

For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died

TAPS®

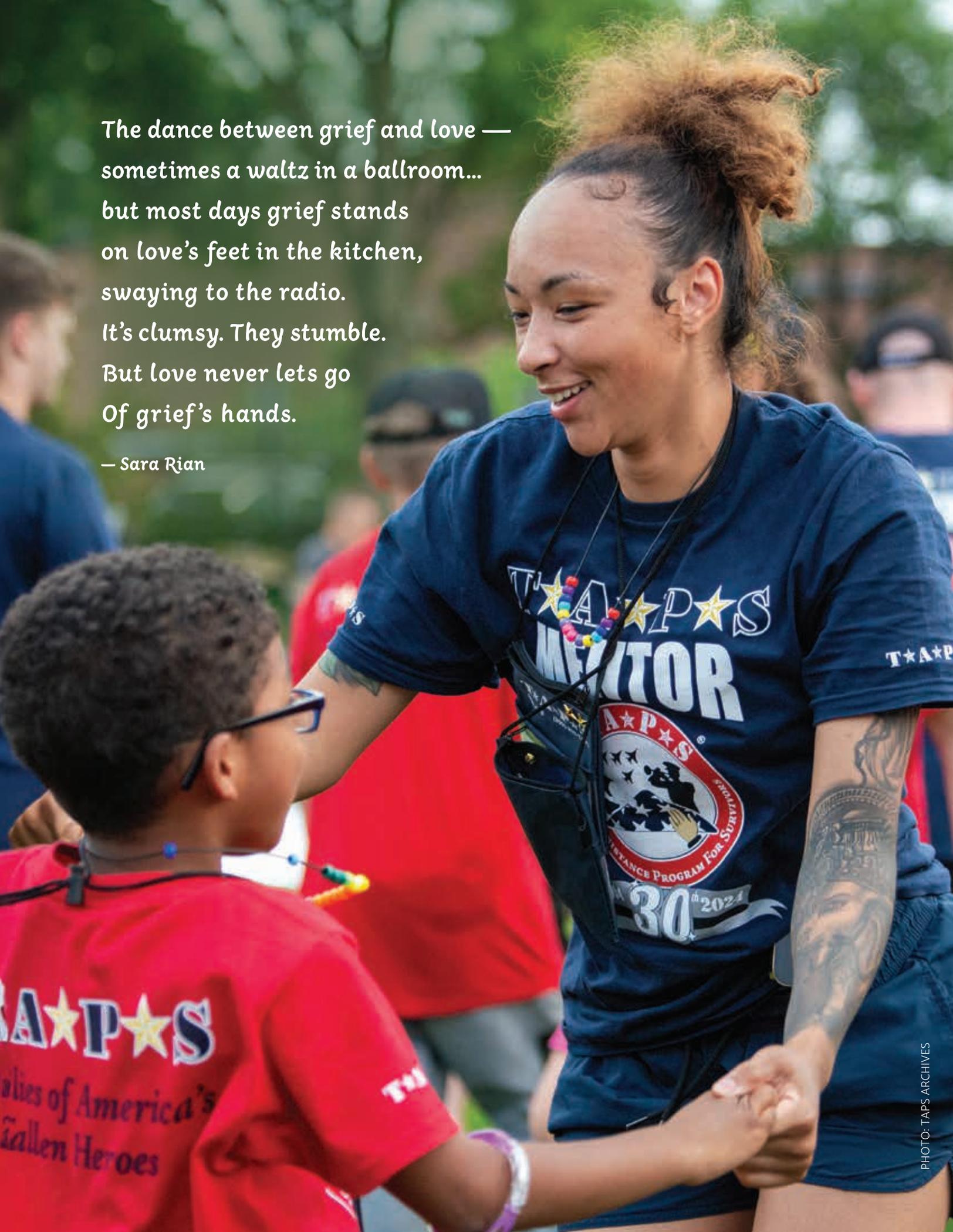
TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

SPRING 2026



The dance between grief and love —
sometimes a waltz in a ballroom...
but most days grief stands
on love's feet in the kitchen,
swaying to the radio.
It's clumsy. They stumble.
But love never lets go
Of grief's hands.

— Sara Rian





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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: Two young survivors share a moment and a smile between Good Grief Camp activities at the Southeast Regional Military Survivor Seminar.
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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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.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

7 DEAR TAPS

We want to hear from you

8 FISHING

A quiet moment between mother and son

10 GRIEF RUMINATION SPIRAL: PART 3

5 tips to calm your anxious mind

12 CURATING THE PERFECT COLLECTION

Finding light and connection through photography

14 THE STARS ALIGN FOR STARS4TAPS

The network of support behind TAPS' NCIS cameo

16 CRACKLED, NOT BROKEN

A Raku reflection on grief and grace

18 PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

A snapshot of TAPS support

20 RESILIENT LIKE FIREWEED

Fireweed inspires resilience, regrowth, and hope

22 THE CAPACITY TO LOVE REQUIRES THE NECESSITY TO MOURN

Honoring your grief and following it back to love

24 QUIET STRENGTH. RESOUNDING LOVE

Learning resilience from Mom in the wake of losing Dad

26 GROWING UP TAPS: DEBUNKING MYTHS ABOUT CHILDREN AND GRIEF

Uncover the truth about childhood grief

28 THANK YOU FOR GIVING BACK

Recognizing two dedicated members of our TAPS Family

29 SPRING CLEAN YOUR FINANCES

Your financial spring-cleaning checklist

30 IT WAS TIME

TAPS will be here whenever you're ready

33 UPCOMING EVENTS

We hope to see you this year

34 A WEEKEND TO REMEMBER

Join TAPS in Arlington, VA, this Memorial Day weekend

A YOUNG SURVIVOR BONDS WITH HIS MILITARY MENTOR AT A 2025 GOOD GRIEF CAMP. FIND UPCOMING GOOD GRIEF CAMPS ON PAGE 33. PHOTO: TAPS ARCHIVES



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WAN (ALICE)

CAMP MENTOR

WORLD ONE



To Our TAPS Family,

Welcome to our spring issue of the *TAPS Magazine*, our publication to share information and resources that we hope will bring a hug in the mail, a bit of comfort when you might need it most, and our love across the miles from our home to yours.

TAPS was created to give us a place to call home and feel understood. For more than 30 years, we've been a family of survivors, and those connections are still at the heart of everything we do. Here, we meet you where you are, and we honor the hero you lost. Surrounded by fellow survivors,

whether seated in a local Care Group, in a quiet conversation with a Peer Mentor, virtually through an Online Group chat, or at one of our national or regional seminars, you never have to wonder where you belong. You have a place here.

This magazine is an extension of the support and services TAPS provides, and, as you explore the pages that follow, we hope you feel connected, understood, and supported. Throughout the issue, you may see familiar programs and some that may be new to your grief journey. Know that our support is available to you as long as you need, and whenever the time is right for you.

Though we know it well, grief is a unique path for us all. That's why our programs and services are diverse: online and in-person, and catered to your needs. Explore our specialized programming for adults, young adults, children, and teens; attend our free, online educational opportunities through the TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing®; plan to join us at a TAPS Together or Care Group; and find compassionate peer support through our Helpline.

In the meantime, find a comfortable place to curl up with this issue of our magazine. Adopt coping tools from grief experts, and witness courage, resilience, and hope from fellow survivors, as they share their experiences to help light your path through grief.

As we look ahead to the warmer days of spring, many of you will once again be with us as we gather in our nation's capital for the TAPS National Military Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp over Memorial Day weekend. Affectionately called our "TAPS Family Reunion," we draw strength from one another, grow through laughter and tears, and make meaningful, lasting connections as we honor our heroes, their legacies, and the love that lives on.

Whether in your local community, at an event, or online, know that you have a TAPS Family that sends you love and stands ready with care, now and always.

With hope and love,

Bonnie Carroll, *TAPS President and Founder*



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES

DEAR TAPS®

One thing I wish
people understood
about grief is...



“GRATITUDE is an important tool. I was so fortunate to have my senior chief in my life. I am grateful for the opportunity to grow and become the best wife I could be for him during the good times and his greatest moments of need. It doesn’t cure the pain; it tempers it and makes room for perspective.”

Toni Campbell Dorvitt ★ Surviving Spouse of Retired Navy SCPO David Dorvitt

“GRIEF MANIFESTS ITSELF in all areas of your life: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Recognize it for what it is, and do your best to take care of yourself.”

Vicky Lewis ★ Surviving Mother of Air Force Veteran SSgt Joshua Lewis

“PLEASE ASK! Say my son, Isaac’s name. If you knew him, please share a memory. If you didn’t know him, please ask for a favorite memory. I might start crying while we talk about him, but those tears are not unwelcome! They are healing, and sweet, and real, and authentic, and I don’t care where we are, I will cry those tears. Grief demands a witness.”

Jerry Craven ★ Surviving Father of Isaac Craven

“GRIEF IS NOT LINEAR. It is all over the place. It never goes away. We just learn how to navigate around it. From great love comes great grief.”

Lisa Harrison Stretch ★ Surviving Spouse of Retired Army National Guard SGT Clay Stretch

“AFTER THE MEMORIAL, after the service, after the burial, after the scattering of the ashes, and throughout the first couple of years, we still need you. Too many people stop checking in. It’s the little things, like a phone call or visit, that make a big difference.”

Kristine Benevento ★ Surviving Spouse of Air Force Veteran Capt Michael Benevento

“IT CHANGES YOUR PERSONALITY, such that you are no longer the person you were prior to the death of your loved one. If only people would understand that, accept it, and offer you compassion for it.”

Bobbie Samme ★ Surviving Mother of Marine Corps LCpl Eric Palmisano

“IT CHANGED ME — my natural optimism and spontaneity no longer come naturally. I was such an extrovert before. Now there are times when I don’t even want the cat or dog near me. I miss my son so very much, and I miss some parts of my old self.”

Kelly Schaller Barnes ★ Surviving Mother of Army CW2 Shane Barnes

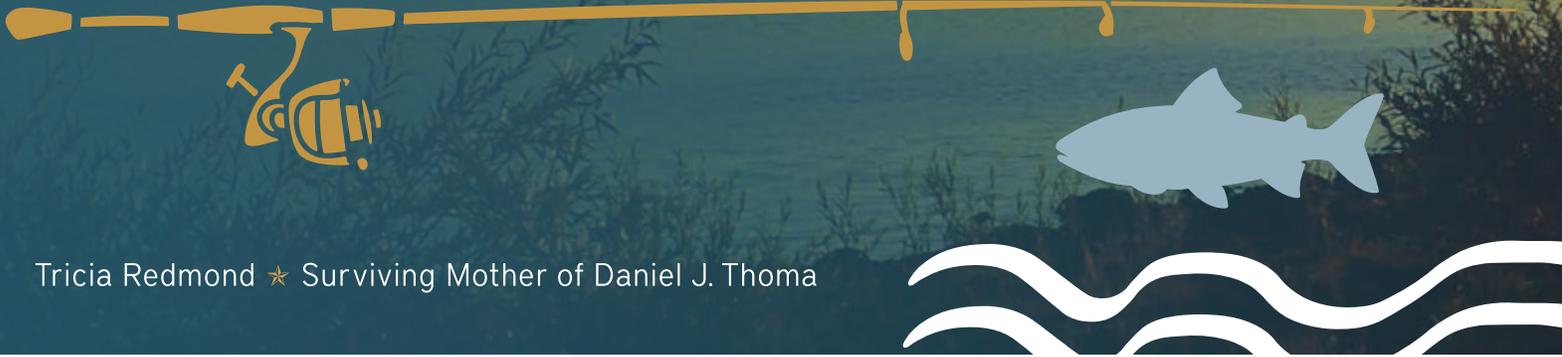


Write in with your own experience,
and — for more discussions like this one —
join the conversation on Facebook, @TAPSorg.

» TAPS.org/DearTAPS



FISHING



Tricia Redmond ★ Surviving Mother of Daniel J. Thoma

My son took me fishing the other day.

I met him on a crystal blue lakeside, where the sun danced across the water like scattered diamonds. The fresh air smelled of pine and damp moss. A small sandy beach stretched along the shore; its serenity broken only by the faint creak of a rickety old boat dock swaying with the gentle ripples.

It had been a while since I last saw my son, and my heart ached with the weight of time lost. Yet, there he was — his familiar silhouette radiant against the backdrop of the lake lined with pine trees. A smile tugged at his lips when I asked him what he wanted to do.

“Go fishing,” he said simply, holding up a tackle box. His eyes, the same warm hazel brown as ever, sparkled with seriousness

and a touch of green as he added, “Wanna come, Mom?”

“I don’t have a fishing license, baby,” I replied, fearful I was thwarting his plans.

A crooked grin flashed across his face as he tilted his head, just as he always had when he thought I was being a tad ridiculous. “You don’t need one here,” he said, his voice tinged with a confidence that felt otherworldly.

He picked up the rods, and we began the slow walk to the water. His steps, once so quick, adjusted effortlessly to match my hesitant pace. Sunlight penetrated through towering pine trees, painting speckled golden patterns on the ground, while a soft, warm breeze tousled his thick brown hair. The cadenced crunch of our footsteps on grass filled the air as I glanced at the dock and an old rowboat anchored nearby. My face lit up. “Can we take that out?” I exclaimed, my voice bursting with excitement.

He nodded, and we climbed into the rowboat, its surface seasoned with scars of countless voyages. “I’ll row,” I insisted, gripping the worn oars, eager to ease his burden.

He shook his head gently, his gaze soft but determined. “No, Mom,” he said, his voice as steady as the lake around us. “You’re tired. You need to rest.” Without waiting for my usual protest, he removed the oars from my grasp and began rowing us out toward the middle of the lake.

The boat rocked gently beneath us as I fumbled with the fishing rod, chuckling at my own ineptitude. “I don’t know what to do now,” I admitted with a sheepish grin.

His face — a mixture of love and exaggerated disbelief — made my smile widen. “You take the bobber, Mom,” he teased, demonstrating with exaggerated patience, “and drop it in the water — like this.” He placed the bobber in the water with deliberate precision.

“The sun soaked his face in soft light. ‘You needed this. God knows you needed this.’ And with gentleness, he leaned forward and kissed my forehead, his touch warm and **FILLED WITH LOVE.**”



As he cast his gaze toward the shoreline, a flicker of something I couldn't quite place crossed his face. Apprehension? Caution? It disturbed me. "Danny, are you going to be in trouble for this?" I asked hesitantly, my voice trembling.

"No, Mom," he murmured, leaning forward as the sun soaked his face in soft light. "You needed this. God knows you needed this." And with gentleness, he leaned forward and kissed my forehead, his touch warm and filled with love.

And then I woke up — bolting upright, gasping for air. "Danny!" I screamed, the name ripping from my throat as I frantically looked around. The room was dark, and my blanket lay tangled around me like a trap. Danny's flannel shirt, the one I clung to every night, was still beside me, worn and faded from my desperate grip. My chest heaved as I tried to catch my breath.

Reality crashed over me with an unforgiving weight: My son was dead. He had been gone for over a month now. The raw, hollow ache of his absence grew fresh in my chest, threatening to consume me all over again.

But as the silence of the room enveloped me, I clung to the certainty that comforted me, even in my grief. As sure as I knew I had been his mom for 24 years, I knew he had just taken me fishing.

"I clung to the certainty that comforted me, even in my grief. As sure as I knew I had been his mom for 24 years, I knew he had **JUST TAKEN ME FISHING.**"



Find Healing in Nature
» TAPS.org/Outdoors



GRIEF RUMINATION SPIRAL

Heather Stang, M.A., C-IAYT ★ TAPS Advisory Board

In part two of the Grief Rumination Spiral series, *Helpful vs. Harmful Thoughts*, we explored the kinds of thoughts that help grief move and the kinds that tend to keep us stuck. If you've begun to notice your own patterns, you're already doing the most important part: bringing awareness to what's happening inside you. Now, let's talk about what to do with that awareness.

Working with grief rumination isn't about making your thoughts disappear. It's about shifting your relationship to them — creating just enough space that they don't drag you under. Thankfully, a growing body of research points to several tools that can help.

1. MINDFUL AWARENESS

Grief rumination thrives when our thoughts run unchecked. Mindful awareness is the skill of noticing a thought as a thought — not a fact, not a command, not a whole story. Studies show that simply being aware of a rumination pattern begins to soften it. Even naming it — "this is a loop" — can start to loosen its grip.

Try this: When you catch yourself in a loop, pause. Label the thought gently. You might even say to yourself, "That's a rumination." Then, return to something steady — your breath, your body, or the feeling of your feet on the ground.

2. GENTLE COGNITIVE SHIFTING

Cognitive shifting isn't about forcing yourself to think positively. It's about nudging a painful thought in a more compassionate direction. Research shows that even subtle shifts can reduce emotional distress.

For example:

- "It's all my fault" becomes "I wish I had known more. I was doing my best."
- "Nothing good can happen now" becomes "Right now is hard. I don't know what's ahead."

The point isn't to pretend everything is OK. It's to practice saying something slightly softer and seeing what opens up.

3. BEHAVIORAL ACTIVATION

When you're stuck in rumination, everything can feel foggy or paralyzed. Behavioral activation means choosing a meaningful action, even a small one, to interrupt that fog. Maarten Eisma's work on prolonged grief disorder found that structured activities, like walking with a friend or completing a task, can reduce both depressive and grief-related rumination. It's not avoidance, it's engagement — a moment of presence.

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES



PART 3:

5 TIPS TO CALM YOUR ANXIOUS MIND

This is the third article in a four-part series, "Grief Rumination Spiral," originally published on HeatherStang.com in May 2025. Parts one and two appeared in the 2025 fall and winter issues of TAPS Magazine. Part four will be published in the upcoming summer 2026 issue.

Ask yourself: "What's one small thing I can do today that connects me to life?"

4. SELF-COMPASSION

People who speak to themselves with kindness during grief are less likely to spiral into rumination. Dr. Kristin Neff's work on self-compassion overlaps deeply with grief studies for this reason. Instead of shaming yourself for having painful thoughts, try offering yourself the same care you'd give a grieving friend.

Remind yourself: "This is hard, and I'm doing the best I can."

5. ACCEPTANCE WITHOUT SUPPRESSION

Trying to suppress rumination can backfire. What helps is acknowledging the thought's presence without needing to act on it.

Acceptance says: "This thought is here, but I don't have to follow it." Over time, this practice makes space for more than just pain — it makes space for breath, choice, and even moments of relief.

These tools begin to create small spaces inside the spiral. These aren't cures for grief. But they are practices that help us stay present, soften the edges, and reclaim a little steadiness — even in the middle of heartbreak. It's not about fixing your grief — it's about softening how tightly it holds you.



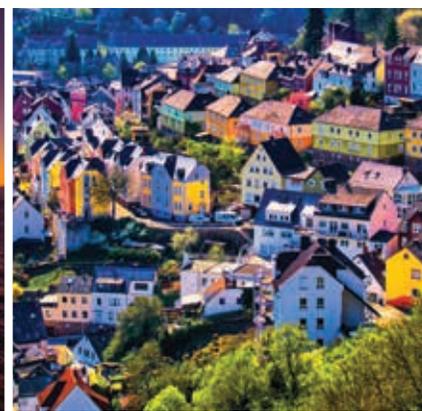
About the Author

Heather Stang, M.A., 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.



Surround yourself with the support of TAPS Care Groups.

» TAPS.org/CareGroups



Curating the Perfect

When my son, SSG Adam J. Henrickson, died by suicide in 2020, he left behind dozens of beautiful, well-crafted photographs that he took in Europe — majestic Norwegian fjords, quiet German countrysides, scenic shots of tourists traveling the Venice canals, and perfectly framed photos of autos built in every country. His first love was cars, after all, they say you photograph what you love.

Adam was a mechanic in the U.S. Army and in his personal life. He was stationed at the Baumholder base in Germany when he died. It had been his dream to go to Germany during his time in the Army, and he reenlisted to do just that. He wanted to race down the Audubon, work on German cars, and travel to other countries — putting stamps in his passport book at a rapid rate.

While in Europe, he picked up photography, purchasing a Sony A6000 camera, a tripod, lenses, and some accessories to begin mastering the craft. He took three-point shots, framed in the rule of thirds, of absolutely amazing destinations, like Lofoten, Norway, a coveted tourist destination known for its beauty and for its northern lights display, which my son desperately wanted to see and capture. He didn't get that chance.

Adam took his life in a wooded park near the gates of his base on Suicide Awareness Day, Sept. 10. Because he was in Germany when he died, it took three months to get most of his belongings back to the States, where I lived in Colorado. But eventually I received his computer, and that's where I found his photographs — some edited, some raw,

all gorgeous in composition, perspective, lighting, and style.

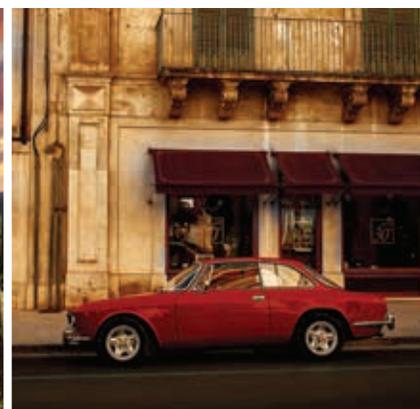
I had some of his photos made into stickers that I gave out in my grief groups or to my friends and family, allowing others to carry a piece of Adam's legacy through the world in a wonderful way. I had one of his Norway photos of a red house near a bridge at sunset made into a triptych canvas collection that I hung right above the fireplace in my townhouse. I turned a photograph he took of a building with skeletons ringing a bell painted on its side into a paint-by-number, which I then painted and hung in my home.

I wanted to show Adam's work to the public somehow, but didn't think that would ever be possible. It wasn't until nearly five years after he died that I realized we had a

PHOTOS: AVA HENRICKSON & ARMY SSG ADAM J. HENRICKSON

He lived; he loved; and he was here.





Collection

Ava Henrickson ★ Surviving Mother of Army SSG Adam J. Henrickson

similar eye — in the way we photographed and what we each thought was interesting. I had recently begun showing some of my art and photography at a local gallery in Colorado. I asked the gallery manager if there was a way to do a dual art exhibit featuring my work and my son's. After some consideration, my first art exhibit was born.

“Echoes of Earth: A Mother and Son's Parallel Perspectives” contained 21 images, most matching in perspective, subject, or composition, and a couple of photos that don't match up, but showcase some of our best work. It was on display on the community walls at the Lakewood Arts Council Gallery in Colorado for all of May 2025.

Curating this exhibit was a labor of love. I first looked through Adam's

photos, then my own, trying to find some that were similar and could hang side-by-side in the exhibit. What I found were several photos so similar, it was breathtaking.

The exhibit was also a family affair. I asked my family if they would pitch in for the costs of printing and framing the pieces. My sisters, daughter, mother, and nephew all immediately stepped up and offered help. And we all agreed that any proceeds from the sale of the artwork would go to a cause related to suicide prevention or to a local grief group that helps suicide survivors.

Opening night was a grand evening, with dozens of my supporters showing up to check out the exhibit, support me, and honor Adam's memory. We cried, we

laughed, and we talked all about Adam's travels that night.

The exhibit captured Adam's spirit and was truly an example of echoes — of his footprints here on earth. He lived; he loved; and he was here. These photographs are proof.



Discover community, your inner strength, and your creativity through our Women's Empowerment program.

»» TAPS.org/Empowerment

These photographs are proof.



THE STARS ALIGN FOR STARS4TAPS

TAPS' Network
of Support
at Paramount
and CBS

CBS ORIGINAL
NCIS
TUESDAYS
OF HONOR

CBS | *STREAMING ON*
Paramount+





Everyone at TAPS carries a story — one of love, and of loss — that lives on each time we share it, each time we say their names. In the ongoing Stars4TAPS story, 2025 will forever be a stand-out chapter, one that came together during a heartfelt TAPS cameo on the NCIS holiday episode, “Heaven and Nature,” which aired on Dec. 16, 2025.

But, like most memories and midseason finales, though, the story goes back further than that.

Stars4TAPS, a part of TAPS Sports and Entertainment, launched in 2017 to connect the TAPS community with titles and entertainers from film, television, stage, and song that hold a special connection to the heroes we lost. In the last 12 years, the Sports and Entertainment team has partnered with members of these two industries to create moments of connection, recognition, and joy for surviving families.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

In the early days, Stars4TAPS welcomed survivors to Los Angeles for immersive experiences at theme parks and set visits. It was on one of these visits to the *SEAL Team* set that TAPS connected with Toni Trucks. “From that very first introduction to TAPS, I saw, firsthand, their commitment to supporting all survivors, all the time,”

Trucks shared. “I knew this was an organization I wanted to be connected to.” Known for her role on the series and for her advocacy through the Paramount Veterans Network, Trucks helped strengthen TAPS’ relationship with Paramount and CBS. Our shared commitment to families of the fallen deepened that bond, and today, Trucks proudly serves on the TAPS Honorary Board.

As relationships with Paramount and CBS grew and our mission was shared, new, exciting opportunities opened up for the TAPS Family. The set visits continued, and, moved by our stories, new supporters joined us along the way. Over the years, our families have also attended movie and television screenings and enjoyed a Paramount Pictures studio tour. During the pandemic, surviving children enjoyed a virtual drawing session with *SpongeBob Squarepants* animators. TAPS Young Adults and surviving families have also gone behind the scenes at *CBS Evening News* and *CBS Mornings*, offering rare, firsthand glimpses into the stories that shape our national conversations — giving names and faces to survivors and the fallen.

IT WAS AN HONOR

Last year, TAPS received an exciting invitation from the Paramount Veterans Network that resulted in TAPS being one

of two charities chosen to participate in the fall 2025 Tuesdays of Honor campaign presented by CBS, *NCIS*, and Lovesac in partnership with VIZIO. The campaign was a way to bring true stories of service and sacrifice to a national audience, and over the course of five weeks, five TAPS families told their stories of love, loss, and legacy.

The chance to bring the stories of military service members, veterans, fallen heroes, and their families to living rooms around the country during the all-*NCIS* primetime lineup was not only a chance to share what TAPS does, but also the impactful stories at the heart of our mission.

THE POWER OF CONNECTION

Meanwhile, *NCIS* Executive Producer and Writer Scott Williams was working on the show’s midseason finale. Rather than create a fictional charity for the storyline, he recalled a TAPS connection he’d made years ago on a set visit. He reached out with a simple yet powerful question: Was TAPS willing to be featured in the episode?

If you caught the episode — at home or at one of the many watch parties nationwide — you already know the answer was yes.

Despite additional approvals and coordination, every effort was made to create a moment that felt authentic and meaningful, not only to the survivors whose heroes were represented through TAPS photo buttons, but to the many survivors watching the episode on screen. The easily recognizable TAPS shirts, photo buttons, and paddle fans sparked pride and connection throughout the TAPS Family.

For this on-camera moment and the many people behind the scenes who, over the years, have consistently created magical moments with care for our families — for those who pause to listen to a hero’s story and witness a survivor’s grief — Stars4TAPS is deeply grateful.

With the ongoing support of partners, like Paramount, CBS, and *NCIS*, we will continue to reach for the stars — creating opportunities for the TAPS Family to be seen, heard, and honored as they share their powerful stories.

CRACKLED,

A RAKU REFLECTION ON GRIEF AND GRACE



On a recent trip to the Smoky Mountains, my wife and I found ourselves, once again, at one of our favorite artisan spots — Alewine Pottery, quietly nestled among the pines and whispering winds of Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Over the years, I’ve grown fond of their artfully crafted mugs, each one a small masterpiece that somehow makes a morning cup of coffee feel like a ritual.

But this visit was different. This time, they were offering something new — an interactive exhibit in Raku pottery, a traditional Japanese firing method unlike anything I’d seen before. I signed up without hesitation, unaware of just how deeply this experience would stir my spirit.

THE ART OF FIRE

Raku is not your everyday pottery. The process begins like most: A formed and glazed pot, carefully prepared, awaits its final transformation. But, instead of a slow, even bake, the pot is placed into a red-hot kiln reaching nearly 1,900 degrees. Then — at its peak temperature — it is abruptly pulled into the open air.

That rapid thermal shock causes the glaze to crackle unpredictably and beautifully.

The red-hot pot is then placed into a metal bin filled with combustible material — in

**I AM NOT WHO
I WAS BEFORE.**

**BUT I AM NOT
BROKEN. I AM
CRACKLED — AND
BEAUTIFULLY SO.**

NOT BROKEN

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

our case, cedar chips and old newspapers, which causes flames to erupt instantly, licking around the vessel before a lid is sealed tightly over the container. Starved of oxygen, the fire devours everything inside, and the smoke infuses the pottery with deep blacks and rich, earthy hues.

Finally, once the piece has cooled, it's scrubbed with steel wool or a Brillo pad, slowly revealing what the fire has made.

PAINTING WITH MEANING

Before the kiln, I was handed a spun and pre-glazed pot — a blank canvas. I was only given two colors: cobalt, which appeared pink but would turn blue in the fire, and copper, which started as a pale bluish tint but would later reveal warm, metallic tones.

I thought carefully about what to paint. I chose three simple, yet profoundly meaningful symbols: a gold star, cross, and D.J. — my son's initials.

Every brushstroke was deliberate. I tried to keep my lines straight, appeasing the tidy, orderly part of my mind that still longs for control. Yet I knew, deep down, that the fire would change everything.

And it did.

INTO THE FIRE

As the potter reached into the kiln with metal tongs and lifted my glowing, molten pot, a wave of anxiety washed over me. Had I made a mistake in my design? Would the pot survive the shock of the fire? Would the lines I painted remain clear — or melt into chaos?

Flames erupted around it as it was placed into the cedar chips. Newspapers were

added, and the entire piece disappeared under smoke and fire. Then came the sealed bucket, snuffing out the oxygen, leaving my pot in darkness to smolder.

When the pot was finally removed and cleaned, I stood in silence as the soot was scrubbed away, revealing the unexpected beauty that fire created. And in that moment, I wept.

I cried not for the pot — but for the journey it mirrored.

BEFORE AND AFTER

On Dec. 23, 2020, my son, David, was killed in an auto accident just outside Fort Carson, Colorado. Since that day, my life has been irrevocably split into two parts: before David died and after David died.

Before, I lived like that unfired pot — untested, polished, with straight lines and a false sense of permanence. I subscribed, unknowingly, to the easy notion that “ignorance is bliss.” Life made sense. My lines were straight. My hands were steady.

After, it was as if the kiln doors flung open and I was thrust into the fire. My sails were shredded. My compass, lost. The life I knew was covered in soot and ash, and everything felt fractured and unrecognizable. The lines of my identity blurred. The colors of hope ran together.

But something began to change — slowly, almost imperceptibly.

BECOMING SOMETHING NEW

It started with community. I began to open my life to others on similar grief journeys. I allowed space for vulnerability, for

therapy, for sacred companionship. And just like the pot emerging from fire and soot, I began to see a new kind of beauty forming — not in spite of the cracks, but because of them.

Like Raku pottery, I am now a vessel that holds truth and emotion without trying to hide the imperfections. The glaze of my life is crackled. Some lines are crooked. The colors have shifted. But, the result is something wholly unique — distinguished by fire, and resilient through grace.

This is not a story of brokenness and repair. It's a story of transformation.

THE ROAD AROUND THE MOUNTAIN

As we left Alewine Pottery that day, the road gently curved around the mountain, like a slow-turning potter's wheel. I stared out the window in quiet reflection. I came to make pottery, but what I received was a glimpse of the man I am becoming — shaped not only by loss, but by love, fire, and the courage to keep turning on the wheel.

I am not who I was before. But I am not broken. I am crackled — and beautifully so.

For more content from Gregory, listen to his podcast, [Turning Grief Into Growth: The Journey of Transformation](#).



Find community through shared experience.

» TAPS.org/TAPSTogether



 TAPS.org/Programs-Services

For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died



TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES



TAPS 24/7 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

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 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

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.

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/CATLANE

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.



Resilient Like Fireweed

Jennifer Ching ★ Surviving Spouse of Air Force MSgt Temujin Ching

In Alaska, fireweed is a familiar sight in summertime. With highways and roads lined with a never-ending green of vegetation, its bursts of beautiful hues of pink, magenta, purple, and the occasional rare white blossoms are a welcome contrast. It's often used as a measurement of time in Alaska. The flowers bloom from bottom to top, and when the blossoms at the top are starting to seed, it signals summer is ending and winter is near. Fireweed is also one of the first plants to dot the landscape after fire devastates an area, bringing back life to the scorched earth. Its deep roots protect it from being completely destroyed. As a result, fireweed is often a symbol for resilience, hope, and regrowth. It represents the ability to recover and flourish after devastation.

I moved to Alaska in February 2008 after accepting a promotion with my then-

employer. I felt stagnant in my life and craved an adventure. I had never been to Alaska before and didn't know anyone. I remember getting into the rental car at the airport. It was negative 20 degrees. As I waited for the car to slowly warm up, I cried uncontrollably. I was alone in a strange new place. It was cold and dark — really cold and dark. I wondered if I had made the biggest mistake of my life. The next day, when I showed up for my new job, one of the first people I met later became my husband of nearly 15 years.

I lost my husband, MSgt Temujin Ching, to suicide on Jan. 3, 2024. He had over 20 years of military service and was headed toward retirement. During his career, he held various positions in the Air Force, Air Force Reserve, and the Alaska Air National Guard, but he was proudest of

his time with the 210th Rescue Squadron as a special mission aviator. He loved the mission and enjoyed taking in the remoteness of Alaska from the back of a Pave Hawk helicopter. He executed many rescue missions and was awarded numerous saves. His work gave him a sense of purpose and pride. It helped him fight his dark thoughts for as long as he could. He truly embodied the motto: "That others may live."

Resilient — I heard that word countless times after my husband's passing. It was offered as a word of comfort, meant to remind me of my strength during the worst moments of my life. I struggled to believe it. I often thought, "I'm not resilient. I just have no other choice." I had three wonderful children who just lost their father. They needed their mother to be strong, now more than ever.

PHOTOS: JENNIFER CHING; ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/CHRISTIANNAFZGER



babies were born and raised, and where I lost my husband. For years, I wanted a tattoo, but Temujin hated tattoos. Out of respect for him, I never got one. So in a moment of defiance, thoughts of “You should have stuck around...you can’t stop me now,” ran through my mind as I sat in the chair at the tattoo shop.



I decided on fireweed growing from the word “resilient” on my left forearm. It’s my daily reminder that beauty and life can resurface after devastation, that I chose to endure and persevere despite it all.

I couldn’t let the burn of grief consume me. I had to find the fortitude to keep going, to keep showing up for them and myself.

After Temujin’s celebration of life, I wanted something personal and permanent to honor my time in Alaska — the life I built there, where I fell in love, where I married, where my three

As survivors, we find many ways to remember our loved ones. We wear bracelets engraved with their names. We have plaques hanging up with their photographs. Medals, helmets, flags, and other tokens of their military service sit on our mantels and bookshelves. Some of us even get tattoos to memorialize them. We eat meals at their favorite restaurants on their birthdays. We post pictures and

memories on social media. We share stories of them at the dinner table. All of these things we do to remember them are crucial for healing. We keep their names spoken and their memories alive in their absence.

Still, as survivors, we can become so focused on honoring those we lost that we forget to honor ourselves. A lot of our identity is ripped from us when we lose a loved one, especially a spouse. Part of resilience is allowing time to heal, but for us to truly heal, we need to learn how to grow again. Fireweed reminds us of nature’s remarkable ability to regenerate after devastation — to not just survive, but find a way to thrive after devastation.

May we, as survivors, be as resilient as fireweed. May we, as survivors, take root as deeply. May we find a way to bloom again.



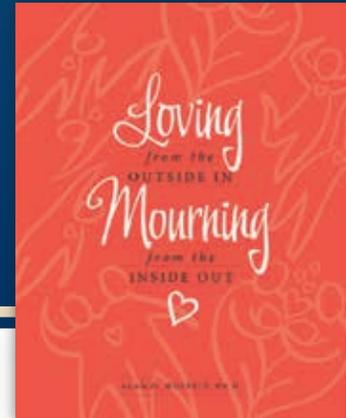
Access suicide-loss support through TAPS.

» TAPS.org/Suicide



THE CAPACITY TO LOVE REQUIRES THE NECESSITY TO MOURN

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



“All you need is love,” famously sang the Beatles. I couldn’t agree more. We come into the world yearning to give and receive love. Love is the one human experience that invites us to feel beautifully connected and forces us to acknowledge that meaning and purpose are anchored not in isolation and aloneness, but in union and togetherness.

What higher purpose is there in life but to give and receive love? Love is the essence of a life of abundance and joy. No matter what life brings your way, love is our highest goal, our most passionate quest. Yes, we have a tremendous need for love that captures our hearts and nourishes our spirits. In fact, our capacity to give and receive love is what ultimately defines us. Nothing we have “accomplished” in our lifetimes matters as much as the way we have loved one another.

Yet, love inevitably leads to grief. You see, love and grief are two sides of the same precious coin. One does not — and cannot — exist without the other. They are the yin and yang of our lives. People sometimes say that grief is the price we pay for the joy of having loved. This also means, of course, that grief is not a universal experience. Grief is predicated on our capacity to give and receive love. Some people choose not to love and so never grieve. If we allow ourselves the grace that comes with love, however, we must allow ourselves the grace that is required to mourn.

The experience of grief is only felt when someone of great value, purpose, and meaning has been part of your life. To mourn your loss is required if you are to befriend the love you have been granted.

To honor your grief is not self-destructive or harmful; it is life-sustaining and life-giving, and it ultimately leads you back to love again. In this way, love is both the cause and the antidote.

Yes, it is a given that there is no love without loss. Likewise, there is no integration of loss without the experience of mourning. To deny the significance of mourning would be to believe there is something wrong with loving. Just as our greatest gift is our capacity to give and receive love, it is a great gift that we can openly mourn our life losses.

It is important to understand that grief and mourning are not the same thing, however. Grief is the constellation of thoughts and feelings we have when someone we love dies. We can think of it as the container. It holds our thoughts, feelings, and images of our experience when someone we love dies. In other words, grief is the internal meaning given to the experience of loss. Mourning is when we take the grief we have on the inside and express it outside of ourselves.

Making the choice to not just grieve, but authentically mourn, provides us the courage to live through the pain of loss and be transformed by it. How ironic that to ultimately go on to live well and love well, we must allow ourselves to mourn well. Somewhere in the collision between the heart — which searches for permanency and connection — and the brain — which acknowledges separation and loss, there is a need for all of us to authentically mourn. You have loved from the outside in, and now you must learn to mourn from the inside out.



Subscribe to **Daily Reflections** from TAPS to receive comforting emails and encouraging words from Dr. Wolfelt.



About the Author

Longtime TAPS supporter Dr. Alan Wolfelt serves as the 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 *Loving From the Outside In Mourning From the Inside Out*, from which this article is excerpted. Visit CenterForLoss.com to learn more about grief and order Dr. Wolfelt’s books.

☹☹ Every time we make the decision to love someone, we open ourselves to great suffering, because those we most love cause us not only great joy but great pain. The greatest pain comes from leaving...the pain of the leaving can tear us apart. Still, if we want to avoid the suffering of leaving, we will never experience the joy of loving. And love is stronger than fear, life stronger than death, hope stronger than despair. We have to trust that the risk of loving is always worth taking. ☹☹ – Henri Nouwen



QUIET STRENGTH RESOUNDING *Love*

Alex Baxter ★ Surviving Son of Air Force Veteran Sgt James Baxter



In my life, one person stands out above all others, and that person is my mother. No matter what life threw her way, she always found a way to keep going, remaining steady, hopeful, and strong — consistently demonstrating grace under pressure and seeing the light, even in the darkest of times. No matter how busy or stressed, she never missed a chance to remind us of the importance of family and creating lasting memories together.

Her strength was tested in 2010 when my father became seriously ill and was no longer able to be involved in the way he once was. Our family dynamic changed drastically, and the emotional weight and financial responsibilities fell almost entirely on my mother's shoulders. Overnight, she became both mother and father — becoming the head of the household while still nurturing and supporting all three of her children. She kept our home functioning, often sacrificing her own dreams and personal interests in the process.

In 2012, my father passed away. The loss was devastating for all of us, especially her. Despite her pain, she continued to put our needs first while also seeking the support and healing she needed. Over time, she found peace, and in doing so, she modeled for us what true resilience and perseverance look like.

To support us financially, my mother worked grueling third shifts for many years. While most people rested peacefully at night, she clocked in for overnight work, giving her all even when running on empty. Her ability to wake up each day, commute, and work long hours without complaint was nothing short of remarkable. She worked at an airport two hours away from our home, meaning she spent nearly four hours a day just commuting — on top of working eight to 10 hours overnight. Yet, even on her most exhausted days, she made sure we had what we needed — not for recognition, but love. Watching her handle her intense routine personified discipline and selflessness. She taught me that working hard for the people you love isn't just a responsibility; it's a reflection of deep commitment.

Despite her demanding schedule, she always found time to create meaningful, joyful moments for us. She had a gift for turning routine into celebration, for making us feel loved and valued no matter how busy or tired she was, and she never allowed her responsibilities to overshadow her desire to connect with us and build traditions. Whether it was preparing a special meal, organizing a weekend outing, or simply sitting down with us to play a game or tell stories, she

made everyday moments feel significant. These moments were a foundation of love and support in our family, even during chaotic or painful periods. She often reminded us: "Memories are the treasures that keep families connected, especially during difficult times." That message stayed with me. Because of her, I now deeply understand the importance of being present, of carving out time for loved ones, and of cherishing the seemingly small moments that ultimately shape our lives.

Every challenge my mother faced, she met with quiet strength, humility, and an unshakable sense of purpose. Her resilience through personal loss, her relentless work ethic, and her deep commitment to our family made her the most influential person in my life. She taught me that real character is built not in easy times, but in how one responds to hardship — with courage, compassion, and the determination to keep moving forward. From long overnight shifts to heartfelt family traditions, from facing grief with grace to showing up for us day after day, she showed me how to lead, how to sacrifice, and how to love unconditionally. Her life continues to be a living example of the values she taught us: integrity, perseverance, and kindness.



"After many years of hard work, my son gave me the greatest thank-you I could ever have imagined. To all the other surviving spouses raising young children, I hope this encourages you to continue loving and supporting your children, knowing everything you do will one day be recognized and greatly appreciated."

– Anita Baxter

The person I am today is a direct reflection of the incredible woman who raised me. Her example still guides me; it's a reminder to push forward, find meaning in hard work, and remain grateful for the people who love and

support me. Because of her, I know that leadership doesn't always come from authority, but from quiet consistency, from the willingness to serve others, and from the courage to keep going when everything feels uncertain.

My mother is more than someone I admire — she is the standard I strive to live up to every day. She is my role model, my anchor, and my greatest source of strength, and her example will continue to shape who I am for the rest of my life.



ABOUT CHILDREN AND GRIEF

Darcie Sims, Ph.D., CHT, CT, GMS

While tending to our own grief, our children's emotional needs may go unmet simply because we don't have the energy, resources, or understanding to help them. We tell ourselves that children are resilient, but in reality, children need just as much compassion and support as adults when adapting to dramatic or traumatic life changes.

As we cope with our own sense of loss, it can be difficult to respond to our children's needs and questions. So, we perpetuate the conspiracy of silence, thinking that children don't understand loss or death. Let's take a look at that concept and some of the other myths surrounding children and grief.

Children don't understand death, so they don't grieve.

Even very young children respond to changes in their environment, and a death in the family certainly brings changes. Routine disruptions and the increased volume and activity in a grieving household affect our children. They may not understand *why* these changes are occurring, but they will notice and respond accordingly. Children do grieve, just not like adults.

Children don't hurt as much because they understand less.



If a child is old enough **TO LOVE,** they are old enough **TO GRIEVE.**

The opposite may be true. Reality can feel scarier and more overwhelming when our children lack information and experience. Giving our children age-appropriate information, teaching them skills to identify their emotions, and modeling ways to express them will better equip them to cope with death and grief. Size has nothing to do with the hurt in their hearts.

Infants and toddlers are too young to grieve.

If a child is old enough to love, they are old enough to grieve. Increased demands for attention, schedule disruptions, regression to previously suspended self-comforting measures (thumb sucking, rocking, drinking from a bottle, etc.) are all signs of an infant or toddler's expressions of grief. Children don't need to know the *why* to experience the emotions of grief.

Children are resilient; they bounce back.

Yes, children are flexible, but they aren't rubber balls that simply bounce back from difficult experiences. Your children may grieve in short bursts of emotion — the younger the child, the quicker a grief moment may pass — but don't assume your child isn't grieving just because they're playing or laughing. Like adults, they need compassionate understanding and support through their grief, too.

Children don't notice our grief.

Children are like sponges, absorbing everything around them. Nothing gets by them! Our grief impacts them, but not always negatively. When we express our grief in healthy, effective ways, our children are watching and learning

our grieving styles. Combined with communication and patient teaching, they learn to embrace their emotions and express them in healthy ways.

Talking about the deceased reopens grief wounds.

Expressing grief and staying connected to the deceased actually helps with the integration of the loss and changing relationship. Hiding pictures and never speaking about the deceased are more likely to keep the wounds of grief open. Share memories and photos with your children, and encourage them to do the same!

We should shield children from the pain of grief.

Grief is not a sign of weakness or lack of faith. It's the price you pay for love, and when someone we love dies, it hurts. Of course, we want to protect our children from that pain, but completely shielding them from it robs them of the chance to embrace their emotions and grow through the hurt.

Busy children cope more easily with grief.

Children know what is happening around them, and they will think about the death and question it, whether or not they're busy. Rather than using distractions as a temporary fix, keep the lines of communication open so they can ask questions, and you can help your children process this death and their grief.

Childhood bereavement leads to maladjusted adulthood.

Experiencing bereavement as a child is difficult, but it doesn't necessarily translate to a doomed adulthood. Supporting our children and teaching them effective coping methods sets them up to adapt and move forward through their lives, rather than facing delayed grief reactions and destructive behaviors in adulthood.

A Final Thought

When you talk to your children about death, remember that they think in concrete terms — young children especially. It is far better to say “died” than to have to explain that “losing” a loved one isn't like losing a toy. The more you try to untwist the explanation, the more twisted it becomes. And, if you think about it, “died” is a difficult word to use, but “lost” is a hopeless one.

Healing after a death is hard. It takes courage in all shapes and sizes to mourn fully while living day to day. Congratulate yourself on welcoming this courage as you care for your children and yourself, and remember that TAPS Youth Programs offers support for grieving children, teens, and their parents or guardians each step of the way.

This article is adapted from Myths About Children and Grief, originally published in the summer 2013 issue of TAPS Magazine.



» TAPS.org/YouthPrograms



★ THANK YOU FOR ★

Giving Back

Please join us in recognizing two members of our TAPS Family who continue to pour service and compassion back into our community.



2026 TAPS Military Mentor Award
★ U.S. Army SGT Tanner Hagerty ★

2026 Senator Ted Stevens Leadership Award
★ Sara Wilson ★
Surviving Spouse of Retired
U.S. Navy Reserve Capt. David Wilson

Tanner joins the ranks of Military Mentors of the Year who, along with serving in the U.S. armed forces, give their time and hearts to the TAPS mission by supporting surviving children and teens. Tanner’s energy at TAPS events brings smiles to the faces of grieving children — sometimes for the first time in quite a while. And for the many TAPS kids who open up to him and trust them with the complex emotions of grief, Tanner is a steady presence during their formative years.

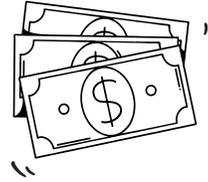
Like the award recipients who’ve come before her, Sara never misses an opportunity to support the TAPS mission and her fellow survivors. As a survivor herself, Sara came to TAPS after the death of her husband, seeking resources and community for her young children and herself. She found that community in TAPS, and through her service as a Peer Mentor, Capitol Hill advocate, and more, she is lighting the path for the survivors following in her footsteps.

TAPS selects a Military Mentor of the Year and a Senator Ted Stevens Leadership Award recipient annually. Though there are so many members of our TAPS Family dedicated to our mission and the survivors we support, these awards are opportunities for us all to say “thank you.” Thank you for making space for grief. Thank you for listening with compassion. Thank you for walking alongside us during tender moments and seasons of growth.

Thank you for being a voice for the needs of the survivor community.



Spring Clean Your FINANCES



Birds singing, flowers blooming, spring is here. It is the perfect time for fresh starts, and your finances can be one of them. If you're ready to begin, take these seven steps to do a little financial spring cleaning. Even if you can only tackle one at a time, each step can lead to greater financial security and peace of mind.

Your Financial Spring-Cleaning Checklist

Have a financial game plan. Life now may be very different than what you expected before your loss. Think about how your financial goals have changed. Build a plan that starts with where you are today and provides a road map to where you want to go.

• **Spend less than you bring in.** Track money coming in and going out to understand your new baseline. Consider changes to your income and expenses, and any benefits you may be receiving. Use the USAA Educational Foundation **Budget Builder** to get started.

Save for emergencies. When you're able, setting a little money aside each month for unexpected expenses, like home and car repairs, can ease day-to-day stress and provide peace of mind as you move forward after your loss. Over time, try to build up three to six months of living expenses in a separate, easily accessible account.

• **Use debt responsibly.** A strong credit reputation can help you achieve your financial goals, but too much debt can cause stress and strain your budget. Learn more about building credit to help support your finances. If one of your goals is to pay off debt, check out the USAA Educational Foundation **Debt Destroyer**

tool to develop a customized plan based on your situation. You'll learn how quickly you can pay off debt and how much you could save with the avalanche and snowball methods.

Protect your life, loved ones, and possessions. Insurance helps protect your health, life, property, and your loved ones' futures. Review your current policies to determine if more or less coverage is needed, and if beneficiary and policyholder designations align with your current needs.

• **Invest for your future.** Your plans and goals may be changing; how could this impact your future needs? **Planning for the future** might mean adjusting how you are **saving for retirement** or investing in your education. Choose steps that support your long-term goals, and go at your own pace.

Prepare your legal documents. Estate planning helps your loved ones navigate the difficult time after your death without extra confusion, conflict, or cost. Protect those you love by **preparing key legal documents**, like a will, power of attorney, advance medical directive, trust, and letter of instruction.



Budget Builder



Debt Destroyer



Investing for Growth



Saving for Retirement



Preparing Key Legal Documents



Let spring – a season of renewal – inspire a similar transformation in your financial life. Remember that taking small steps can lead to long-term financial well-being and peace of mind, and you don't need to travel the road to financial literacy alone. The USAA Educational Foundation has tools and resources to support you at USAAEF.org, and TAPS Casework and Education Support Services can guide you through survivor benefits, emergency financial assistance, and more. Visit TAPS.org/Casework or call 202-588-TAPS (8277).

It Was Time

Tai Prohaska ★ Surviving Mother of Navy HM3 Nikolas Pono Kaniela Venuti

Five years? Five weeks? Five decades? Grief warped my sense of time. My son, HM3 Nikolas Pono Kaniela Venuti, died Oct. 17, 2020. He was 26. Nothing, not even time, was the same anymore.

Time was irrelevant, but dates packed their punches — his birthday, his first wedding anniversary, which he didn't live to celebrate, and the day he died...the day he *died*.

I felt like I was living on the *Twilight Zone* set. The world was surreal. People got up in the morning, went to work, shopped for groceries, and did not notice — did not see — the zombie mom walking among them.

TAPS saw me. Other survivors saw me. But it was not time.

Niko was a corpsman in the U.S. Navy. “Doc,” as his beloved II MEF Camp Lejeune Marines called him, and he remained on active duty while battling cancer over three years. His continued service to our Navy and our country during remission and treatment was testimony to his strength and commitment. When the cancer came back a third time, it came with a vengeance before he could be medically discharged.

Time: We thought we would have more — time to laugh at his corny jokes; to watch him start a family with his beautiful bride, Maddy; to see him become a forest ranger, or whatever God called him to do. But God simply called him.

I read TAPS emails and magazine articles. It was comforting to know I was not alone, but I was not ready to share. At the same time, I was grateful for the parents,



husbands, wives, and children who did have the courage to share.

When information on the Camp Operation BBQ Rescue retreat landed in my inbox last winter, I hesitantly applied. “What do you hope to gain through this experience?” the questionnaire asked. I wanted to think about Niko and feel more joy than pain. It had been nearly five years, and there were still mornings when I struggled to get out of bed. I filled out the application with some ambivalence. But once I hit submit, I was committed.

We, survivors, see each other. And, while we curse the circumstances that bring

us together, we are grateful when we find each other. Like magnets, we click to form a force stronger than our individual brokenness. I knew this, having met Mary Laureana when we were both living in Germany. Mary is the mother of CPL Nathaniel Aaron Aguirre, who was killed in Iraq. She encouraged me to take advantage of TAPS' many programs. But it had been less than a year since Niko's passing when we met. I needed more time.

At Camp OBR last April, I was amazed by parents brave enough to be vulnerable less than one or two years after their child's death. Many spoke of their positive



*While we curse the circumstances that bring us together, we are grateful when we find each other. Like magnets, we click to **form a force stronger** than our individual brokenness.*

experiences at other TAPS events and how they bonded with other survivors. At Camp OBR, we cooked, we talked, we walked...together.

Supported by the compassionate Camp OBR and TAPS staffs, my husband Don and I shared our grief and stories with other parents for the very first time. There are no adequate words to describe the giving and receiving we experienced.

Being able to look in another mother's eyes and, with confidence, promise her that the debilitating pain she feels can subside, helped me realize how far I had come. I am forever grateful that Mary took me under her wing, that her TAPS Peer Mentor gave her the strength to walk with me.

One point we all readily acknowledged at Camp OBR is that everyone's grief journey is different. There are survivors who are very active participants in TAPS programs, and others who need time. I needed time. But after experiencing Camp OBR, I sincerely encourage anyone who has not applied for a TAPS event to consider the next one you see. It will be time well spent.

Camp OBR was more than a retreat — it was a safe space carved out of shared grief. It was a place where tears were honored, laughter was welcomed, and silence was understood. The smell of smoked brisket mingled with stories of love and loss, and healing didn't feel like a demand, but a gentle invitation.

To the Camp OBR staff: Thank you for your warmth, your patience, and your unwavering presence. You didn't just feed us — you nourished us. You created an environment where we could be ourselves, broken and brave, without judgment.

To the TAPS team: Thank you for holding space for our pain and our progress. Thank you for walking beside us. Your dedication to survivors like me is a lifeline, and your programs are a bridge between despair and hope.

To my fellow survivors: Thank you for showing up; for sharing your children's names, their stories, and your pain; for listening to mine; for hugging me when words failed; for letting me lurk on our

group chat, even though I don't often post anything.

Camp OBR gave me something I hadn't felt in a long time: connection. And in that connection, I found some peace. I said Niko's name out loud, and it was heard.

So yes — five years, five weeks, five decades — time may be warped, but love is constant. And at Camp OBR, love showed up in every meal, every conversation, every shared moment. I will carry that with me, always.

Mahalo nui loa, from a grateful mom.



Give back as a TAPS Peer Mentor when the time is right for you.

» TAPS.org/PeerMentors

COMMUNITY & CONNECTIONS



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

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.



» TAPS.org/Events



UPCOMING EVENTS

Join your TAPS Family for a weekend of community and personal growth at one of our 2026 national or regional seminars. Registration is open now at TAPS.org/Events or by scanning the QR code at the bottom of the page. Follow us on social media @TAPSorg, and check our events page throughout the year for additional experiences, activities, camps, and retreats.

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



NATIONAL SEMINARS

32ND ANNUAL NATIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP

MAY 21-25
Arlington, Virginia

NATIONAL MILITARY SUICIDE LOSS SURVIVOR SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP

AUGUST 14-16
San Antonio, Texas

REGIONAL SEMINARS

SOUTHWEST REGIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP

JULY 17-19
Scottsdale, Arizona

SOUTHEAST REGIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP

SEPTEMBER 11-13
Jacksonville, Florida

NORTHEAST REGIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP

NOVEMBER 20-22
Buffalo, New York

SELF-FUNDED EVENTS

7-NIGHT EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN CRUISE

OCTOBER 18-25
Rome, Italy



» TAPS.org/Events

A Weekend to Remember

One weekend each May, while our nation pauses to honor fallen heroes, the TAPS Family comes together to remember, heal, and connect. No matter where you are in your grief journey; whether you lost a family member, friend, or fellow service member; and whether you're an annual attendee or a first-timer, you are welcome.

WHO

This event is open to anyone grieving the death of a service member or veteran. Children ages 5 and up attend Good Grief Camp while adults focus on grief, growth, and community at the seminar. Child care is available for children who are not yet school-age or are under 10 and ineligible for Good Grief Camp.

WHAT

Surviving adults connect with peers facing similar losses and attend whole-group events and small-group workshops on a variety of topics designed to support a healthy grief journey. TAPS staff and grief experts are available throughout the weekend, and special guests visit the event to honor your hero.

Good Grief Campers are paired with a Military or Legacy Mentor — their buddy for the weekend. Children build friendships through shared grief and fun activities while surrounded by support. Throughout the weekend, campers will join their parents or guardians for scheduled family meals and activities.

Thanks to our generous donors and sponsors, most meals and all activities are provided at no cost. Attendees are responsible for the cost of lodging and transportation.

WHEN

Check-in begins Thursday morning, May 21, and continues through Friday, May 22. After the opening ceremonies on Friday morning, adults spend the weekend

connecting with peers, honoring their loved ones, and growing through expert-led workshops and discussions. Children engage in indoor and outdoor activities alongside their peers and mentors that are both fun and healing.

On the final day of the event, Monday, May 25, attendees are invited to attend the Arlington National Cemetery Memorial Day ceremonies and join TAPS in the National Memorial Day Parade.

WHERE

The primary hotel for this year's event is the Hyatt Regency Crystal City, located at 2799 Richmond Highway in Arlington, VA. A limited number of rooms are available at a discounted group rate through April 28. During check-in, specific locations for all activities, including camp, workshop, and child care room assignments, will be provided.

HOW

Registration and hotel information are available on the TAPS website. Find answers to common event questions and view the event schedule (once finalized) by scanning the QR code or selecting "32nd Annual National Military Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp" on TAPS.org/Events.



» TAPS.org/Events





**32nd Annual National
Military Survivor Seminar
and Good Grief Camp**

MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND
May 21-25
Arlington, Virginia
Hyatt Regency Crystal City





202-588-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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Even now, they still serve.

Their stories inspire.

Their memories bind communities.

Their sacrifice teaches us to live more fully.

We honor them not by holding back our tears,

but by living a life they'd be proud of.



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES