reality, but motivation to live fully. My work at TAPS, serving others through healing in the outdoors, reflects both my personal ethos and my brother's legacy. Adventuring around the country with my family in America's wild spaces; facilitating meaningful retreats for my peers around the campfire and under the stars; and continuing to choose joy, connection, and growth each day — these are the ways I honor the lifetime my brother didn't get to experience.

But what is a lifetime, really? If we continue to speak their names, remember they existed, and truly live our own lives in gratitude, the legacy of those we've lost is woven into the fabric of many lifetimes.

Kyle's lifetime may have been just 7,025 days, but it was fully lived. The last 7,025 days may have been an entire lifetime without him, but he was always remembered. The next 7,025 days and beyond are full of endless possibilities, for if one person can leave such an impact in 7,025 days, anything is possible.



About the Author

Rachel is the TAPS Outdoor Programs manager, overseeing the development, implementation, and support of outdoor programming across the organization. As the surviving sibling of Marine LCpl J. Kyle Price, she knows the valleys and peaks of the grief journey, and she is passionate about connecting survivors to the healing power of nature.

HEAL IN NATURE

Honor your loved one while you reconnect with yourself and nature through TAPS Outdoor Programs. Join the community and find meaningful ways to stay engaged.

>> taps.org/outdoors

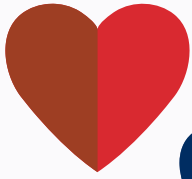
REDEFINING RELATIONSHIPS AND SUPPORT CIRCLES After Spouse or Partner Loss

Erin Leigh Nelson & Colleen E. Montague, LMFT

After the loss of your spouse or partner, you may be trying to find your place in an entirely new social landscape. You are walking through a complex and emotional time where your relationships are both a lifeline and a source of unexpected challenges. Grief touches every connection you have, creating a new and often disorienting terrain.

Relationships with friends and family that once felt natural may feel strained or awkward. As one recently widowed mom shared, “Friday nights were the nights my husband and I went out with other couples. Now, when those invitations come, I find myself feeling anxious about being there without him. Conversations don’t seem to flow like they once did.”





GRIEVING TOGETHER

When your spouse or partner dies, it impacts your relationship with friends and family. What were once natural connections may now require effort. Some find relationships strengthened because of the increased bond over your shared love for your partner, while others find them more difficult because of the uniqueness of each person's response to grief.

In this tender time, misunderstandings may arise more easily as everyone processes their loss differently. It's natural for each person to want their particular experience of loss to be seen and acknowledged. Others may be experiencing this loss as the death of their child, sibling, or a dear friend, and may be tempted to compare their pain to another's. Even when surrounded by those who care deeply for you, you might feel alone in your grief because of the uniqueness of each person's loss and the bond they shared with your partner.

FINDING YOUR "ALONGSIDERS"

You might find yourself surprised by who shows up and who steps back when grief enters your life. A close friend may suddenly fall away, while someone you don't know very well may step into your pain with exactly what you need. One dad who lost his wife shared, "My best friend had a hard time looking me in the eye, but my neighbor, who I hardly knew, came and checked on the kids and me almost every day."

The reshaping of relationships is part of grief. Some people may retreat, not because

your pain isn't real, but because it brings up an unhealed part of them. Others may try to fix what can't be fixed and offer hollow words like, "Everything happens for a reason," or "They're in a better place now." When you hear "brightsiding" messages, stay true to your grief process by responding with authenticity. If someone says, "You are so strong and are handling this so well," you can say, "Actually, I don't feel strong at all, especially today, and I'm learning that's part of grief." If someone says, "Time heals all wounds," you can respond, "I'm healing at my own pace as I learn to carry my love for him in a different way." Your tender heart needs to be true to itself during this time, and it may be uncomfortable for others, but grief by nature is just awkward sometimes.

Even the gentlest form of our American greeting, "How are you?" can feel like an impossible question to answer. The pain of your grief deserves to be honored and expressed in the way it is felt in each moment, not hidden away behind polite smiles and words. When your honest expression of grief is welcomed and met with acceptance, it supports your healing. Before responding, take a moment to check in with yourself. Are you emotionally prepared to share in this moment? Do you have the energy for an honest conversation? Or do you need to keep it simple? Is this someone you are comfortable being honest with?

One grieving parent discovered a strategy of asking the person what kind of answer they are seeking: "Do you want my quick answer, or the truth?" This simple question creates space for genuine connection. Consider developing some go-to responses that feel authentic to you: "I'm functioning, but sad," "Thank you for asking. It's hard, but we're doing OK," or "This moment is a tough one." Because your grief represents your love for your partner, it needs to be witnessed in all its forms.

Finding someone who is an "alongsider" is essential to your healing. These are the ones who can sit with you in the dark without rushing to turn on a light. They understand that there is nothing they can do or say to take your pain away, but their presence helps it feel more bearable. They don't try to fix your pain; they are there to hold it with you.



CREATE YOUR CIRCLE OF SUPPORT with those who give you the most strength. As you consider your alongsiders, ask yourself:

- ♥ Who can listen to and bear your darkest thoughts and deepest fears?
- ♥ Who knows how to jump in with practical help, like dishes and laundry?
- ♥ Who can speak your loved one's name and share in your love for them?
- ♥ Who can sit with you in silence, offering comfort with their presence?

You might even find yourself using brightsiding messages in harsh internal dialogue like, "I should be stronger," or "I need to manage this better." These thoughts can feel like an additional burden to your heavy heart. Try practicing self-compassion when those critical thoughts arise with a gentle healing technique. Place your hand over your heart and say to yourself, "It's understandable that I feel this way." As you exhale, imagine pushing away

unsupportive messages from yourself or others. You need care and kindness right now, even from yourself. Whether you are more introverted or extroverted, you will need a balance of alone time and supportive companionship. In some moments, you may crave solitude to journal, reflect, or accomplish tasks. Other times, you'll need the warmth of understanding from your alongsiders. You are learning to respond to the energy of your grief to identify what you need moment by moment.

LAYERING SUPPORT

Your grief needs will change with time, and so might your needs for support. Some friends or family members are good for the early days, and some will be your steady, long-term supporters. Over time, you may want to reach out to others who share a similar loss. Support groups and online communities can offer a space where you feel understood without explanation. Counselors can also offer a space where you learn to express the grief in your body and find long-term coping strategies to help you heal.

Take a deep breath. Let it out. Place your hand over your heart and notice your heartbeat. Your heart, though changed forever because of your loss, continues its rhythm forward as you carry your love alongside your pain. And remember, any heavy work becomes lighter when you hold it with others. Having a community, no matter how small, to hold your grief with you helps you move toward healing.



About the Authors

Erin Leigh Nelson is the founder and executive director of Jessica's House, a grief support center for children and families. Through the tragic losses of her husband, mother, and son, Erin has learned the need for grief support for children and teens. She is an advanced certified trauma practitioner through the National Institute of Trauma and Loss in Children and has supported grieving families for more than 20 years.

Colleen Montague is a licensed marriage and family therapist and director of community outreach for Jessica's House, supporting parents and their children after a death in their family. Together, they are the authors of When Grief Comes Home, available wherever books are sold.

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; BAKER PUBLISHING

TAPS PEER MENTORS

The TAPS Peer Mentor program is an opportunity to be paired with someone who can come alongside you as you walk through grief — they've been where you are, and they know the path. The program is also a way for survivors more than 18 months beyond their loss to be an "alongsider" for someone just beginning their grief journey. Learn more, request a Peer Mentor, or apply to become a Peer Mentor at taps.org/peermentors.

>> taps.org/peermentors

Positive Attributes

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

It has been said that children are keen observers but poor interpreters — meaning, they have a hard time distinguishing between behaviors they should mimic and those they should avoid. All adults in a child's life are models for how to behave, and children who have adults modeling positive attributes in their own lives are more likely to adopt these behaviors themselves as they grow into adulthood. Let's explore four positive attributes we can model that promote healthy growth and development in our children.

Facing Adversity With Resolve

Life will have adversity. No one knows this better than those of us who have experienced the painful reality of loss and grief. Children grieving the death of a family member or friend learn very early in life that there are different degrees of adversity, some more intense and life-altering than others. This is why it is important that we model how to face these challenges in life with a sense of resolve. This does not mean that we are perfect or hide our grief from our children. Facing adversity with resolve simply means that we keep going with determination even though our pathway is challenging to traverse. We can show our children that feelings are OK and expressing those feelings can be healthy. We can demonstrate how struggle and grief are to be expected when we experience loss, while at the same time modeling healthy approaches to facing hard times.

Adapting to Change With Hope

In the same way we model facing adversity with resolve, we can model how we adapt to all the changes loss brings to our lives

with some amount of hope. Hope is not just a feeling or a fleeting thought. Hope is a mindset and lifestyle that we can build and nurture. For example, facing adversity with resolve can produce a sense of hope in our lives. Another component of hope is the ability to trust yourself and the ability to trust others. We often focus attention on our failures and the failures of others, overlooking our strengths and the positive actions of others in our lives. Directing our attention to the good around and within us reminds us that we are capable and that others can be reliable.

Creating predictability and rituals; leaning into our ability to make choices for ourselves that friends and family validate; and believing that good things can happen in our lives, even amid the pain of loss, are all components of hope.

Succeeding With Grace and Failing With Dignity

Winning and losing are parts of life we experience very early. Playing games, participating in sports, or competing in or outside of school are often a child's first experiences of success and failure. Succeeding with grace means learning how to be humble, yet confident in our success. Failing with dignity is recognizing that our self-worth is not fully dependent on perfection and that we have room for personal growth. This balance can be hard to strike, particularly for children who have already suffered a major loss. We can model for our children what it looks like to face life's many challenges with a positive attitude. We can remind our children that we cannot always control our circumstances, but we can control our attitude in the midst of those circumstances.

We Can Model for Our Children

Accepting Responsibility for Your Choices

People who accept responsibility for their choices are often more self-reliant, better able to adapt to changing circumstances, and more in control of their response to life's difficulties. Our children look to us and the other adults in their lives to learn how to accept responsibility for their personal choices. When we, as adults, admit when we behaved or reacted inappropriately; point out how personal choices impact a particular situation; or accept responsibility for our own actions and reactions, we're modeling accepting responsibility for our choices.

Though we are not fully in control of our children's behavior, we do have a responsibility to be their "teachers" through modeling positive, healthy behaviors. Consider what attributes you would like to encourage in your children's lives — taking from this list and those not mentioned that may be priorities for you and your family — and begin implementing these in your own life.



About the Authors

Andy is dedicated to supporting children, teens, and families through grief, bereavement, and the general challenges of parenting and growing up. His commitment to healthy children and families shines through his work facilitating TAPS Youth Programs.



GRIEF SUPPORT FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY

The experts and volunteers on the TAPS Youth Programs team are dedicated to supporting your entire family. Whether through Good Grief Camps; support tailored for you, the parent or guardian of a grieving child; or family activities, you don't face parenting through grief alone at TAPS.

taps.org/youthprograms



LIVING A *Legacy* of Kindness

Wendy Araiza-Villalpando ★ Surviving Sister of Marine Corps Sgt Steven Araiza

Each day since losing my brother, Sgt Steven Araiza of the United States Marine Corps, on March 13, 2023, I have made it my mission to create an everlasting legacy of his life. I strive to honor him by embodying the same kindness he showed to everyone he met, whether they were lifelong friends or strangers.

Steven was a remarkable human being. He had a beautiful soul, and wherever he went, sunshine followed. I want to carry that same light, to be that energy for others as “his” energy. From a young age, he was disciplined and driven. He grew into an intelligent, assertive, confident, and responsible young man, full of life and love for his family. Music was his passion, and his smile — radiant and unforgettable — could light up any room.

I want my smile to reflect his: his character, his dedication, his hard work. I want it to be an extension of his light, shining for others in their moments of darkness.

This path of honoring him is transforming me in ways I never could have imagined. Through my grief, my soul has found purpose: to help others — those struggling with loss, mental health challenges, or the hardships faced by our military and their surviving families. By spreading the same positivity Steven gave so freely, I will continue to honor him while

growing into the person I am meant to be. His light has not faded because he is gone; it has only grown stronger within me, ready to be shared with those who need it most.

I also believe good people should be remembered, recognized, and immortalized. Their names should be spoken, their legacies preserved for future generations. Steven’s legacy must live on — not just in memory, but through action. It should stand for healing, prevention, and the preservation of life.

Every day, we are given choices. We can choose to be good human beings — to be kind, compassionate, and empathetic. Sometimes, all it takes is a kind word, a hug, or a smile to change someone’s day or even their entire outlook on life.

This legacy of kindness is for my brother. It is for all our fallen heroes, who risked and sacrificed their lives for the country and the families they loved. It is for every grieving military family.

Your light still shines. Your legacy lives on.

Good people should be remembered, recognized, and immortalized. Their names should be spoken, their legacies preserved for future generations.



HONORING FALLEN HEROES, SUPPORTING THEIR SURVIVORS

At TAPS, we honor and remember all fallen service members who bravely served our country. For a meaningful way to recognize your loved one and carry their legacy forward, consider the many ways you can contribute to fellow survivors through TAPS.

>> taps.org/support

COMMUNITY & CONNECTIONS



We know the needs of a grieving heart are not universal; that is why we offer a variety of online and in-person events. No matter how you connect with TAPS, you'll find the supportive community you seek.

UPCOMING EVENTS

TAPS events, like those listed on the following page, offer opportunities for healing and personal growth.

Be sure to check **TAPS.org/events** often; events are added throughout the year.

Call the 24/7 Helpline at **800-959-TAPS (8277)** to register.

>> TAPS.org/events



MANY WAYS TO CONNECT

TAPS CARE GROUPS

Experience the comfort of TAPS in your local community. Recurring meetings happen year-round across the country. Join a peer-led group near you for an opportunity to listen, learn, and share.

>> TAPS.org/caregroups

TAPS ONLINE GROUPS

Access TAPS peer support wherever you are. Groups are organized by relationship to the fallen, cause of death, and peer group. Attend one or multiple groups that fit your needs and your schedule.

>> TAPS.org/onlinegroups

TAPS TOGETHERS

Meet up with survivors in your local community for a one-day event hosted by a TAPS staff member or survivor, like you. Grow your community of support while sipping coffee or experiencing something new.

>> TAPS.org/tapstogether

IN-PERSON & ONLINE WORKSHOPS

Learn, grow, and heal through our in-person and online courses and workshops. Attend Peer Mentor training, engage in a Theatre Lab session, or pursue growth through the TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing® – all that and more are at your fingertips when you're ready.

>> TAPS.org/workshops

UPCOMING EVENTS

Connection, unique experiences, and opportunities to grow and heal await you at TAPS events. There is truly something for everyone at all points of the grief journey. Join us for one of these upcoming events.

Call our 24/7 Helpline at
800-959-TAPS (8277) to Register



SEMINARS

NATIONAL MILITARY SUICIDE LOSS SURVIVOR SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP

NOV. 14-16, 2025

Scottsdale, AZ

Open to Suicide-Loss Survivors

32ND ANNUAL NATIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP

MAY 21-25, 2026

Arlington, VA

RETREATS

YOUNG ADULTS: HOPE FOR THE HOLIDAYS

DEC. 10-14, 2025

Arlington, VA

TEXAS FAMILY CAMP

DEC. 4-7, 2025

San Antonio, TX

COLORADO FAMILY CAMP

JAN. 16-19, 2026

Estes Park, CO

SELF-FUNDED EVENT

ALASKA IDITAROD EXPERIENCE

MARCH 4-8, 2026

Anchorage, AK

7-NIGHT EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN CRUISE

OCT. 18-25, 2026

Rome, Italy

...AND YOU WILL *SMILE* AGAIN

Scott Pleasants, Air Force Veteran ★ Surviving Father of Navy PO2 Michael K. Pleasants

On Nov. 17, 2024, I was part of a group of TAPS surviving families who attended the teams4taps New York Jets Salute to Service game at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey.

The day was filled with anticipation. Our group was eager to see this special game and participate in the on-field NFL high-five tunnel experience. As we waited for the event to begin, I observed the TAPS

Family members interacting. I couldn't help but wonder about the circumstances that brought us all together — an opportunity to honor a family member, the loss of a loved one merged with military service, and embraced by a supportive community of peers and survivors.

We began to take photos, capturing many moments throughout the afternoon. We took photos of our arrival at the stadium;

the fan tailgate activity; the TAPS families getting to know each other; our group in the tunnel adjacent to the field; and we took photos of our group on the field participating in the high-five experience. I even captured a brief video of two F-18 fighter jets honoring our military service members with a stadium flyover. It appeared as though we had photographed varying aspects of this amazing event.

However, within the many pictures, there was one in particular that stood out from the others. It was a photo that I had not taken, but one that another TAPS survivor had taken for me. The picture captured me standing on the field prior to the players entering. In the background, there are military service members in uniform and

HAPPINESS AND SUPPORT
CAN REPRESENT PURPOSE AND
PROGRESS, PROMPTING THE IMAGES IN
OUR PHOTOGRAPHS TO BE TRUE TO LIFE...
AND YOU WILL SMILE AGAIN.



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; SCOTT PLEASANTS



an overflow of fans in the stands. When I looked closely at this photo, I noticed something that I hadn't seen in quite some time. It was the image of a father who was immersed in a moment of happiness, unknowingly with a smile on his face.

I lost my son, Michael, in May of 2021, and like many, I cried in disbelief and walked through many days of uncertainty. During those times, I could never have imagined myself in a moment of happiness and smiling again. However, this photo shows that there is hope to be found.

On this November afternoon, our group was surrounded by support directly and indirectly. TAPS is a phenomenal organization that creates memorable opportunities. With teams4taps and the steadfast support of the TAPS Men's Program, we can see how special moments are captured within one small photo. An inconspicuous expression of hope, a smile, may resonate as a positive shift within our journey of grief.

Happiness and support can represent purpose and progress, prompting the images in our photographs to be true to life...and you will smile again.



TAPS SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Find your smile again while honoring your fallen hero through incredible experiences with teams4taps and stars4taps. From player meet-and-greets and on-field experiences to concerts, set visits, movie premiers, and more, the Sports and Entertainment team creates meaningful, memorable moments for surviving families. Share your hero's connection to a favorite sport, team, or entertainer for a chance to honor them in an unforgettable way.

>> taps.org/entertainment



800-959-TAPS (8277) ★ TAPS.org

TAPS is the national nonprofit organization providing compassionate care and comprehensive resources to all those grieving a death in the military or veteran community.

>> taps.org/donate

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

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ALWAYS CONNECTED

Between magazine issues, monthly newsletters, and events, you can find and follow us on social media to engage with the TAPS community and access our most up-to-date information.



**SEARCH @TAPSORG OR TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS
TO JOIN OUR ONLINE COMMUNITY.**

FOR 24/7 CONNECTION AND SUPPORT, CALL OUR HELPLINE AT 800-959-TAPS (8277)