

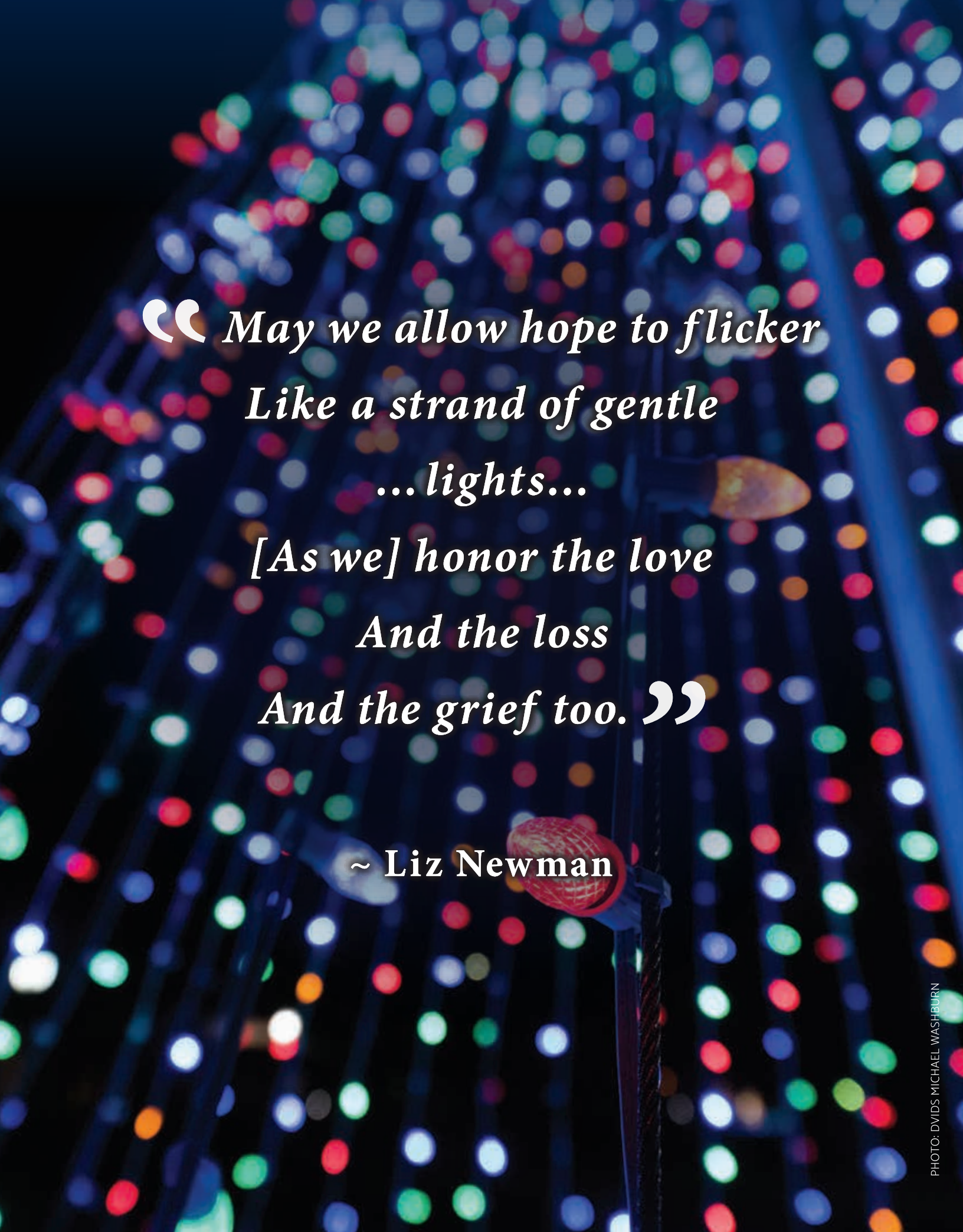
For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died

T★A★P★S

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

WINTER 2025





“ May we allow hope to flicker
Like a strand of gentle
...lights...
[As we] honor the love
And the loss
And the grief too. ”

~ Liz Newman



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

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BRING HOPE TO
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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: Bundled in the comfort of TAPS, a young survivor soaks up the light and warmth of the winter sun.

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.



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There are so many ways to honor your hero while shining a light for others.

A YOUNG ADULT SURVIVOR ENJOYS THE SNOW DURING THE 2025 TAPS YOUNG ADULT PARALYMPIC EXPERIENCE IN LAKE PLACID, NEW YORK. SURVIVORS AGES 18 TO 30 ARE ELIGIBLE TO ATTEND EXCITING EVENTS LIKE THIS WHILE GROWING AND CREATING COMMUNITY. PHOTO: TAPS ARCHIVES



To Our TAPS Family,

As we enter the winter season — a time of year often marked by traditions and memories — we know this can be an especially tender time for those who are grieving. Whether you are navigating your first holiday season after loss or you've carried your grief through many winters, you are not alone. Your love lives on, and hope endures.

Winter is often called the season of hope. It reminds us that even when cold and darkness settle in, there is light ahead of us and within us. It's in the connection we find with our Peer Mentors and members of our TAPS Family in Care Groups, Online Groups, and at TAPS events. Hope is in the compassion we received after loss and continue to receive; it's in the compassion we extend to fellow survivors. And, hope can be found in the enduring bonds we share with those we love and those we've lost.

Within this issue of *TAPS Magazine*, you'll find comfort for your heart this season, connection in the stories of fellow survivors, inspiration to carry into a new year, and hope waiting to be discovered. Hope isn't always gift-wrapped in a grand gesture — you might find it in a perfectly timed reminder of your loved one or a meaningful way to honor their legacy. You may find it in your faith — no matter what you believe — or in continuing a beloved tradition or starting a new one. You might find it in a quiet, reflective moment alone or time spent with family, friends, and your TAPS community this season.

In this season of giving and remembrance, offer yourself the same compassion you give so freely to others. Grief is not a journey we are meant to walk alone, and at TAPS, no one does. Throughout this season, the same 24/7 care we provide throughout the year is still here for you. Call our Helpline any time, day or night, for support from a caring member of our TAPS staff. You can also visit our website, [Taps.org](https://taps.org), and connect with us on social media, @tapsorg, so your community is never out of reach.

As you turn each page of this magazine, may you find comfort in knowing your grief is seen and your love remembered. The love you carry for the person you lost is still here — present in your memories, your actions, and your continued connection with them. That love is a source of strength; it's where hope lives. Your feelings as you approach the holidays and a new year — from sorrow to joy and anything in between — are valid, and your TAPS Family walks alongside you. Together, we all carry the light of those we've lost through this season and into the new year with grace, courage, and hope.

With comfort, care, and enduring hope,

Bonnie Carroll

Bonnie Carroll,
TAPS President and Founder



Dear TAPS®



We took to Facebook to ask you — the TAPS Family — to share meaningful ways you've honored your heroes, and we received so many thoughtful and creative responses. We're sharing a few in this installment of Dear TAPS for anyone searching for a special way to honor their loved one this holiday season, in the new year, and beyond.

Be sure to like us on Facebook — @TAPSorg — to stay connected with TAPS and fellow survivors.

Holiday Remembrance

"I'm the coordinator for Wreaths Across America in Tracy, where my son is buried. We have over 2,400 veterans here, and we fundraise all year to honor and remember them."

Julia Conover ★ Surviving Mother of Marine Corps
LCpl Brandon Dewey

Sweet Memories

"On his birthday, we donate boxes of cake mix and icing to the local food bank, so that others might celebrate their special day. The sweetness of his memory brings sweetness to another."

Juline Magruder Renfro ★ Surviving Mother of Army
2LT Dylan Renfro

View From There

"My son was a paratrooper and always wanted me to go skydiving with him (outside of work, of course), but I was too scared. After he passed away, I found an old GoPro video of him on one of his jumps and could hear him talking about how beautiful it was to see everything from up high. At that moment, I booked my first tandem skydive. I wanted to see the world the way he did from up there."

Kathryn Fuchs ★ Surviving Mother of Army National Guard
PV2 Robert Prichard

Making a Difference

"I was very grateful to join TAPS for Advocacy Week this year on the first anniversary of his death. I hope his story makes a difference."

Shanyce Beamesderfer ★ Surviving Spouse of Retired
Air Force TSgt Timothy Beamesderfer

Saving Lives

"I overcame my fear of needles (which we shared and used to joke about) to donate nearly three gallons of blood to the Red Cross in hopes that someone's life could be saved."

Julie McAdoo ★ Surviving Spouse of Retired Air Force
Maj Kevin McAdoo

Pay It Forward

"I established a grant and scholarship fund at the public school he attended."

Tina Green-Buschke ★ Surviving Mother of Army
SGT Joshua Throckmorton

Sharing the Journey

"I take a little bit of his ashes with me whenever I go somewhere new or beautiful, and I scatter them."

Olivia Kinsey ★ Surviving Spouse of Marine Corps Veteran
Cpl Tino Gonzalez Enriquez



LET US KNOW

Share your TAPS experience with fellow survivors for a chance to be featured in a future installment of Dear TAPS. Your words may be the comfort another survivor needs.

taps.org/deartaps

It Only Takes a Glimmer

Healing in the Smallest Moments

Sabrina Peters, M.Psych.

Since beginning your grief journey, you've probably become familiar with triggers — those seemingly normal moments that wash over you with a powerful wave of grief. They can be a certain song on the radio, a scent that snaps you back in time, a significant date, stumbling across something that reminds you of the person you lost, and the list goes on.

But have you heard of glimmers? If triggers activate your survival system, glimmers are what awaken your sense of safety and ground you in the moment. In the landscape of grief — a world that can feel overwhelming, noticing glimmers might be one of the most powerful things you can do for your mental health.

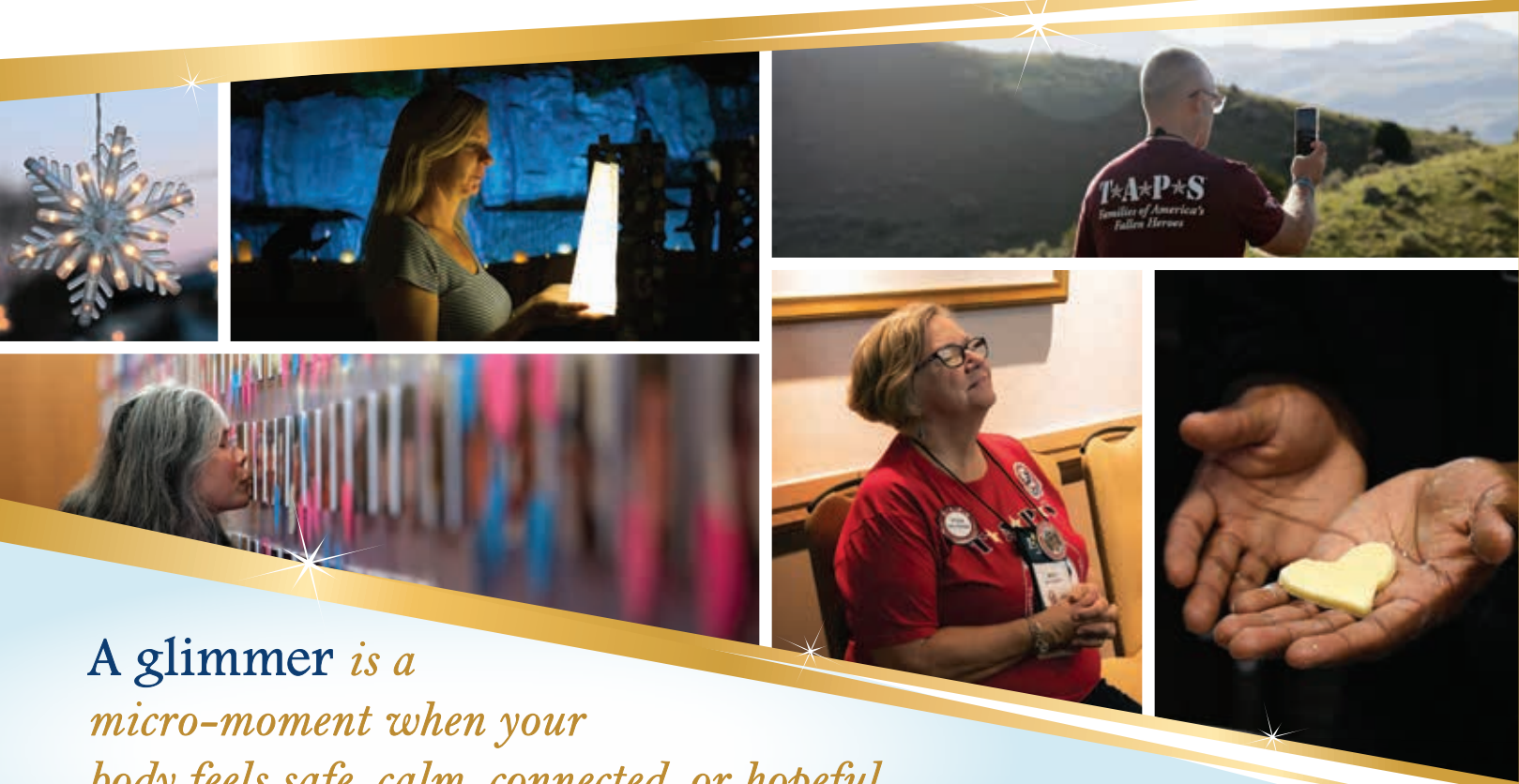
What Is a Glimmer?

The term “glimmer” was introduced by Deb Dana, a licensed clinical social worker and expert in Polyvagal theory — a model that helps explain how our nervous system responds to safety and threat.

A glimmer is a micro-moment when your body feels safe, calm, connected, or hopeful. It may be subtle — a warm breeze on your face, a song that stirs positive emotions, a kind smile from a stranger, or the way sunlight dances on your wall in the morning. And it doesn't have to be loud to be powerful. “Glimmers are cues of safety,” says Dana, “small moments that shape our biology and remind us that we are OK.”

Our brains are hardwired to look for danger, not delight. It's called the negativity bias, and it's an evolutionary survival mechanism. While that was once helpful for escaping predators, it's not so helpful in the modern world when you're trying to navigate grief, trauma, or even daily stressors. That's where glimmers come in. They help train your nervous system to notice safety, not just threat. When you learn to spot glimmers — however small — you begin to:

- ★ Regulate your nervous system
- ★ Decrease chronic stress
- ★ Improve emotional resilience
- ★ Build inner safety
- ★ Increase your capacity for joy



A glimmer is a
*micro-moment when your
body feels safe, calm, connected, or hopeful.*

Find Your Glimmers

1. Set Intention

Start with a small goal – finding one glimmer each day, even the smallest thing that gives you a sense of ease.

2. Be Present

In grief or busy, stressful times, it's easy to focus on the past or the future. Make an effort to slow down and tune in to the good around you.

3. Recognize and Feel

When you experience a glimmer, take it in. Tune in to all five senses, and notice how your body responds.

4. Record

Whether you journal your glimmers each evening or create an album on your phone, logging your glimmers allows you to return to moments of comfort whenever you need to.

Glimmers will fortify us
and teach our bodies that, despite our profound loss, good things are still happening all around. Peace is possible — even here, even now.

What Do Glimmers Look Like?

Glimmers are deeply personal. What calms you may not calm someone else — even within your family, but here are some common examples:

- ★ The sound of your child's belly laugh
- ★ The smell of fresh coffee in the morning
- ★ Your dog resting their head on your lap
- ★ A song from your childhood
- ★ Gentle rain while you're safe inside
- ★ A friend remembering something small, but meaningful
- ★ Clean sheets
- ★ Warm lighting
- ★ A quote that hits right when you need it

These moments don't erase the heartache you feel in grief, but they anchor you. They remind your body that you are safe and not alone.

Polyvagal theory, developed by Dr. Stephen Porges, explains that your vagus nerve — the largest cranial nerve in the body — is constantly scanning your environment for cues of safety or threat. Triggers activate our sympathetic nervous system (fight, flight, or freeze), but glimmers activate your ventral vagal

state — the part of the nervous system responsible for connection, calm, and social engagement.

This isn't just emotional; it's neurological. And it means that your healing doesn't have to be one huge breakthrough. Sometimes it's just learning to pause long enough to feel the softness of a moment, to stay grounded, to stay open, and to stay present.

If you're not used to noticing glimmers, don't worry. This isn't about "good vibes only" or pretending life is perfect after loss. Rather, it's about building a habit of paying attention to what brings you peace, even for five seconds.

Glimmers of Hope

What if healing isn't just about what we survive, but also about what we learn to see? Glimmers won't fix everything — they won't erase our grief, but we wouldn't want them to. Glimmers will fortify us and teach our bodies that, despite our profound loss, good things are still happening all around. Peace is possible — even here, even now.

So, here's your invitation: Notice the light. Name the calm. Hold the moment. Because

healing isn't always big and dramatic. Sometimes it's subtle. Sometimes it's sacred. Sometimes, it starts with a glimmer.

This article was originally published on June 25, 2025, by The Healthy You. It has been modified slightly for the TAPS community.



About the Author

Sabrina is a Brisbane-based psychologist. Through her practice and online platform, The Healthy You, she equips others with practical tools and resources that bridge psychology and faith, encouraging deep, long-lasting healing.

'TIS THE SEASON...FOR INK

Kristi Stolzenberg ★ Editor, TAPS Magazine

I LOVE YOUR TATTOO: WHAT DOES IT MEAN? EVERYTHING.

On National Tattoo Day 2025, TAPS invited you to share your ink and the story behind it on social media. Your responses blew us away. The viral post raised a good point: Memorial tattoos not only serve as a permanent, deeply personal reminder of someone we lost, but each time we share the story behind the ink, it's an opportunity to speak their name and tell it again. These symbolic tributes to love, life, and service are as unique as the person who inspired them.

ONE OF A KIND

"I love you more than life itself and I miss you every moment that we are apart" — a line from a letter Courtney Wood received while her husband (then fiancé) was overseas. She explained, "After he passed, I found the letters and knew I wanted this on me forever. It reminds me every day of how much we loved each other."



Few things are more unique than our loved one's handwriting or fingerprint, making these tattoos truly one of a kind, and members of the TAPS Family have incorporated personal touches as a reminder of deep and lasting connection. Jennifer Allgaier bears "I love you and

miss you," the last thing her husband wrote to her. On Amy Farmer Bishop's wrist is: ILTWYLM, short for I love the way you love me — how she and her husband signed everything.



Tara Hulett carries a beloved reminder of a Valentine's Day card from her dad: "Love always, Daddy." Amber Leigh Martin received a letter from her son while he was in basic training; he signed it, "Love, The Favorite Child, Kalin." Amber shared that Kalin and her older daughter would jokingly argue over who was the favorite, and now she has a permanent reminder of Kalin's humor.

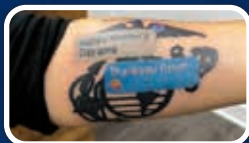
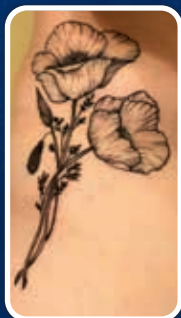


Kate Kastle memorialized a Post-It her husband left on her desk weeks before his death: "You're my favorite. — Jake." After a year together, Jolaine Locke's husband bought her the perfume, Beautiful, and attached a sticky note above the label that read, "Because you really are." Jolaine shared, "I don't know why I kept it, but with all the moves, it never got damaged. Ben passed away after 17 years together, so I took the note in and got it tattooed."



Lauren Buckland bears two unique tattoos: "You'll never walk alone" in her husband's handwriting, and a bouquet of four poppies — a tribute to their military connection. One of the poppies is a drooping bud holding her husband's fingerprint. Michelle Marine incorporated her husband's fingerprints by forming them into a heart-shaped tattoo.

PHOTOS: COURTNEY WOOD; AMY FARMER BISHOP; TARA HULETT; AMBER LEIGH MARTIN; JOLAINE LOCKE; LAUREN BUCKLAND;



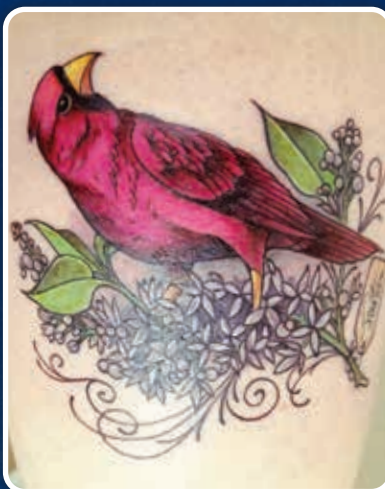
It's not one of a kind, but Betty Merritt Fry and her family have a four-of-a-kind tattoo on their arms: a replica of her son's birthmark. Though it isn't his handwriting, Ana Hernandez will forever be reminded of the last text message she received from her son. And a reminder doesn't have to be written or typed. Diane Travis, her son, daughter, and four Marine brothers of Jason Lee Davis, Diane's son, were all tattooed the night before Jason's funeral with a Jack Daniel's label recreation containing Jason's details. Diane shared, "We live in a small town about 40 miles from the Jack Daniel's distillery. This was a fact Jason told everyone."

SYMBOLISM

Memorial ribbons, birds, badges of accomplishment, they're all reminders of connection and strength. Janet Harpool Crane's tattoo is a reminder that she completed an Ironman race on Sept. 29, 2019, Gold Star Mother's Day. She paired it with her son's signature and his birth and death dates, making sure "the dash" was included.



Robin Bethel was visited by a cardinal right before her son's death. "It perched on the top of our lilac tree," Robin shared. "His signature is on the tag."



Sue Johnston, Lisa Stacks, and Bonnie Page all acknowledge their loved ones' strength in the face of illness. Sue's husband suffered from progressive supranuclear palsy due to Agent Orange exposure. She shared the inspiration behind her hummingbird tattoo: "With PSP, on an MRI of the brain, you will see the shape of a hummingbird." Lisa has a tattoo of a non-Hodgkin's lymphoma ribbon, which her brother succumbed to after burn pit exposure. Bonnie's tattoo — an infinity symbol, anchor, and pink ribbon — represents the infinite love she shares with her husband, their Navy service, and both of their battles with breast cancer.

Chris Meeker and his wife also both served in the Navy. After respecting her wishes for a burial at sea, he designed a tattoo that incorporated her coordinates and their love for each other and the sea. Angela Prather has "12,645" tattooed on her wrist, representing the number of days her son lived — from his birth to his death. Sharron Stidfole traveled to her husband's hometown, on his first anniversary to be tattooed with his plane's tail number and a gold star. Jesse Frankoski honors the crew of Dover 14 with a gold star next to the initials of the three who died, including his sister, and a blue star for the surviving crew member.



WRAPPED IN MEANING

Each of these tattoos is more than ink. They're stories carrying on — not just about what was lost, but what remains. It's not always easy to narrow a full life, an entire relationship, into one tattoo. When that happens, as Surviving Mother Cheryl Huff explains, "I couldn't decide on one, so I got a half sleeve!" Brett Strickland's sleeve with an angel and phoenix is still in progress; for now, his son's portrait is on his forearm, always close to him.



This season, and always, let these special tributes start conversations, help you feel closer to the hero you lost, and, in the words of Lauren Buckland, serve as a reminder to us all that "even in moving forward, we're never far from the ones who shaped our hearts."

(GRIEF'S) HOME FOR

As the song goes, “There’s no place like home for the holidays,” but home might feel different after the loss of a special person. Grief moved in and insists on staying for the holidays. Managing your day-to-day while grieving is challenging enough. Adding seasonal stress and emotions might be too much this year, and that’s OK. To help you slow down and check in with yourself in the comfort of your home, the Center for The Study of Traumatic Stress at the Uniformed Services University and TAPS created a web-based resource (see QR code below) that connects eight parts of your home to gentle ways you can care for yourself, your family, and your home this season.

GARAGE ⚙️ **HOME AND FAMILY SAFETY**

The start of a new year is the perfect time to assess home safety and maintenance. Routinely checking locks, smoke detectors, alarm systems, and utilities; reviewing emergency plans; and properly storing firearms can ease anxieties heightened by loss while protecting you and your family from potential dangers in and outside your home. Use a checklist to record regular home maintenance so you don’t have to keep track of it while grieving.

KITCHEN 🍳 **NUTRITION**

Often called the heart of the home, in grief, your kitchen may feel very different this time of year. If you don’t have time or energy to bake all the holiday treats this year, that’s OK. In deep grief, even if you have an appetite, whipping up the season’s comfort foods – or a healthy, balanced meal of any kind – might feel impossible.

Maybe the opposite is true for you. Emotional eating or over-indulging in the abundant seasonal food and alcohol can impact your health and your mood. Prioritizing moderation and healthy choices isn’t always easy in grief (or during the holidays), but your kitchen is a great space to check in with yourself: Are you giving your body the nutrition it needs to be physically well while you tend to your heart and mind?

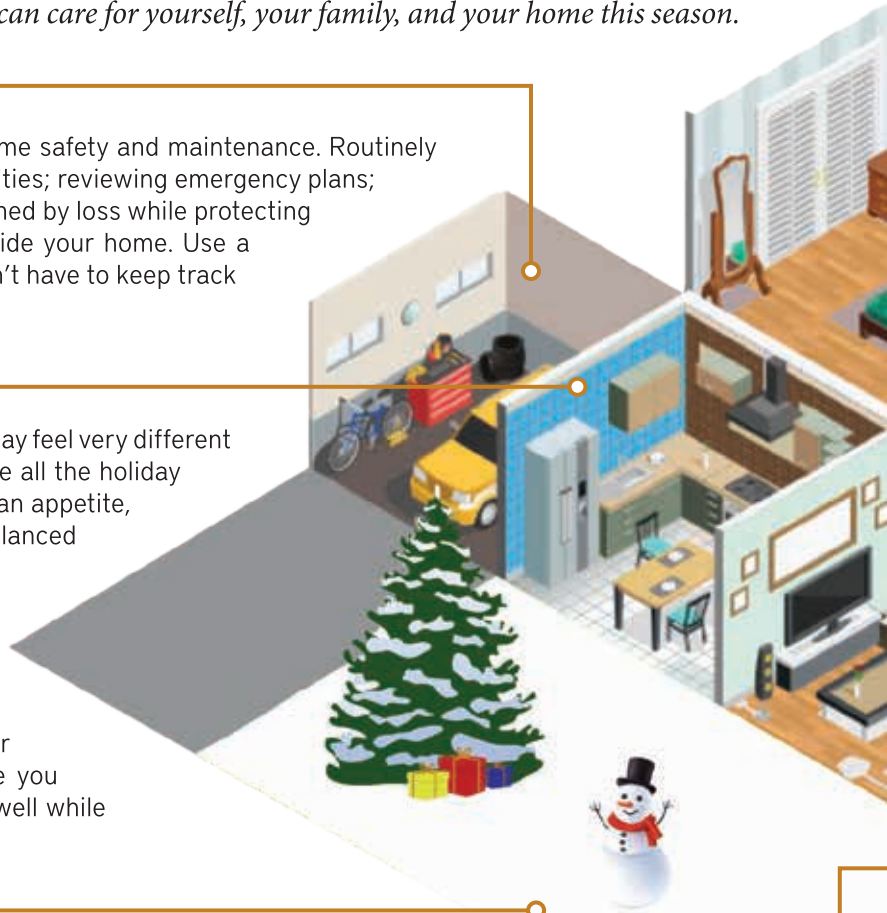
YARD 🌿 **BALANCE AND PURPOSE**

Your loss is not something you will “get over,” but you will move forward with the memories, love, and what you learn about yourself through grieving. In your yard, you get reacquainted with people, things, and parts of you that may have fallen away after your loss: your friends and relatives, routines, nature, faith, sense of self, beloved pastimes, and new interests – including some that honor your fallen hero and continue to nurture your healing.

From your yard, you can look up at your home with the soft winter sun on your face. Though it (and you) have been remodeled by grief and loss, the walls still hold your memories. And, as you come inside, feeling the comforting warmth rush over you, you walk room to room reflecting on your loss, your growth, and the strength you’ve acquired along the way.

FRONT PORCH 🏠 **SECURITY AND SAFETY**

Just like the bustling holidays, after your loss, you may have noticed more visitors than usual – friends and neighbors offering support, and the media or organizations offering services, too. Sadly, not everyone who contacts you has good intentions. Your front porch is where you get to decide who you trust and let inside. Take time to identify reliable services, like TAPS and Better Business Bureau-accredited companies, and screen for fraudulent calls and scam emails to protect your privacy and keep you and your family safe. You have permission to set boundaries and say no to uninvited solicitors, guests, and media.



THE HOLIDAYS



BATHROOM 🛁 HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Things that were once routine, like personal hygiene, sleeping enough, taking prescribed medication, regularly visiting the doctor and dentist, and monitoring your health, can feel burdensome in grief. But your bathroom is a place of daily renewal, where seemingly small acts of self-care can make a big difference in the way you feel, both physically and mentally. Just a warm shower on a cold winter evening or the scent of peppermint soap can awaken your senses and lift your spirit.

BEDROOM 🛏️ EMOTIONS AND MENTAL HEALTH

There is no “right way” to grieve. Which is great because everyone – including each member of your family – experiences grief differently. However, this makes it hard to know if you need additional support, like addressing post-traumatic stress, survivor’s guilt, prolonged grief disorder – intense feelings of grief that do not diminish over time and impact your ability to function.

In the quiet of your room, be honest with yourself about how you feel. If you haven’t yet sought support from peers or grief professionals, let the new year be the time to reach out. TAPS can provide you with trusted Care Groups and mental health professionals in your area, and you are always welcome at the recurring Online Group meetings.

HOME OFFICE 📞 FINANCIAL AND LEGAL DECISIONS

While you’re facing overwhelming grief, you may also feel the weight of important financial and legal decisions on your shoulders, especially if your loved one handled these matters. Here in your office, it can feel like you’re making these big decisions alone, but resources are just a click or call away. Lean on your casualty officer, TAPS, and the VA to guide you or point you toward trusted support.

LIVING ROOM 🏠 RELATIONSHIPS

In the comfort of your living room, snuggle under your favorite blanket, and use this safe space to reflect on how grief has impacted your relationships. A good friend may have distanced themselves, unsure of what to say or how to help. Maybe you’ve grown closer to a supportive friend or neighbor or found community among a TAPS peer group.

While you’re fireside and cozy, check in with your own emotions and remind yourself that coping styles can look different between family members, affecting communication. Show each other (and yourself) extra grace and patience right now.

YOUR HOME

Explore the grief house model, and make the house your own by scanning the QR code. And for support in any room, look no further than your TAPS Family. From casework assistance and webinars to mental health provider connections and peer support, you have a home at TAPS.



>> Grief House



>> TAPS.org

Disclaimer: The opinions and assertions expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences or the Department of Defense, or the Henry M. Jackson Foundation for the Advancement of Military Medicine, Inc.

CRISIS *Amid* FAITH

Gregory T. Jacobs ★ Surviving Father
of Army SPC David M. Jacobs;
TAPS Peer Mentor



A PLACE FOR ALL MILITARY AND VETERAN SURVIVORS

TAPS is a place to heal and grow after loss, surrounded by the company and comfort of fellow military and veteran survivors. No matter your faith or beliefs, your TAPS Family will walk alongside you on your journey through grief. If you aren't sure where to start, join one of our Online Groups — organized by peer group, cause of death, and relationship to the fallen, and offered at convenient times each month. Find the right fit for you, and join from the comfort of your own home.

>> taps.org/onlinegroups

FINDING PEACE *amidst the storm took time and acceptance that — on this side of heaven — many of my questions might not be answered.*

Grief is a common, dare I say, universal life experience. We grieve the death of pets, the end of meaningful relationships, moving from a longtime home, and the death of loved ones. Each encounter with grief brings varying levels of denial, anger, deep sadness, and loneliness — to name just a few. However, grief born from the death of a child can be a dark void, ensnaring even the strongest believer. For me, the grief associated with my son, David's, unexpected death was like a thick, sticky tar that impeded every aspect of my life. For the first time, I experienced a crisis of faith.

I was raised in a Christian home and attended a Protestant church my entire life. I diligently read my Bible and regularly committed time to prayer. I attempted to live as selflessly as possible and devoted time to helping others. In college, I served as my dormitory's chaplain; after graduating, I led men's ministries for over 24 years. I was committed to my God and believed my life was firmly grounded in my faith.

That all changed with the news of David's death on Dec. 24, 2020, Christmas Eve — a significant date in the Christian church. Until the moment two men in uniform knocked on our front door, I lived a pleasant, tidy existence; my little apple cart was nicely organized and ran smoothly. That knock at the door shook the very foundation of my life and ushered in a dark period of questioning everything I professed to believe. My

apple cart was wrecked, and the apples were thrown to the ground.

Early in my grief journey, I consistently cried out to God, asking why. I wallowed in the darkness of despair, feeling abandoned by God. Why David? Why now? Was this the thanks I received for over 28 years of service and devotion? Where was the God of my youth I'd served all those years?

Amid the pain and darkness, I continued to attend church on Sundays, but I neglected to pick up my Bible during the week, and my prayer life was meager. The thick, sticky tar of grief made me bitter. I struggled to discern a way forward in faith. I remember visiting David's grave and cursing God. I knew I served a big God and hoped that He wouldn't strike me with lightning as I worked through my grief.

My son's unexpected death sparked a crisis of faith, and even though I was in survival mode — connected only to the Father through my pain as a grieving father, I never ceased crying out to Jesus. While I don't understand why my son died, my faith has helped me reach a belief that David's death was part of a larger, eternal plan. Finding peace amidst the storm took time and acceptance that — on this side of heaven — many of my questions might not be answered. I had to learn to surrender my bitterness and doubts.

As I reflect on my own crisis of faith, three things were critical in overcoming it. No matter what you believe, or who you pray to, they may help you navigate your own doubts while grieving and come out on the other side with a fortified faith.

First, I learned to show myself grace. It was OK to question and even to be upset at God and ask why. I was counseled to keep asking the why questions, but not necessarily expect an answer.

Second, I learned that taking a break from routine tasks is normal. I needed to discover a "new normal," and hitting the pause button on attending small groups, reading my Bible and devotional, praying, etc., was OK. God was still pouring into me.

Third, I surrounded myself with others who experienced a similar loss and who were asking similar questions. There is power in empathy and in walking with others. After years of ministering to others, I allowed others to minister to me.

My concurrent dark walks through grief and faith have only made me more empathetic, more faithful, and better equipped to both minister to others and mentor fellow grievers. No matter what you believe, deep grief has the power to shake your faith in it. I'd encourage you to incorporate these three suggestions into your own walk and remember that you don't walk alone.

TAPS AND THE EVOLUTION OF GRIEF

Heather Gray Blalock ★ Surviving Spouse of Air Force Maj David Gray; TAPS Peer Mentor



It's been almost 15 years since my husband was killed by a suicide bomber in Afghanistan. Some days, I still find myself expecting him to return from deployment. With every new milestone our children reach — every passing anniversary, birthday, and holiday — his absence is sorely felt anew. Yet our loss does not stop life from continuing its forward march. Survivors have no choice but to pick up the pieces of broken hearts and continue moving with them. The journey begins with acute pain, but eventually settles into more of a chronic ache. The weight of grief never lightens. But, like all weight training, with time, we grow strong enough to carry it more easily.

The more time that passes, the more life takes on a new normal. The journey brings new joys and challenges. I have remarried and been blessed to raise six children, having given birth to only

three. But my current husband will never be able to take the place of my late husband in my heart. This kind of triadic relationship can be difficult but not impossible to navigate. I am able to truly love another because the heart just somehow miraculously expands to make room for new love. Having lost his wife to cancer, he, thankfully, understands grief and isn't threatened when it rears its ugly head in our lives. This is critical for me personally because, though I am Jack's wife, I will forever be David's widow. There must be room for both.

ROOM FOR GROWTH

Similarly, TAPS has provided space for the evolution of my grief. The support network and resources provided right after David's death were invaluable. At a time when I could barely remember to eat regularly, their phone calls came

at just the right moment to remind me I wasn't on this new journey alone, and I needed to take care of myself.

Further down the road, the retreats provided a point of connection with other survivors and a chance to disconnect from the madness of everyday life — a chance to just be. TAPS trained me to be a mentor to my peers and pour into others, just as others had poured into me.

But in the last few years, the recurring seminars in our region are TAPS' current lifeline to our family. My children, very little when their father died, have reached their teen and young adult years. They now experience grief in a more tangible way, despite the lapse of time. Their grief was perhaps delayed by their youth, but it is no less valid, and it deserves to be experienced. TAPS welcomed them with open and accepting arms. They

**THE WEIGHT OF GRIEF NEVER LIGHTENS.
BUT, LIKE ALL WEIGHT TRAINING, WITH TIME,
WE GROW STRONG ENOUGH TO CARRY IT MORE EASILY.**





FOR THOSE LIKE ME, GRIEF EVOLVES, AND I'M GRATEFUL TAPS HAS BEEN THERE FOR EVERY STEP OF THE PROCESS.

empowered them to be a light to their peers, as ambassadors of hope and resilience. The yearly regional seminar has become like a “family reunion” for my children, their friends, and their mentors. Our youngest graduates from Good Grief Camp this year and cannot wait to trade her red shirt for a purple one as she becomes a Legacy Mentor.

TAPS UNDERSTANDS

For me, everyday life now shows little evidence of my widowhood aside from the black memorial bracelet that never leaves my arm and the scar forever on my

heart. I must, for the sake of those I love, compartmentalize grief and carry on as Heather Blalock. But, for one weekend a year, I get to be Heather Gray — the widow of an amazing man who died serving the country and uniform he loved, defending a way of life he wanted all to have. TAPS understands the need for a safe place to let my guard down and feel all the things without those around me worrying I’m about to go off the rails.

Now, at seminars, I mostly sit quietly and reflect, cry, and pray for those around me whose grief is clearly fresh. Their journey is just beginning. I have attended all the

workshops and shared the many “God Winks” I’ve been blessed to experience. The black shirts know me by name. But I will continue to proudly wear the giant badge with ribbons and a button bearing my David’s handsome face. It’s one way to keep the memory and legacy of my late husband alive. More than anything, it’s so good for my heart to have a place where it’s appropriate to express my enduring love even after all these years.

Perhaps for some, grief eventually dissolves. For those like me, grief evolves, and I’m grateful TAPS has been there for every step of the process.



INFLUENCING CHANGE FOR ALL SURVIVORS

Just as TAPS provides space for you to grow with your grief, we also empower you to use your voice to spark change and advance policy and legislation that impacts you, your fellow survivors, and those who will one day walk this path. Scan the QR code to learn more and get involved.

>> taps.org/advocacy



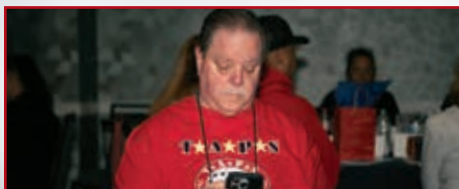
 taps.org/programs-services

For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died



TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

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.



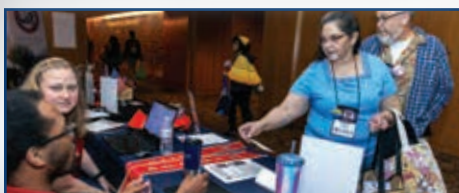
PEER-BASED EMOTIONAL SUPPORT • [TAPS.ORG/PEERMENTORS](https://taps.org/peermentors)

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.



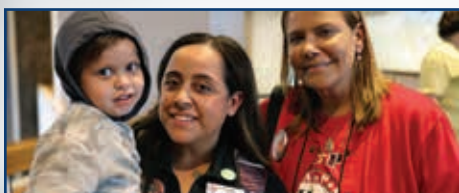
CASEWORK ASSISTANCE • [TAPS.ORG/CASEWORK](https://taps.org/casework)

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.

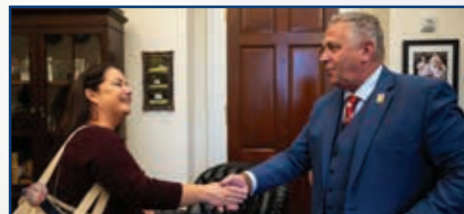


SUICIDE-LOSS SUPPORT • [TAPS.ORG/SUICIDE](https://taps.org/suicide)

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.



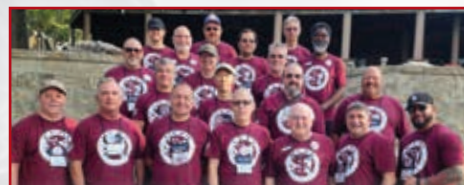
WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT • [TAPS.ORG/EMPOWERMENT](https://taps.org/empowerment)

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.



BALANCING *Grief* AND *Celebration*

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

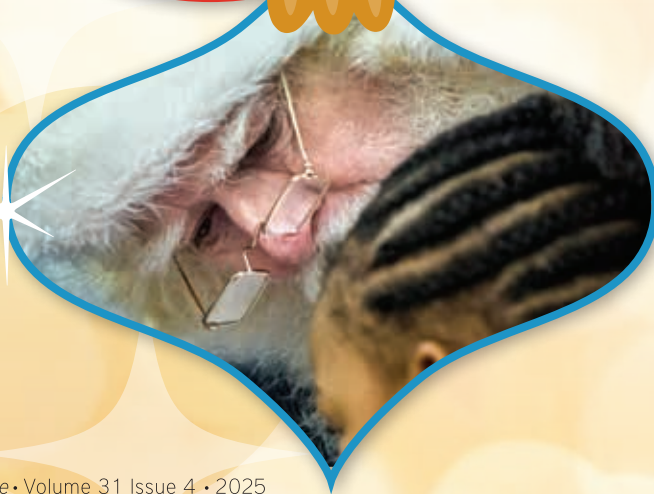
Holidays and family celebrations may not feel the same after the profound loss of a loved one, family member, or friend. Many long-held traditions are linked to fond memories of past celebrations with our special person. Often, the pomp and circumstance of the season seems too much to bear. This season can bring with it many challenges when we are in the depths of grief. It is equally true that this time of year brings many opportunities to celebrate with our children and model the important balance of honoring our grief and the lives of those who died, and leaning into the love, light, and wonder of the season. Even when life lacks luster after loss, we can strike a balance between joyous celebration and nurturing our grief.

MAKE SPACE FOR *Grief*

Someone once said that grief has borders. What they meant by this is: Grief takes up space within our lives, and things that occupy the space within cannot be ignored. This is one reason why putting on a happy face, ignoring our grief, and trying to push through as if everything is fine are not effective coping strategies — during the holidays or long term. Our children watch our reactions, and when they see us hide our pain, they often do the same. What if, instead of trying not to grieve, we leaned into key aspects of our grief that the season brings to light? After all, life often carries with it both joy and sorrow at the same time. Making space for grief during this time of year may offer a more balanced approach to self-care during the holidays.

FIND REASONS TO *Celebrate*

Although different after loss, many of the reasons we celebrated in the past can still be true for us and our children. We can still acknowledge the purpose of the season and open ourselves up to the wonder of the holidays — embracing traditions old and new.



WITH OUR CHILDREN THIS *Holiday Season*

Many of the season's traditional celebrations were born out of great struggle and the long, dark winter nights. Lighting candles, singing songs of hope, and anticipating goodness were all intentional ways throughout history that people found meaning during the harsh winter months. Maybe celebrating the season is as simple as acknowledging what we have all endured and recognizing the courage, strength, patience, and fortitude it has taken to navigate the challenges of grief. No matter what that looks like, let's make sure we not only reserve space for grief this season, but space for wonder, awe, and meaningful, memorable experiences, too.

LEAN INTO THE MESSAGES OF THE *Season*

The holiday season is a wonderful time to reinforce many of the values and virtues we hold dear with our children. Children are vulnerable to so many messages they receive every day of their lives. Particularly in modern times, children and teenagers — through technology — are susceptible to thoughts and ideas that might be contrary to our personal beliefs. Social media messages, online video shorts, and other digital content are accessible and influential to our children's hearts and minds. Holiday gatherings, faith traditions, and celebrations promote love, joy, acts of kindness, and goodwill — all strong foundations for our children's lives. The holiday season is a wonderful

time to reinforce these core values and virtues while meeting our grief and theirs with hope and meaning.

PRACTICE *Patience*

Grief can be messy, disruptive, unpredictable, and overwhelming, and it doesn't take holidays. When these challenges arise throughout the winter months, it is important to remember they're normal, and we need to exercise patience with ourselves and our children. The goal of the holidays is not to forget about our grief or avoid all painful memories or thoughts. So, when our grief comes over us, even at what might seem to be the most inconvenient time, we can take a deep breath, make space for our grief, and give ourselves the grace we need at that moment.



About the Author

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.



CONNECT WITH TAPS YOUTH PROGRAMS IN THE NEW YEAR

During the holidays and throughout the year, TAPS Youth Programs provide safe spaces for bereaved children to learn about their grief and themselves alongside fellow surviving children and caring mentors. Parents and guardians, there are resources and events available to you, too. Scan the QR code to learn more.

>> taps.org/youthprograms

MAKING IT MATTER

Cambridge and Lisa Brown ★ Surviving Son and Spouse of Retired Navy MCPO Robert Brown

After losing his dad to cancer the day after his 7th birthday, Cambridge Brown arrived reluctantly at his first Good Grief Camp in 2023 feeling hurt and out of place. Now 11, and a three-time Good Grief Camp attendee, Cambridge — well, let's let him tell you...

On that first day at TAPS, I was 8 years old, and I was sad. I didn't really want to be there; I didn't want to talk to anybody. I felt like the odd one out. But, I liked the music at the Good Grief Camp opening ceremony, especially "The Unicorn," performed by General Dempsey. When my dad and I listened to that song, my dad sang it just like the general. Hearing it at TAPS made me feel closer to my dad. Looking around the room, I realized that I wasn't the only kid who lost a parent and was going through a hard time. All the kids around me lost someone.

The second time I went to TAPS Good Grief Camp, I wore a unicorn outfit and sang "The Unicorn" on stage with General Dempsey. I always sang that song with my

dad, so I knew the words, and we took the time to get the unicorn outfit...I knew I had to do it.

What a difference a year makes; what a difference TAPS makes. Lisa, Cambridge's mom, explains how TAPS changed everything...

Even though my husband's friends — we call them the boys — have stuck by Cambridge, it was different at TAPS. These were people who didn't know his dad. He got to tell the story. And he didn't have to live in his dad's shadow. As he tells me, he gets to be himself while remembering his dad. I have my little boy back — the boy he's supposed to be. He's not angry. He's not upset. He knows that there are other kids like him. Now he wants to help other

kids going through what he's gone through. He's not angry at the military anymore.

During July — which he declared "Make it Matter Month" — Cambridge partnered with TAPS to raise \$50,000 to create more opportunities for surviving kids to attend Good Grief Camp. In his words...

My dad always taught me, "If you're going to say something, say it loud and be proud."

And, he is proud — a proud TAPS kid, a proud surviving kid — and a very special part of our TAPS Family. Cambridge, thank you for supporting other kids like you. Thank you for raising \$12,515 and counting for fellow survivors. Thank you for making it matter.



PASS IT ON

If you're inspired by Cambridge's story and looking for a way to support TAPS while you support fellow survivors and honor your hero, read "Be of Service" on page 34 or visit taps.org/fundraise.

The Importance of *Hope*

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

*"Today...I open my heart's hand to allow...
the touch of hope." - Julia Cameron*

Someone you love has died. In your heart, you have come to know your deepest pain. Your grief has brought challenges that seem beyond your own capacity to survive. Grief creates chaos, and your soul cries out. You naturally experience a sense of helplessness and, at times, the depths of hopelessness. It all feels so incredibly overwhelming. And as you live in this painful place, you come to learn that you must surrender to your grief, sit in your wound, and make space for your lost self.

If your experience is in any way like my own and those of the thousands of mourners I have had the honor to walk with and learn from, you may be feeling abandoned and alone right now. You may instinctively be questioning the meaning and purpose of life. You recognize that so many things in your life have changed — your future plans, dreams, concerns, and roles. You may discover yourself searching for meaning and asking countless how and why questions.

"How can this be happening?"

"How am I going to make it through this?"

"Why did this happen now, in this way?"

"Why am I feeling so lost?"

When we experience a loss, it reminds us of how little control we really have over some things in life. Naturally, loss can leave

us feeling incredibly powerless, seemingly helpless, and deeply hopeless at times.

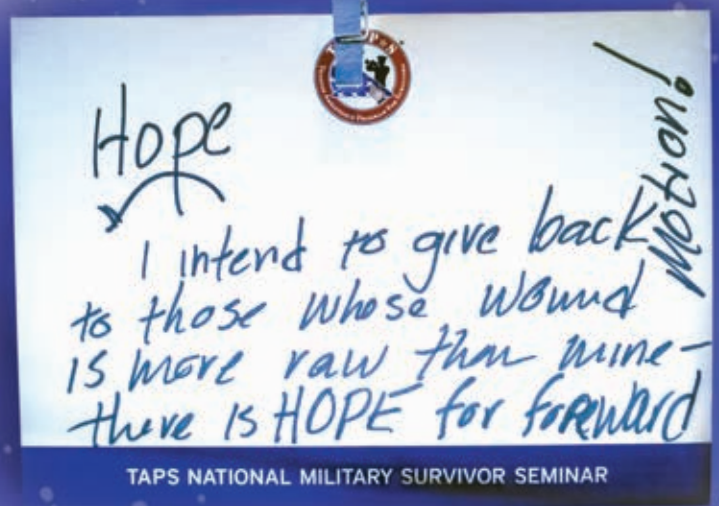
When we lose someone we love, it changes us. The person who died was a part of you and part of your life. This death means you must mourn a loss not only outside yourself, but inside yourself as well. At times, overwhelming sadness and loneliness may be constant companions to you on this grief journey. You may feel that when this person died, part of you died with him or her. And now you are faced with finding some sense of meaning at a time when you may be feeling empty and alone.

Your loneliness and emptiness are often present, even in the midst of family and friends. When others try to help by saying, "I know just how you feel," they usually do not. They cannot. They are not walking this walk for you. Your pain, your questions, your doubts, and your fears are unique. No one can know exactly how this feels for you.

While your grief is unique, some of the questions you may be asking are universal. The fears, doubts, and questions that come when we experience grief have been with us since the beginning of our awareness that loss is part of the cycle of life.



...the only way to the other side of pain and hopelessness
is *through* the pain and hopelessness...



Loss truly is an integral part of life. You are asking questions that others before you have raised. Like others who have been where you are, you may be feeling distant from your faith, perhaps even questioning it. These kinds of questions have been preserved in time because they are asked by almost everyone who experiences the pain of loss.

So, like your fellow travelers on this grief journey, you are faced with sitting in the wound of your grief. When you do, you surrender to it in recognition that the only way to the other side of the pain and hopelessness is through the pain and hopelessness. You acknowledge that you are willing to do the work that mourning requires. Paradoxically, it is in befriending your wound that eventually you will restore your life and reinvest in living.

Loss of Your Divine Spark and the Role of Hope in Your Healing

People in grief often begin their grief journey by expressing their sense of

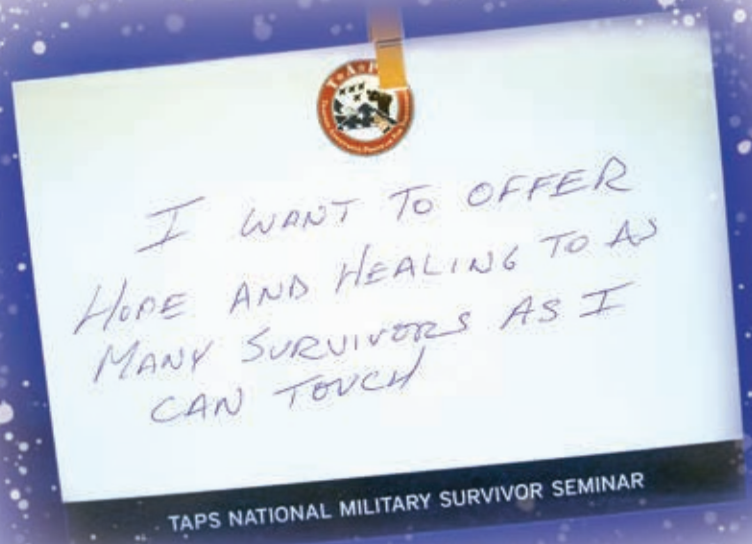
hopelessness: *I feel so hopeless or I am not sure how to go on.* Like you, the losses that have touched their lives have naturally muted, if not extinguished, their divine spark. Their *divine spark* is that internal energy that gives meaning and purpose to life. Your divine spark or life force is the keeper of your mind, your body, and your soul.

I discovered some time ago that a central part of my helping role is to gently and quietly bring hope to those in grief — hope that encourages them to discover a renewed divine spark and a desire to reenter life with meaning and purpose.

Each and every one of us as humans has a divine spark. We are each the keeper of our own spark or life force. My personal life losses and my role as a caregiver to others have taught me that hope is the vital ingredient that helps us reignite our divine spark after loss breaks our hearts and touches our souls. Hope is what draws us out of the dark and into the light.

My Hope for You

My hope is that you find wisdom and strength for today, tomorrow, and each day that follows. May you continue to



discover hope — an expectation of a good that is yet to be. May you continue to find new ways to renew your divine spark and believe that meaning, purpose, and love will come back into your life. No, you did not go in search of this loss. But it has come to you, and you have discovered the importance of sitting in your wound on the pathway to your healing. If you give up, the essence of who you are will be muted for the rest of your life. Hope can and will keep this from happening.

May you never give up, and may you consciously choose life! May you turn

your face to the radiance of joy every day. May you live in the continued awareness that you are being cradled in love by a caring presence that never deserts you. May you keep your heart open wide and receptive to what life brings you, both happy and sad. And may you walk a pathway to living your life fully and on purpose.

As you befriend hope and choose to celebrate life, my thoughts are with you. May your divine spark shine brightly as you share your gifts and your love with the universe.

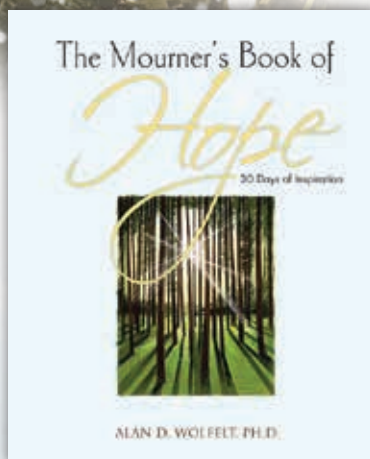


About the Author

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 Mourner's Book of Hope*, from which this article was excerpted. Visit www.centerforloss.com to learn more about grief and to order Dr. Wolfelt's books.



Hope is what
draws us out
of the dark
and into
the *light*.



HOPE AND HEALING

As you search for and nurture hope, the TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing® offers support through live webinars and courses and archived videos available any time, at no cost. Join us for Grieving During the Holidays on Dec. 16, and fill your new year with hope by making time for archived content that supports you right where you are.

>> taps.org/institute



After my son, Michael, died on Oct. 28, 2020, I searched for answers in books about grief and death. *Is there a heaven? Is he really gone? Why?* I was surprised by how often authors cited a connection between this world and the spirit world. Encounters years earlier — including seeing my father's apparition the evening after his death in 1982 — convinced me a spiritual realm existed and interacted with the temporal. But I never expected the vivid, very real interactions I've had with Michael.

VISIONS OF MICHAEL

Loretta Krause ★ Surviving Mother of
Retired Army MAJ Michael Krause

FIRST SIGHT

The night after Michael died, I saw him as clearly as if he were in the room with me. He sat against a light blue background on what appeared to be a brownish-colored seat. With his elbows on his thighs, head turned about 45 degrees away from me, he said, "I'm OK."

Through tears, I managed, "But I miss you."

Without ever turning to face me, he repeated, "I'm OK," then vanished.

THE FIRST WINTER

I saw him next in January 2021, in our new home — the only home Michael would never visit, yet there he was, standing just inside the front door, smiling his infectious smile. He looked around, then down the hall at me. He gave me two thumbs up and was gone. He approved.

About a month later, on Feb. 21, we traveled to Virginia for Michael's interment. Jil, Michael's widow, rented two contiguous hotel rooms, one for guests to gather, relax, and have something to eat, and another spillover room for the kids. The hallway between the rooms overflowed with guests in town for Michael's funeral the next day. Tired, I sat, feet up, in the room with the kids, looking intermittently between them and the hallway through the door.

Suddenly, Michael was there, one foot in the hallway, one foot inside the room, his right hand outstretched, and an anxious, almost worried look on his face — as though he just left the other room, hadn't found what he was looking for, and hurried to search this room. Wearing a black T-shirt and Bermudas, he was so real that, for a second, I forgot he died. I lurched up to say, "Michael, we're here. Your kids are here; come in!" But he was gone.

Reason took over. No corporeal being could have walked through that hallway crowd unnoticed. I knew it was his spirit. He came looking for his sons, and once he found them, he returned to his new home.

Is there a heaven? Is he really gone? Why?

ANOTHER WINTER

December 18, 2022, was a sad day for me because Michael's favorite holiday was approaching. The tree was up, and I was thinking of past Christmases when I'd make tassies, his favorite. He'd pop one after another into his mouth, devouring them. But that lifetime was gone.

I turned out the kitchen lights to start for bed, glanced back at the sliding door outlined in mini, white Christmas lights just in time to see a burst of light and an angelic figure glide through the glass and vanish. I entered that in my "Seeing Michael" journal late that Saturday night.

The next day, I connected the dots. Jil and the boys attended the Dec. 18 Arlington National Cemetery wreath-laying ceremony. Either she told him that I love him and we think of him every day — just as I asked — or he knew, and he came to visit.

SPRING

What happened over April 21-22 I will never forget. My husband, Mike, and I returned to Southport, North Carolina — where we moved from just months ago — the last home Michael visited. Once in our hotel room, I connected my laptop to the WiFi and went about unpacking.

I was by the microwave, at least 10 feet from my computer, when "Earth Angel" began playing. It took a few seconds to identify the song and its source. In that time, I heard a voice superimposed over the music — the DJ from the Tuesday doo-wop program I subscribed to, I thought.

But it never began by itself. I always had to select a link. Besides, it was Wednesday. Still confused, I moved toward the computer to mute the sounds when, suddenly, I realized the "DJ" was Michael! It was a message that Mitchel, Michael's brother, saved and played every morning. *Oh my God — what's happening?*

Then came the second voice — also Michael's. He was saying "Happy birthday, Dad," while at that very moment, he appeared on the screen with Jil on his left, trying to get their three boys, who were cavorting around Michael, to record a birthday message for their grandpa. This nearly hour-long video was a tribute that Mishi, Michael's sister, created for Mike's 80th birthday in August 2020. It included recorded messages from each of our children and grandchildren, yet it began playing at the exact moment Michael's message started.

Nothing on the menu bar indicated that something was playing. The cursor moved about — despite holding the mouse still in my hand — like a computer tech took control to fix a problem. But, this was no computer tech; this was Michael: the song, the video clips — a collective phenomenon that far exceeded my computer skills. Michael was letting me know he was here with us in Southport! I sank back in my chair, in awe.

Mike came into the room in time to hear Michael's voice wishing him a happy birthday and see the moving cursor. We both saw. We both heard.

I record Michael's communications in my journal as often as I can. They still occur today, five years later, though visions are not as frequent or intense as they used to be. For me, they confirm the existence of a direct link between me, here in the temporal world, and my son, in the spiritual world, and I find great comfort in that belief.

TAPS: WHERE YOU CAN SHARE

For grief's hopeful moments and hard days, TAPS creates supportive places to share and be understood. Whether you attend an Online Group, an in-person Care Group, or you submit your story for potential publication in *TAPS Magazine* at Editor@TAPS.org, this is your community. We're listening.



>> taps.org/onlinegroups



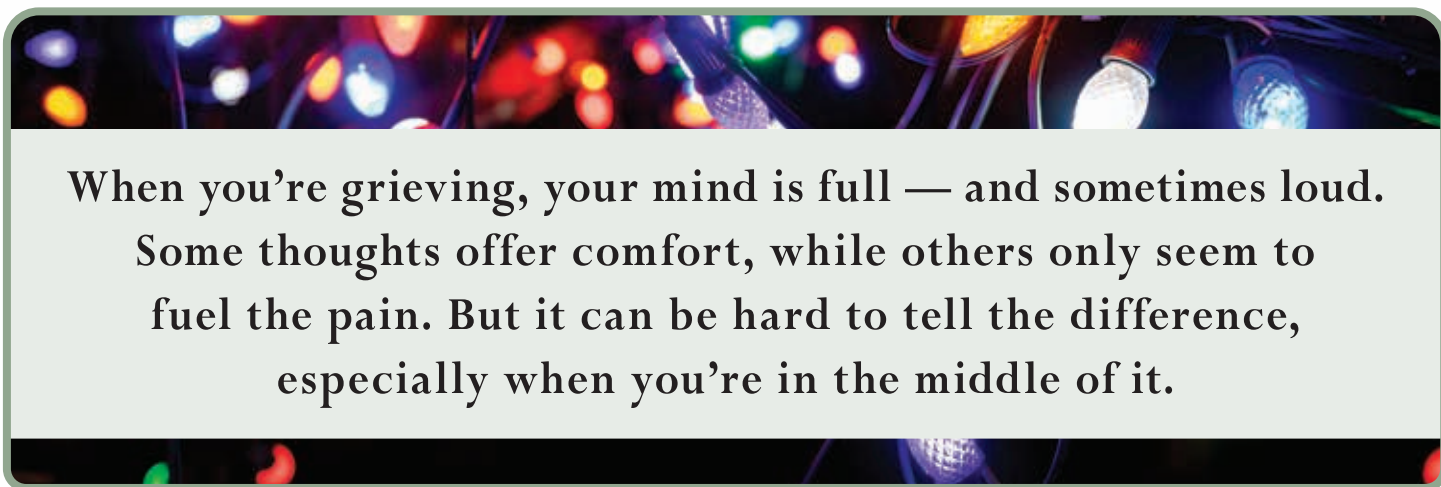
>> taps.org/caregroups



GRIEF RUMINATION SPIRAL

PART 2: *Helpful vs. Harmful*

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



When you're grieving, your mind is full — and sometimes loud. Some thoughts offer comfort, while others only seem to fuel the pain. But it can be hard to tell the difference, especially when you're in the middle of it.

WHAT HELPS:

FOUR TYPES OF SUPPORTIVE GRIEF THOUGHTS

Certain kinds of thoughts actually support healing. They help you stay connected to yourself and the person you lost, while allowing room to breathe.

EMOTIONAL PROCESSING THOUGHTS

These thoughts name emotions in a simple, direct way. They help you pause and feel what's real, instead of pushing emotions away or analyzing them:

- "I feel really sad today."
- "I miss them so much it aches."

They allow you to feel what's true, which is a vital part of healing.

MEANING-MAKING THOUGHTS

These thoughts help you explore what your loved one meant to you. They often reflect growth, values, or lessons tied to your relationship, helping grief feel purposeful — not just painful:

- "She taught me how to stand up for myself."
- "I still carry their love forward through the way I care for others."

They can help you feel a sense of continuity and connection.

ACCEPTING THE REALITY OF LOSS

These thoughts acknowledge what happened without spiraling into regret or denial. They create space for emotional truth while gently loosening the grip of resistance:

- "They are gone, and I miss them."
- "This hurts because I loved them."

It means acknowledging what's true without adding more resistance or fantasy.

SELF-COMPASSIONATE THOUGHTS

These thoughts speak to your pain and care instead of criticizing it. They remind you that struggle doesn't mean failure — and you're allowed to be human in your grief:

- "Of course this is hard. I'm doing the best I can."
- "I don't have to have it all figured out today."

You are someone who deserves care. That matters more than you think.

WHAT HURTS:

FIVE COMMON RUMINATION PATTERNS

Other types of thoughts tend to pull you deeper into suffering. They often show up as loops that never bring resolution.

INJUSTICE THOUGHTS

These thoughts focus on the unfairness of the loss. While they may be rooted in truth, they can keep you stuck in powerlessness, prevent emotional relief, and often increase helplessness or resentment:

- “It’s not fair.”
- “This shouldn’t have happened to me.”

COUNTERFACTUALS

These thoughts replay what you could’ve done differently. They often feel urgent, but rarely lead to peace — instead, they deepen guilt, delay acceptance, and usually lead to self-blame or guilt:

- “If only I had _____, they’d still be here.”
- “I should’ve seen the signs sooner.”

CATASTROPHIC PREDICTIONS

These thoughts project permanent devastation. They can make it difficult to imagine healing or future well-being, even when small moments of ease begin to return, and they can make healing feel out of reach:

- “I’ll never be OK.”
- “Everything is ruined forever.”

HOPELESSNESS

These thoughts erase any possibility of change or support. They block hope and discourage the small actions that often lead to relief or connection:

- “Nothing good can happen now.”
- “There’s no reason to try anymore.”

SELF-BLAME

These thoughts direct blame inward, often unfairly. They can spiral into shame and self-punishment, which makes it harder to receive care or connection, and makes relief or growth feel impossible:

- “It’s all my fault.”
- “I failed them in the end.”

A PRACTICE:

NOTICING WITH KINDNESS

Pick one thought you’ve had recently, and ask yourself:

- Is this helping me soften or stay stuck?
- What emotion does it stir in me?
- Could I offer myself a slightly gentler version of this thought?

We’re not trying to delete any part of your grief. But, with a little more awareness and a little more care, we can begin to make space inside it.



This is the second article in a four-part series, “Grief Rumination Spiral,” originally published on HeatherStang.com in May 2025. Part one appeared in the fall 2025 issue of TAPS Magazine, and parts three and four will be published in the first two issues of 2026.



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.



MAKING SPACE

You don’t have to face your swirling thoughts alone. The TAPS Men’s Program and Women’s Empowerment program create safe, supportive environments to face grief’s challenges and grow alongside peers who get it. Wherever you are, there’s a space for you.



>> taps.org/men



>> taps.org/empowerment

10 STEPS to Finding a *Great* Mental Health Counselor

Stan Popovich

Are you having a difficult time finding a mental health counselor? Whether you need help navigating your life after loss and the many emotions under the grief umbrella, or you're seeking professional support working through mental health challenges impacting your day-to-day life, the right counselor provides a safe space where you can openly express yourself and receive the compassion and tools you need to heal and move forward. The key is to find someone you can trust.

Signs You May Need to Talk to Someone

Seeing a counselor, especially as you work through the loss of a family member, friend, or battle buddy, can provide answers to your anxieties, validate what you're feeling — whatever that may be, and increase your chances of getting relief.

Some signs you might need a counselor include having trouble managing your day-to-day life; feeling overwhelmed by your emotions; having trouble keeping up at work or school, maintaining relationships, or sleeping or eating regularly; and experiencing feelings of anxiousness or depression.

How You Can Find a Good Counselor

1. Think about your goals. Setting goals in therapy provides direction and focus. When you are struggling with mental health challenges, it can be overwhelming and difficult to know where to start. By setting clear goals, you and your therapist can work together to develop a plan to improve your situation.

2. Talk to your doctor. Your family doctor is a great resource when looking for a

therapist. Explain your concerns and needs to your doctor, and he or she can point you in the direction of the proper treatment. Your primary care physician may know of some low-cost services that you can use to your advantage.

3. Go to your local hospital. Your local hospital is another source in your search. Staff members may know of additional mental health programs in your area. Your emergency center can handle your situation right away if you are struggling with fear, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts.

4. Ask your friends and relatives for advice. Don't be afraid to use your network. Family members and friends may be able to recommend reputable counselors in your area. Many churches and nonprofits, including TAPS, offer mental health resources. Asking the people you know — and who know you — who may attend these groups is a great way to find a good fit.





“ The right counselor provides a safe space where you can openly express yourself and receive the compassion and tools you need to heal and move forward. The key is to find someone you can trust. ”



5. Contact your local organizations.

Depending on where you live, there may be local support groups and organizations you can talk to. You can contact your local government agencies and community centers for additional information.

6. Find a mental health support group.

Many people in these groups are walking a similar path. In addition to finding community and healing in the support group, you might also pick up recommendations for counselors in your area.

7. Find a counselor you can work with.

Remember that finding a counselor to help you depends on how you interact with them and how they interact with you. It may take a couple of tries to find the right person, but do not give up.

8. Get the details. Ask whether the counselor or therapist has experience in dealing with grief — or whatever you're experiencing. Additionally, learning the

basics up front — like the practice's location, availability, whether sessions are in-person or virtual, if emergency appointments are available, and understanding what fees to expect and whether or not your insurance is accepted can save you from additional stress.

9. Measure your progress. The keys to a great therapist are affordability, the ability to talk openly, and how effectively they guide you through your current challenges. Your main goals are to find answers and acquire tools to help you manage your grief and overall mental health.

10. Do what is best for you. Choose a mental health professional you feel comfortable talking to — if it isn't a good fit, you can always change counselors. Don't pressure yourself if things are not working out. If, after a few sessions, you do not feel any improvement or you're having trouble feeling heard or connected, you may want to try another professional who can better meet your needs.



About the Author

Stan is the author of A Layman's Guide to Managing Fear, which covers a variety of techniques that can drastically improve your mental health. With years of experience writing on anxiety, depression, and grief, his work — which has been widely published — offers practical strategies for managing life's challenges and helps readers find hope and resilience. More information is available on his website: managingfear.com.



STEP 11: REQUEST A TAPS COMMUNITY RESOURCE REPORT

Your TAPS Family can connect you with local Care Groups and trusted counselors that can help you work through your loss and manage the many things you may be feeling in grief. Prioritize your mental health this holiday season and start the new year with support in place. Simply scan the QR code for more information and to request a Community Resource Report for TAPS-verified resources near you.

taps.org/griefcounseling

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

Please join us for a weekend of connection and growth at one of our 2026 national or regional seminars. Registration opens Dec. 1, 2025, at taps.org/events or by scanning the QR code at the bottom of the page. On our events page, you'll also find unique outdoor activities, retreats, and experiences. We hope to welcome you for a weekend of connection and growth.

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



>> [TAPS.org/events](https://taps.org/events)

NATIONAL SEMINARS

32ND ANNUAL NATIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP

MAY 21-25, 2026
Arlington, Virginia

NATIONAL MILITARY SUICIDE LOSS SURVIVOR SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP

AUGUST 14-16, 2026
San Antonio, Texas
Open to Suicide-Loss Survivors

REGIONAL SEMINARS

SOUTHWEST REGIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP

JULY 17-19, 2026
Scottsdale, Arizona

SOUTHEAST REGIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP

SEPTEMBER 11-13, 2026
Jacksonville, Florida

FAMILY CAMPS

COLORADO FAMILY WINTER RETREAT JANUARY 16-19, 2026

Estes Park, Colorado

GEORGIA FAMILY CAMP FEBRUARY 12-15, 2026 Fayetteville, Georgia

BE OF SERVICE

Rebecca Mizener ★ Surviving Mother of Army PFC Jesse Mizener

My son, Jesse Mizener, had a heart for people. He always thought of others. No one was lonely or upset in his presence — he was everyone's friend. After Jesse joined the Army, his first assignment was Fort Lewis, Washington. Jesse, his wife, and two babies weren't there long before he was deployed to Baghdad, Iraq.

It might sound crazy, but I was honestly excited that he was going overseas. I enjoy sending letters and packages to friends and family. So, in my head, it was an opportunity to send packages. I sent Jesse packages two to three times a week with things he needed and goodies he wanted. One day, he asked if I could send packages to a couple of his battle buddies who weren't receiving mail — he couldn't stand them not feeling supported. So, I began sending packages to Jesse and 15 other soldiers in his unit. This went on for 11 months.

Jesse was killed on Jan. 7, 2004. I was lost and suddenly without purpose. My husband suggested I keep sending packages, but Jesse's unit was now home.





REDISCOVERING PURPOSE

I somehow got the name of a soldier in Afghanistan. I wrote him a letter asking if I could send him a care package with toiletries and snacks. I'm sure he must have thought: *There's a crazy woman in California who wants to send me things, sure!*

Once again, I bought supplies and goodies and rediscovered my rhythm of packing and shipping. In each package, I included a letter asking for the name of any soldier who wasn't receiving mail. My one soldier soon became five, then 15, then 50! It was then that my friend, Stephanie Fetherlin, suggested we form a nonprofit organization. And, so, Packed with Pride (because I packed each box with the pride of a soldier's mom) was founded.

Names of Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines from all over the world came in, and once word got out, we began receiving donations — from \$5 to \$500 — which allowed us to buy supplies and ship hundreds of boxes. What began

in my formal living room eventually moved to the garage, which was a feat in itself. At the time, we'd lived in our house 20-plus years and had a garage full of things to prove it. It took a while to clear it out and set up shelving for our supplies. It wasn't long before even the garage was too tight for our operations.

PITCHING IN

Volunteers who wanted to support our troops — even some of the parents of service members who received one of our packages — pitched in with the packing. Businesses — Starbucks, See's Candy, and more — donated items. We were blessed in so many ways, including finding a home where Packed with Pride could grow: a local church, the Central Church of Christ, which offered their old youth building.

We ran Packed with Pride for 10 years, sending over 60,000 packages to hundreds of men and women serving in the military. I have binders full of letters thanking us for the boxes. These letters brought us all joy and encouragement.

FIND YOUR PLACE, MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Over our 10 years, I spoke at churches, service organizations — anywhere I could find an audience, and each time I spoke about Jesse. That helped me to heal. It was as if I had been carrying bricks on my shoulders; each time I spoke about him, I felt the emotional weight I carried after his death ease. And, each time, talking about him and our loss became easier.

This time was full of incredible experiences at the White House, the Pentagon, Andrews Air Force Base, Walter Reed Hospital, and more. In serving the deployed, I found a way to keep Jesse's memory alive and continue his legacy of supporting others.

Starting a nonprofit was challenging work — wonderfully satisfying, challenging work, and it's not for everyone. But, you can be of service somewhere. Your school, your place of worship, a local service organization, or a national nonprofit, like TAPS — you can make a difference, and you will notice positive changes in yourself. Find the place that is right for you, and be of service.



SERVICE MADE SIMPLE WITH TAPS

You can make a difference in the lives of fellow survivors while honoring the life and legacy of your hero through fundraising for TAPS. Your cause can be as unique as your fallen loved one and the bond you shared, and your donation to TAPS will support critical programming and survivors following in your footsteps on the path of grief. The possibilities are endless, and so is your potential to make a difference.

taps.org/fundraise



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](https://taps.org/donate)

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*"Your voice lives in the pauses,
in the things I notice but can't explain —
in the parts of me that feel most like home."*

– Chinwe Uju



IN WINTER'S QUIET PAUSES, FIND WARMTH
IN MEMORIES, COMMUNITY IN YOUR TAPS FAMILY,
AND COMFORT IN KNOWING THAT...

Love Lives On



PHOTO: DVIDS: SSGT JOSHUA JOSEPH MAGBANUA