

For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died

# TAPS®

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

SUMMER 2025





"WHEN YOU SAY THEIR NAME,  
YOU ARE NOT REMINDING ME  
THAT THEY DIED. YOU ARE  
LETTING ME KNOW THAT YOU  
REMEMBER THAT THEY LIVED."

JOHN POLO





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**BRING HOPE TO**  
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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

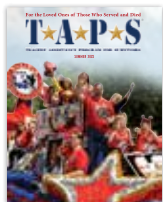
Men's Program

Young Adults Program

Youth Programs

Sports & Entertainment Events

*\* For full descriptions, see pages 18-19.*



## ON THE COVER:

Survivors attending the 31st Annual National Military Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp honor their heroes in the National Memorial Day Parade. 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.

## TAPS MAGAZINE VOLUME 31, ISSUE 2

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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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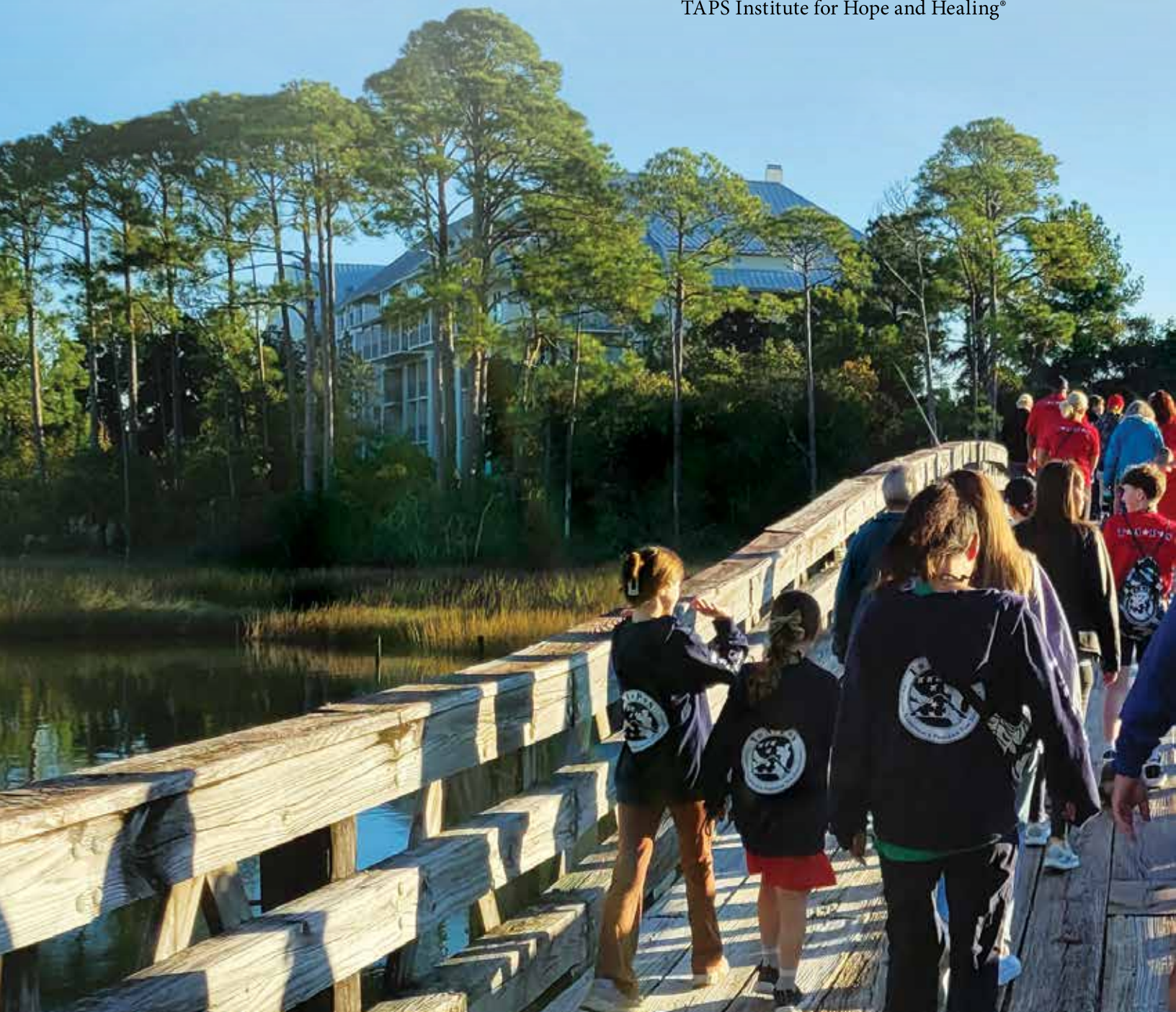
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PHOTO: TAPS ARCHIVES

SURVIVORS ATTENDING THE 2024 TAPS SOUTHEAST MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR AND GOOD GRIEF CAMP TAKE IN THE NATURE AROUND THEM. TAPS SEMINARS ALLOW ADULTS TO NAVIGATE THEIR OWN GRIEF WHILE CHILDREN AND TEENS CONNECT WITH PEERS AND MENTORS AT GOOD GRIEF CAMP. SEE PAGE 34 FOR THE REMAINING 2025 SEMINARS.





# To Our TAPS Family,

Welcome to the summer 2025 issue of *TAPS Magazine*. Within these pages, we hope you find not only comfort and connection, but the steady reminder that you are never alone. This publication is created with you in mind — to bring the heart of TAPS into your home, to share our collective strength, and to honor the love we carry for those who served and sacrificed for our nation.

Each of us in the TAPS Family carries a story — of love that endures beyond death, of heartbreak and healing, of courage in the face of unimaginable loss. In this issue, you'll find reflections from fellow survivors who have walked their own path through grief. Their words may echo parts of your own journey — in the quiet moments of sorrow, in the search for meaning, and in the brave steps forward as we learn to live with loss. Their stories remind us that healing doesn't mean letting go — it means moving forward with our loved ones forever in our hearts. Love lives on.

Over Memorial Day weekend, we came together in Washington, D.C., for the 31st Annual TAPS National Military Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp. For more than three decades, this sacred gathering has been a place where love, remembrance, and peer support create space for powerful healing. While only a portion of our TAPS Family can join in person each year, the spirit of Memorial Day — and of that beautiful weekend — lives on in every act of remembrance and every embrace extended through this community all across the nation.

TAPS is here for you every day of the year — not just during a seminar or on a holiday. Whether it's through our Peer Mentor Program, our Online Groups, the 24/7 National Military Survivor Helpline, or the many connection points offered by the TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing®, Team TAPS, TAPS Togethers, Care Groups, and our Youth and Young Adult Programs — you always have a place where your grief is understood, your hero is honored, and your heart can begin to heal.

I invite you to explore the stories and resources in this issue. Use the QR codes throughout the magazine to learn more, or visit us at [taps.org](https://taps.org). You can also connect with us on social media, @tapsorg, or call us anytime at 202-588-TAPS (8277). We are always here for you — ready to listen, to help, and to walk beside you.

We are bound together by love, by remembrance, and by the strength that comes from knowing we carry one another through.

With love and deep care,

Bonnie Carroll,  
*TAPS President and Founder*





# DEAR TAPS



## Open Your Heart

My husband and I had the opportunity to attend our first TAPS seminar in San Antonio this past year, and what an experience! To walk into a room knowing everyone there is experiencing the same grief and understands it opens your heart. It allows you to let your guard down and let yourself grieve. Everyone was so loving and so welcoming from the first day! We loved it so much, we plan to attend the suicide seminar in Phoenix this coming November.

Tosha Hull ♥ Surviving Sister of Army SFC Aaron James Weaver

## Dreams

"I have hope now, even though it is small. I know I have a few more struggles, but I realize I can still have dreams for my own life. Now I'm doing the grief work with 'my eyes wide open.' Even though you told me this journey was difficult, thank you for showing me there is still good in the world — still people who care. I will keep stepping down the road you started with me."

Nancy Carnes ♥ Surviving Spouse of Navy Veteran Mark Carnes

## Lean In

"From the first phone call, TAPS has easily offered the very best support. It's hard when you're still in survival mode to really let people in, especially from some distant nonprofit, but I decided to lean in and be open, if not for myself, for my children. I'm so glad I did. It was evident from the start that TAPS as an organization is not only top-tier in terms of resources, but it is full of top-tier people."

Kristin Teffeteller ♥ Surviving Spouse of Army National Guard MAJ Charles Teffeteller

## Compassion

"TAPS was there for me after I lost my sister to suicide. Military culture is difficult; those who are grieving this loss — if anything like me — feel alone and don't know where to turn. Friends and family are great, but sometimes we need more, especially when they are grieving themselves. My sister was my person, and I was so thankful that TAPS was less interested in how she passed and more interested in supporting me in my grief. Regardless of how a soldier is lost, families deserve to be treated with respect and compassion — whether they lost a child, spouse, or sibling. They were your family, and I want to ensure others have the opportunity to have support as I did. I want to be part of the solution, ensuring fewer people have to carry this alone."

Karen Hasselman ♥ Surviving Sister of Army CPT Kelly Hasselman



## WRITE IN

Share your TAPS experience with fellow survivors. Your words can bring comfort, connect others to TAPS programs, and may be featured in a future issue of *TAPS Magazine*.

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



# FINDING YOUR

Erin Leigh Nelson & Colleen E. Montague, LMFT



*The loss that brought you to TAPS and the secondary losses that follow can impact your connection to the world around you and the people in your circle — even those closest to you. As you navigate your grief and changing relationships, let the words that follow be a guide and source of support.*

## CHANGES IN Community

You are living with your loss in connection with others and finding ways to grieve together with different personalities, grief reactions, and dynamics with family and friends. Your relationships impact the landscape of your grief. Misunderstandings happen after a loss since each person affected in your circle will experience grief differently. Your emotions are high, and your coping skills are tapped. Each person wants to have their loss validated and acknowledged in the way they are experiencing it. It's common to want to compare pain, even when you are grieving the same loss.

You may notice that your most intimate relationships with your parents, in-laws, children, extended family with aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends have changed. You have changed, and each person affected by the loss has changed. Because death often makes people feel uncomfortable, interactions can be awkward, leaving you feeling like you did something wrong. You are learning to live with others in unfamiliar ways. As one dad said, “I don’t call it my ‘new normal.’ I call it my ‘not normal.’”

Shifts in relationships can add to your grief. Any previous tension may intensify. When you are living in the fragility of grief, comments that were once viewed as harmless may feel offensive. One mom said, “I had a falling-out with my in-laws after the death of my husband. The conflict left my daughter grieving not only for her dad but also for her grandparents.” Conversely, sometimes current conflicts are put aside early in grief because what once seemed important doesn’t matter much.



Remember that any heavy work **becomes lighter when you hold it with others.** Having a community, no matter how small, to hold your pain will help you move toward healing.





# Community

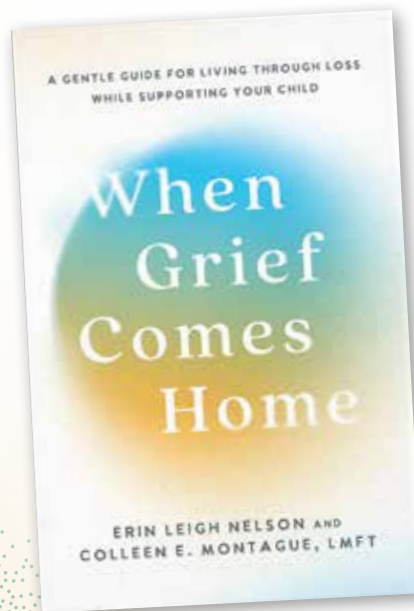
## YOUR HOME Team

How do you find the companions most helpful to you? Consider who you want on your home team. You may have a wide circle of support, but not everyone is helpful. Identify the roles of those who can support you in different ways. Who is empathetic? Who can be with you in your anger? Who can take daily walks with you? Who can give you a hand with household tasks? Who do you trust to help with your kids? Who can you call, regardless of the time of day or night? One mom whose husband died said, "One night, I woke up with a wicked bout of a stomach virus. I was sick alone for the first time. My husband had always checked on me as I lay on the bathroom floor. I called the friend I knew would answer. She stayed on the phone with me through the night and invited the kids and me over the next day. She made a bed for me, played a movie, and kept me hydrated while my kids played with hers."

Maybe you feel your home team is lacking. You don't have the capacity to nurture new relationships, activities, or hobbies you once did. Shortly after moving to a new town, one mom's husband died while she was still establishing her community. She said, "I spent a lot of time connecting via video calls with my family and friends back home and joined an online group of bereaved moms."

Over time, you may discover a newfound capacity to find new routines alone or with others, learn something new, or rekindle a fondness for a hobby you once enjoyed. You may find you want to be with others who have faced a similar loss. One mom said, "When I finally connected with other moms who had lost a child, it felt like they had a passport to my heart that no one else had." Community-based and online support groups are good places to find those who understand what it's like to experience a loss like yours.

Remember that any heavy work becomes lighter when you hold it with others. Having a community, no matter how small, to hold your pain will help you move toward healing.



*This is an excerpt from When Grief Comes Home: A Gentle Guide for Living Through Loss While Supporting Your Child, published in February 2025 by Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group. It is reprinted by TAPS with permission.*



### About the Authors

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

Colleen Montague is a licensed marriage and family therapist and director of community outreach for Jessica's House, supporting parents and their children after a death in their family.

## FIND YOUR COMMUNITY WITH TAPS

Let TAPS help you shape your support network. Turn to the next page for community-based opportunities to connect with your peers in grief. Whether you're looking for a recurring Online Group or in-person Care Group, or a single-day event to meet other survivors in your area, TAPS has a program for that and so much more.



# Community &

# CONNECTIONS

TAPS understands the needs of a grieving heart are not universal. We offer a variety of online and in-person opportunities to make sure you have the supportive community you need to heal and grow.

## Upcoming **EVENTS**

TAPS events, like those listed on page 34, offer opportunities for healing and personal growth.

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



**>> TAPS.org/events**

## More ways to **CONNECT**

### ▶ **TAPS CARE GROUPS**

TAPS Care Groups bring the comfort of TAPS to your local community with meetings happening all throughout the year. These recurring meetings provide time to talk, opportunities to listen, and a comforting reminder that we are not alone in grief. Scan the QR code to find a peer-led group near you.



**>> TAPS.org/caregroups**

### ▶ **TAPS TOGETHERS**

Looking for a way to connect with survivors in your local community outside of Care Groups? TAPS Togethers are one-day, organized social events led by TAPS staff members or a survivor like you to share experiences and expand the local community of support. Scan the QR code to share an idea for an event near you.



**>> TAPS.org/tapstogether**

### ▶ **TAPS ONLINE GROUPS**

No matter where you are in the world, you can access TAPS through Online Groups. Groups are organized by relationship to the fallen, cause of death, and peer group and occur at a variety of convenient times, giving you the option to attend one or multiple groups that meet your needs and your schedule.



**>> TAPS.org/onlinegroups**

### ▶ **IN-PERSON & ONLINE WORKSHOPS**

TAPS offers in-person and online opportunities for personal growth that help you heal, build resilience, find meaning and gratitude after loss, and nurture relationships. From Peer Mentor training to Theatre Lab and a diverse selection of webinars and workshop series through the TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing®, we have courses to support your growth through grief.



**>> TAPS.org/workshops**





# Words Will *Never* Be Enough



Ava Henrickson ★ Surviving Mother of U.S. Army SSG Adam Henrickson

**F**irst Sergeant Ryan Teter's 20-year military career in the Colorado National Guard has been peppered with many memorable and commendable acts of service. For months at a time, he was called away from his family, serving in Korea, Iraq, Bahrain, and Afghanistan — not to mention the training and temporary duties in between. As a leader, he's shaped the careers and attitudes of younger soldiers, while pursuing his own career goals.

His most rewarding mission, though, had him drawing on skills he didn't know he had. It taught him a lot about himself, the military, death, and compassion. When my only son and youngest child, SSG Adam Henrickson, died of suicide on Sept. 10, 2020, in Ruschberg, Germany, 1SG Teter became my casualty assistance officer (CAO), acting as the liaison between the U.S. Army and me. I was notified of Adam's death by an Army chaplain and notification officer around midnight that night. My world crumbled — the absolute worst thing that could happen had happened to me.

I met 1SG Teter two days after the notification when he came to my house for our first meeting. I opened the door that Saturday morning and saw a soldier dressed for battle. His kind eyes looked back at me — a moment of peace. He appeared to be as nervous as I was, neither of us knowing what to expect. It may have been at that initial meeting when he told me this was his first CAO assignment.

He arrived to a living room full of my people — with more on the computer, on Zoom. We all had questions for 1SG Teter, most of which he didn't have the answers to — not because he wasn't prepared, but because that's the nature of the duties of a casualty officer. As 1SG Teter explained it himself, getting through the next six months or so would be like eating an entire elephant: one bite at a time.

"I knew going in the first day that I was going to have to say, 'I don't know' a lot, and that's difficult to hear," he recalled. "It's a very good lesson in empathy."

But it wasn't nerves, exactly, that 1SG Teter was feeling that first day:

"I knew it would be a challenge, but I found the [CAO] training engaging. I saw the purpose of doing it, and I felt ready, but I also felt a lot of anxiety. Fortunately, a lot of other training I've had in the military taught me not just about how to handle stressful situations, but about communication and getting through giant conversations, so I felt prepared."

That doesn't mean it was easy. "It turned out to be far more complex than I took it at face value," he said.

The biggest challenge 1SG Teter said he faced at the time was Covid. The pandemic caused delays and changes in the way things were normally done — the way he was trained. Another challenge was the eight-hour time difference between Germany and Colorado.

But, 1SG Teter was used to challenges. He deployed three times, supporting

★ ***My world crumbled***  
— the absolute worst thing that could happen had happened to me.





***His most rewarding mission,***  
though, had him drawing on skills he didn't know he had.  
It taught him a lot about himself, the military, death, and compassion.



Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Spartan Shield. He shared that he's learned a great deal during his service experience, but his training — and ultimately his assignment — as a CAO made him look at things differently, at work and at home.

When he took the CAO assignment, his daughter was only 8 weeks old. While his wife had been through deployments, this was a new challenge for the new mom.

"My wife is exceedingly patient and supportive of the National Guard. So, she understands and has continued to understand that if I get a call, I have to go," said 1SG Teter. "For her, it was probably easier to understand why I had to be fully committed to this thing. The challenge was being emotionally tied up with the CAO case and having nothing left emotionally after that, and not being the most emotional person to begin with.

"My wife has a very strong sense of duty. In a way for her, if she backs me up, it's like her form of service," said 1SG Teter.

Despite his belief that he was not an emotional person, 1SG Teter went above and beyond the call of duty during those days when I was in immense grief. He offered a shoulder to cry on, explained how the military worked, how cars worked, and always offered a nonjudgmental space where my feelings could flow. The morning before Adam's celebration of life, 1SG Teter came over early to place my son's Army pins, medals, and commendations in the box that held the flag from his casket — now ceremoniously folded to fit the triangle-shaped box.

Facing death and death-related decisions is not easy, and 1SG Teter said Adam's

death had a profound influence on him. "It impacted me in a way, and I tried to channel what I learned into my soldiers," he said. "Something profoundly negative happened, what positive can we leverage out of it?" He was able to help his soldiers think about what's important in life. "That motivation on my part was extremely pure," said 1SG Teter.

All the lessons 1SG Teter collected along the way served a greater purpose; he said that being a CAO "was the best preparation possible to be a first sergeant," which he became a few months after he served as a CAO. In fact, he thinks the CAO course should be mandatory for all soldiers because of how well it explains all the military forms and death benefits.

After my son's death, 1SG Teter changed the way he had his death gratuity payment set up, in that not all of it would go to his wife; a portion would go to one of his family members, a portion would go to one of his wife's family members, and a portion would go to a friend, for a very good reason.

Even though they insisted they didn't want his money, 1SG Teter responded, "This money is so that you can stop what you're doing and go take care of my wife and kid [if something happens to me]."

And even though he didn't know my son, Adam, he felt like he knew him throughout this process of helping me navigate his death and all the duties that came with it. "I recognized him in my soldiers," said 1SG Teter. "Never having met him, I felt like I could recognize him in myself, too. I think I felt some connection as we went through the process."

My son was a hard worker — an Army mechanic who loved to work on German





***Even though he didn't know my son,***  
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and all the duties that came with it.



cars in his spare time. He also traveled all around Europe and took beautiful pictures. His death by suicide was a total shock; we all thought he was living his best life.

According to data from the U.S. Department of Defense, Adam was one of 406 active-duty military members to

die by suicide in 2020 out of a total of 1,017 active-duty deaths that year. Many of those who died had family members who were assigned a CAO. And, if they were lucky, they got one as good as 1SG Teter. He became like family throughout the months-long process of closing out my son's affairs, and we stay in touch,

years later. Maybe it was his duty to help me, but it was his humanness that bonded us. I think my sister, Angie, said it best: "I just want to say 'thank you' — for being available 24/7, putting your life on hold, for letting us scream and holler and holding us as we cried. Words will never be enough to express our gratitude."

### MEETING YOU WHERE YOU ARE

TAPS programming is designed to pick up where military casualty services end, meet you wherever you are in grief, and walk the path of grief with you. From peer support to casework assistance to survivor advocacy, and any need in between, you will find what you're seeking in the TAPS community.

**>> [taps.org/casework](https://taps.org/casework)**



**>> [taps.org/peermentor](https://taps.org/peermentor)**



**>> [taps.org/advocacy](https://taps.org/advocacy)**





# ECHOES IN THE

Chris Beck ★ Surviving Father of U.S. Navy PO1 Jarrod Beck

The silence in grief is excruciatingly loud — it's deafening. It floods the soul and overpowers the senses. But, how can silence be so intense and overwhelming while remaining completely unnoticed by others? I pondered this question for months, attempting to achieve some level of understanding. When my son, Jarrod, passed away on Jan. 12, 2023, I faced hundreds of people and countless decisions, all while navigating an overwhelmingly emotional journey. A constant, relentless stream of noise filled my ears and clouded my mind. Several months after all of Jarrod's affairs were settled, visitors ceased, decisions were made,

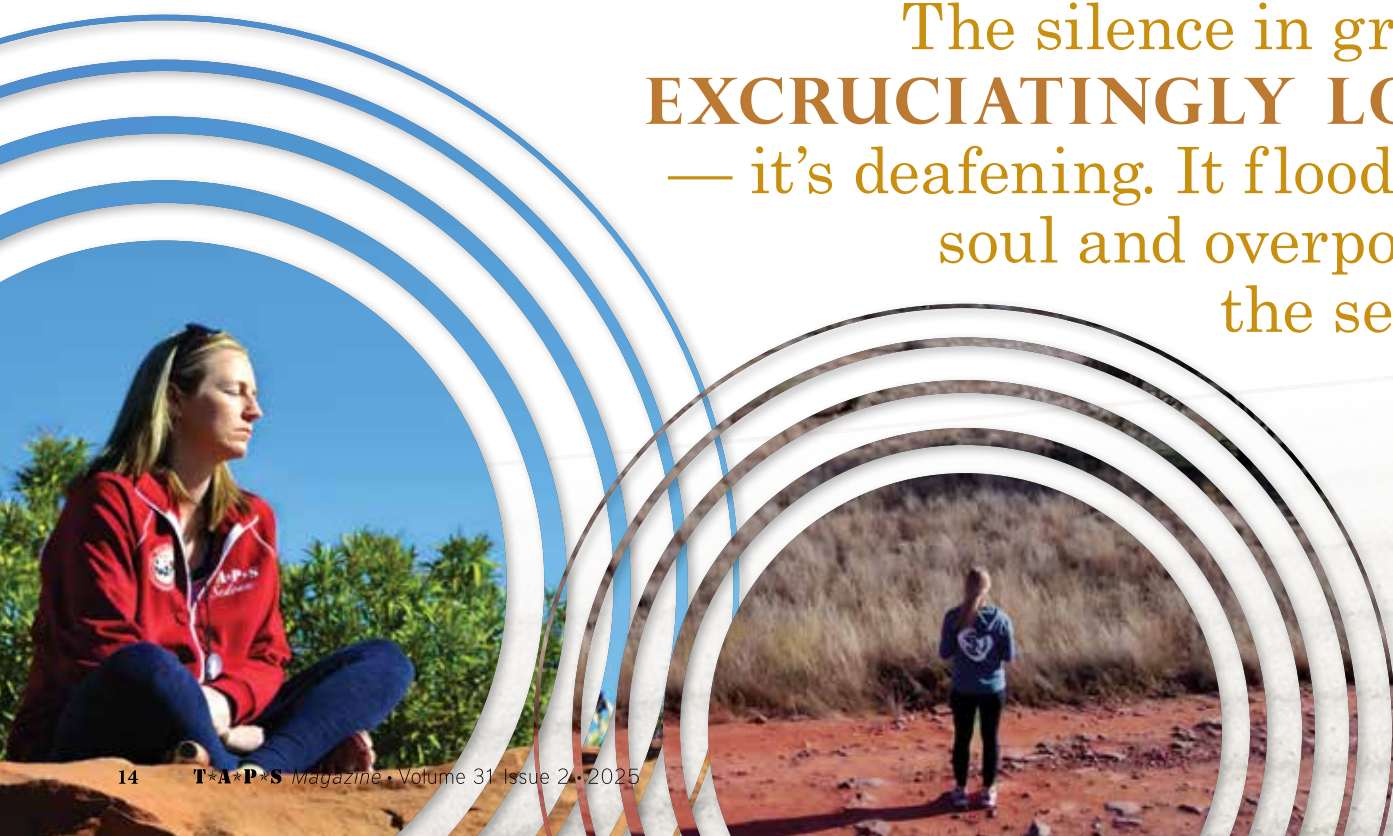
and paperwork was completed, the silence set in. There were no more condolence calls or emails to send. My wife, Julie, and I found ourselves alone, and it was in that silence that Jarrod's absence became the loudest.

The silence was every memory I was unable to share with him. It was every unanswered text message and each time I picked up the phone to call, only to remember that no one would be there to respond. It was every trip I planned without him; the music and movies he loved that I avoided playing; and his favorite meals, which I prepared and ate across from an empty chair. Each birthday, holiday, or family gathering felt incomplete

without him. Not hearing his voice or laugh — not seeing his face — underscored his absence even more. Sitting in this silence with my unanswered questions, the finality of my loss became real.

In his book, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*, David Kessler wrote, "We don't like loss. We will never be OK with it, but we must accept it, even in its brutality, and, in time, acknowledge the reality of it." Silence, whether it is profoundly quiet or intensely overwhelming, plays a significant role in the grieving process. It provides an opportunity for reflection, healing, connection, and understanding.

The silence in grief is  
**EXCRUCIATINGLY LOUD**  
— it's deafening. It floods the  
soul and overpowers  
the senses.





# SILENCE

## He will always be CONNECTED TO ME by the echoes in the silence.

In this silence, I finally acknowledged the reality of my loss: Jarrod was gone and was not coming back. No matter how hard I tried to wish it away, pretend it didn't happen, or refuse to accept he was gone, the silence endured — deafening and empty. His traumatic death resulted in the unintentional, but conclusive, form of “ghosting.” My head knew he was gone, but my heart refused to accept it.

Grief is odd because it is painful, uncomfortable, and emotional — experiences we naturally avoid in life. Yet, to lessen grief's grip, we must sit down with it, listen to it, and invite it in. Acknowledging my grief, embracing the pain, and recognizing the loss of Jarrod allowed me to understand that silence serves as a bridge from sorrow to meaningful connection.

Though he isn't here, Jarrod will always break the silence. He fills my heart and soul with memories...echoes. If I rid my mind of distractions and listen hard enough,

I can hear his echoes returning: memories from a life well lived; the legacy he left behind that continues to inspire so many people; the laughs we shared; the places we visited; his triumphs that we celebrated; and — of course — the love. In these echoes — where the noise quiets and the silence fills with hope — my soul finds peace. It is in the echoes of the silence that I honor him by not reducing his life to his death, but rather remembering that he actually lived.

Every now and then, my soul releases a smile, a long-forgotten memory, or a happy tear to remind me that Jarrod is always with me. While my cries go unanswered and his voice never returns, he remains. And he will always be connected to me by the echoes in the silence.

### SUPPORT IN THE SILENCE

Even in grief's quietest moments, your TAPS Family is never out of reach. You can call the National Military Survivor Helpline any time, day or night, at **800-959-TAPS (8277)**. Your call will be answered by a compassionate TAPS staff member who can connect you to the support you need — even if that support is just to be heard by someone who understands your grief.





# COURSES AND

Ken Naglak ★ Surviving Father of U.S. Navy ABHAN Joseph Naglak

**L**osing a person with whom we shared a close bond is shattering. That is certainly how I felt after the loss of my son, Joe. One moment, I was thinking about his recent engagement to the girl of his dreams and their wedding plans; Joe's fiancée and her mom worked diligently while Joe was underway — place and date set, plans were moving along superbly. Hours later, as the day was ending for me, I received a phone call from a Navy chaplain who needed to see me as soon as possible. Was I home? He wouldn't say why, but I knew.

I was proud to call my son a United States sailor. He joined the Navy to give back to the country that gave him so much. Joe was born in Seoul, South Korea, and we

adopted him in 1999. As I soon learned that he died during flight operations while out at sea, plans halted abruptly, and a cloud of shock settled in.

## So What Is Grief All About?

Unexpected and overwhelming disbelief, anguish, and even despair hit immediately after we are confronted by loss. We try to make the new reality make sense and understand what happened and why. We begin the long, arduous, and often complex process of grieving.

Brené Brown reminds us that humans are “emotional, feeling beings; who, on rare occasions, think.” There is much truth to that sentiment. We go through life experiencing a multitude of emotions, but we rarely give them much thought. Some emotions, such as love, happiness, and belonging, are more than welcome. They are easy to express.

Others, grief for one, are not so welcome or straightforward. Yet, grief is the mirror

**Grief is the mirror  
image of love —  
the other,  
unwanted side  
of the same coin.**

## SUMMER LEARNING

The TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing® does not take summers off. The institute's experts will offer an informative and empowering lineup of webinars and workshops, just as they do throughout the year. Whether you are searching for a one-time course on a specific topic, an ongoing series, or you're open to learning something new about yourself or your grief, you can find the healing and connection you seek through the TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing®. Scan the QR code to see the most up-to-date course listings — including meeting times, presenters, and a brief summary — and register for open webinars and workshops. If you don't see what you're looking for, you can browse the webinar archives for even more learning opportunities.



**>> [taps.org/institute](https://taps.org/institute)**



# CLASSMATES

Grief is a natural reaction to loss. It is the price of a strong, well-founded relationship with another human being built on mutual respect, caring, and love.

image of love — the other, unwanted side of the same coin. Many of us find grief difficult to express, but to begin to heal and accept our new reality, we must somehow learn to live with it and move forward with it. If we do not, we risk remaining as we are: lonely, angry and upset, hurt and resentful, to name just a few.

This is where TAPS and the TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing® have helped me and fellow survivors, and I know it can help those who will follow us. We need to know what grief is all about. It is not an illness. It is not a weakness or something to be avoided. We are not crazy. Grief is a natural reaction to loss. It is the price of a strong, well-founded relationship with another human being built on mutual respect, caring, and love. Because one person in that relationship has now died, the relationship can no longer remain as it was. It must change. That is the process of grief that we all face.

## Tools for the Journey

The TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing® and its always-growing course library, which includes Zoom classes and webinars about navigating grief, cultivating meaning, developing positive relationships, building resilience, and many others, have prepared me for my journey through grief and connected me with like-minded peers and friends who walk the path with me. We console, encourage, and gently guide each other along the way.

These courses — offered online and at no cost to survivors — and the connections I've made have empowered me, and I believe they will do the same for you and anyone suffering the loss of someone dear who served in the military. So, I encourage you to sign up, give a listen, participate, learn, and connect. The mutual support and empathy that connection brings and the tools at our fingertips hold the hope we seek.

### July 8

*Healing in Nature — Finding Peace and Renewal After Loss*

### July 14

*Developing Positive Relationships*

### Aug. 5

*Making Meaning, Staying Connected, and Post-Traumatic Growth*

### Aug. 5 - Sept. 16

*Building Resilience*

### Aug. 6 - Jan. 21

*Dare to Lead 2.1, Cohort 21*

### Aug. 19

*Building a Strong Foundation — Self-Care and Family Care Essentials*

### Sept. 15

*Navigating Difficult Conversations*

### Sept. 30 - Nov. 4

*Creating Our Belonging*





 [TAPS.ORG/PROGRAMS-SERVICES](https://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.





# SEEING THE FORGOTTEN

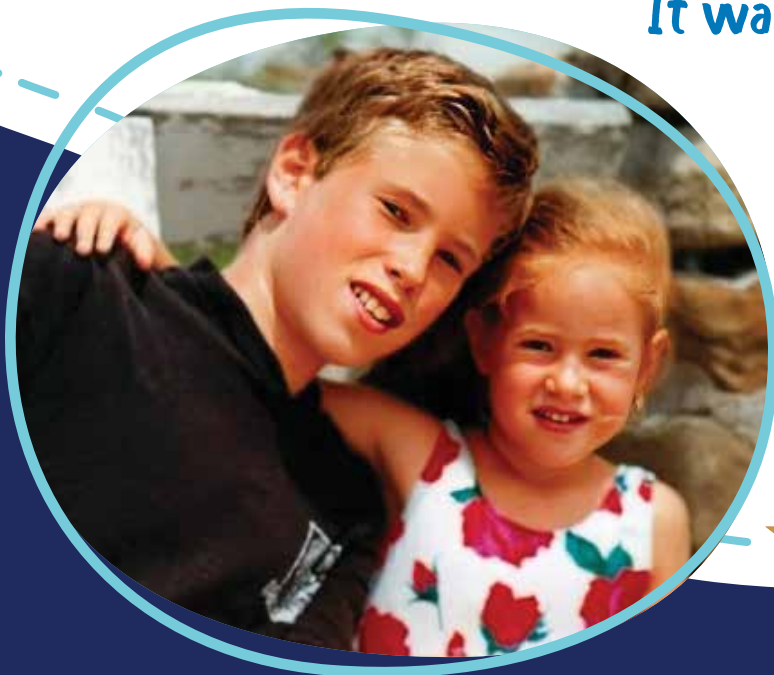
Shortly after my oldest brother was killed in Afghanistan in 2009, I started to receive calls from TAPS. The first call came while I was in class, struggling to make it through yet another long day. Curiosity piqued by the unknown number, I checked my voicemail from the bathroom. A smooth, comforting voice told me that she had heard about Ben's death and wanted to reach out. She thought that I might need some extra support. There's no doubt that I did need extra support, but I was skeptical. Ben was my best friend and guiding star, but in the story of his death, I played only a supporting role at best — a one-line extra, most often seen in the background of large group shots. How did she know about me? No one knew about the sibling griever. I may have been new to the world of sibling grief, but I knew we were the invisible ones.

It wasn't until years later that I would hear surviving siblings referred to as the "forgotten mourners," our grief chronically dismissed and disenfranchised. Research into familial losses shows that siblings experience disproportionately high rates of disenfranchised grief — meaning their loss is not socially acknowledged or supported. This lack of validation can lead to avoidant coping mechanisms and complicated grief disorders. I was so used to being dismissed, to having my grief written off as the dramatics of a woman in her 20s, that I was skeptical of anyone who claimed to want to help me. On top of that, I was determined to direct all of my grief-fueled rage at the Army and anyone (or anything) associated with it. I saw the Army not as how Ben lived, but how he died. I was insistent that the Army had killed the most beautiful soul I'd ever met, and anyone who tried to convince me otherwise was part of the

problem. They stole him from me, and now they wanted to help? No, thank you.

The second time TAPS called, the voicemail played back the same comforting voice, the same offer of support. My rage had grown stronger by that time, as is often the case. Grief rage is a special kind of anger that can reach a level of intensity previously unimaginable. I never knew true rage until I knew grief; then, it became one of my most common emotions. And here was that call, again — another voicemail offering to help. I couldn't believe a stranger genuinely wanted to help me. I assumed they were using me to get to my mom, and I was not about to let that happen. Ben was gone, and now it was my job to protect her. I did the thing that so many bereaved siblings do: I prioritized the emotional needs of my grieving parents and other family members and entered protection mode. No one else

*It wasn't until years later that I would hear surviving siblings referred to as the "forgotten mourners," our grief chronically dismissed and disenfranchised.*





# MOURNERS

Annie Sklaver Orenstein

★ Surviving Sister of U.S. Army Reserve CPT Benjamin Sklaver

*I was falling deeper into the abyss of sibling loss, something no one talked about, but that consumed my every thought.*

in my family would be hurt, not on my watch. Unfortunately, when we put the grief of others before our own like this, it can fuel a quiet grief — internalized, invisible pain that can persist for years without acknowledgement or support. I was falling deeper into the abyss of sibling loss, something no one talked about, but that consumed my every thought. Once again, I deleted the message without responding.

Undeterred, the calls continued. Every month or two, I'd see the now familiar number pop up on my phone, and each time, I would send it to voicemail. Each voicemail came with the same offer of support from the same calming voice. She wasn't giving up on me, even though I had long since given up on myself. I was resigned to spending the rest of my life in deep grief, unable to conceive of a happy, contentful life without both my older brothers by my side. The anger slowly settled, and at some point, I could acknowledge that this woman was not, in fact, the reason my brother was killed. I could even acknowledge that she wanted to help me, not my parents. For a long time, she remained the only person outside my close circle who seemed to understand the simple fact that siblings grieve. I started to save the messages. Just because I couldn't

bring myself to answer the phone didn't mean her calls went unanswered. Over time, the voicemails themselves gave me comfort. Simply knowing that someone cared, that someone saw my grief, was enough.

I'm not sure when the calls stopped, but they did. She told me they would, that she would stop calling but would always be there if I wanted to reach out. I listened to that one a lot, wondering if I should finally return the call. I never did.

Years passed, and those voicemails burrowed somewhere deep in my mind, nearly forgotten but still accessible when

I needed them. In that time, I started the work of writing a book about sibling grief. It was to be the book I needed so desperately — but the book that didn't exist — when I lost Ben. I am a qualitative researcher, and talking to people is what I do; it is what I love. So, for my book, I wanted to do just that: Interview other bereaved siblings in an effort to capture the full range of experiences. I was set to conduct dozens of interviews in a short period of time, sometimes multiple back-to-back interviews in the same day, and I was terrified. I'd never talked to other bereaved siblings like this, and I didn't know what it would do to me. Would I be triggered?





## They were reminders that I was allowed to grieve and that my grief mattered.

Would these interviews send me back into the deep, relentless grief that I'd spent years trying to dig myself out of?

The first interview came and went, then the second, and the third. With each interview, I felt lighter. I wasn't alone. I wasn't crazy. So much of this terrible experience seemed to be universal: feeling crushed — a reflection of the deep love we felt for our siblings — and a society that doesn't know how to support grievers. Except, some people do know, don't they?



Those voicemails were proof of that. This was exactly what TAPS was trying to offer me: a community of grieving siblings who knew what I was going through. Those interviews became the backbone for my book, *Always a Sibling: The Forgotten Mourner's Guide to Grief*, providing insight into the experience of sibling loss across a range of relationship types, lived experiences, and causes of death. Without those interviews, I could never have accurately captured the experience of losing a sibling to addiction, as a young child, or with whom you had a strained relationship. On a personal level, without those interviews, I don't think I would have been able to heal myself. Each one gave me a new insight into my own grief and a new perspective on how to move forward.

If I could go back in time, I'd beg 25-year-old Annie to answer those calls from TAPS. Back then, I had no idea that the support they were offering me could have changed everything. Perhaps it would have helped me move through my grief, rather than getting stuck in it for years. Maybe I would have learned sooner that grief is love and that I could learn to live with it. Maybe I would have met someone else who understood what it was like to lose someone in such a violent way — someone who had the same nightmares.

Even though I didn't answer, those calls were not for nothing. They gave me comfort in early grief when comfort was so hard to find, and they remain the only sibling-specific outreach I ever received. They were reminders that I was allowed to grieve and that my grief mattered.



About the Author

Annie Sklaver Orenstein is a qualitative researcher, oral historian, and storyteller who has spent over a decade collecting stories from people around the world and exploring those elements of humanity we don't talk about enough. Her first book, *Always a Sibling: The Forgotten Mourner's Guide to Grief*, was published by Hachette in 2024.



### SUPPORT FOR SURVIVING SIBLINGS

TAPS understands the unique grief that comes from the loss of a brother or sister. You have a place at TAPS. Connect with fellow surviving siblings in our monthly Online Group or at in-person events throughout the year — including those just for siblings. Your grief matters, and your TAPS community will walk through it with you.

[» taps.org/events](https://taps.org/events)



# Understanding the Guilt of Grief

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

If you're feeling guilty, ashamed, or regretful in the aftermath of the death of someone loved, the first thing I want to do is assure you that all your emotions are normal. While these feelings are painful, they are common and natural. There is nothing wrong with you. These guilty feelings can mean that you have a developed sense of right and wrong, you care about others and your relationships with them, and you strive to be a better person.

Second, I promise you can find relief from these hurtful feelings. When you become better acquainted with your guilt, shame, or regret and work on understanding and restoratively expressing it, over time, it will soften. It may seem counterintuitive to you right now, but the truth is that, like all feelings in grief, your guilt is trying to teach you something. And if you allow it to speak, it will no longer weigh so heavily on your heart and cause you so much pain.

## Guilt, Shame, and Regret

Guilt, shame, and regret are close cousins. They belong to a group of feelings psychologists call "self-conscious emotions," meaning they are feelings of self-awareness — they're emotions we have about ourselves. What do guilt, shame, and regret have in common?

### Judgment

It's important to note that self-conscious emotions are self-evaluative. In other words, they arise when we judge ourselves. What are we judging? We're measuring ourselves against the yardstick of our social and cultural rules and values. Human beings have many rules, expectations, and values — spoken and unspoken. Think of self-conscious emotions as moral emotions.

### Backward-looking

What's more, guilt, shame, and regret are backward-looking emotions. You feel them in the now, but they're caused by memories of things done (or not done) in the past.

In grief, it's instinctive and necessary to go backward before we can go forward. When someone we love dies, we naturally turn around, remembering the time we shared with them.

So, the backward-looking nature of guilt, shame, and regret in

grief is normal and necessary. Whether your grief journey includes guilt or not, it's good to excavate the past, look at old photos and videos, share stories, and talk about what happened. In fact, remembering the past is what makes hoping for the future possible. The key is not to get stuck in the past, which is why befriending and integrating guilty feelings is so important. You won't be able to move forward unless you do so.

### Secrecy

Have you felt yourself concealing the guilt of your grief? Have you noticed that you would prefer to keep it a secret? Guilt, shame, and regret tend to hide in deep, dark corners. They typically don't like to be revealed.

In grief psychology, we sometimes talk about disenfranchisement. Certain types of loss tend to be stigmatized, and the people grieving those deaths or losses often experience disenfranchised grief, meaning their grief is often not broadly acknowledged or well-supported by their community. Sometimes it's even shamed. Examples include grief following suicides, overdoses, and, sometimes, military deaths.

We tend to stigmatize guilt, shame, and regret in similar ways. They're often based on secrets, and we keep them a secret because we feel ashamed, and then they become even more secret because we haven't brought them into the light in a timely fashion — at the time of the loss



**“Guilt** is perhaps the most painful companion of death.”

— Coco Chanel

— so we feel even more ashamed, and the downward spiral continues.

Secrecy is not your friend if you hope to heal in grief. All your feelings need to be acknowledged, encountered, and shared outside of yourself if they are to soften. They need the light of affirmation and the balm of normalization.

## The Utility of Guilt

The fact that guilt exists is all the reason we need to accept it as a normal part of human life. All emotions are natural, and this includes the self-conscious emotions of guilt, shame, and regret.

But, feelings of morality also serve a purpose in our lives. They encourage us to act responsibly. In fact, they help us understand what responsible behavior is. They direct us to consider others. They remind us that we are part of a community that needs rules and mutual consideration to function. They're the guardrails that help keep society safe, vulnerable individuals protected, and

families safeguarded. They nurture one of the most meaningful emotions available to humankind: empathy.

Can you imagine a world with no morality? It's not a pretty picture, is it? But, as with everything in life, moderation is key. Not enough guilt and you have anarchy. Too much guilt and you have repression and misery.

## The Dangers of Guilt

Prolonged, pronounced guilt, shame, and regret are harmful to your well-being. They're emotions to experience and work through — not inhabit forever.

### Physical

What does guilt feel like in your body? Stop reading for a moment and see if you can locate the sensation and describe it to yourself. Where do you notice it? What are the qualities of the feeling?

Guilt often feels similar to fear or worry. This is because guilt releases the same stress hormone, cortisol, that anxiety does. Over time, too much cortisol in the body can lead to high blood pressure, a higher risk of heart disease and diabetes, and clinical depression and anxiety disorders. What's more, research demonstrates that high guilt levels dampen the immune system. This makes people more vulnerable to illness and disease.

Guilt may also feel heavy, like a weight on your chest or an anchor dragging you down. Studies have shown that the psychic burden of guilt makes physical tasks seem more difficult. Like depression, guilt can sap us of energy and drain our productivity.

### Emotional

Guilt feels bad emotionally — it hurts. Anything that hurts is a symptom that needs attention.

“Your guilt is trying to teach you something. And if you **allow it to speak**, it will no longer weigh so heavily on your heart and cause you so much pain.”





## Social

Feelings of guilt, shame, and regret may be negatively affecting your relationships. These emotions can lower your self-esteem, making you feel unsure of yourself and less worthy of love and care. You might avoid spending time with people. The secrecy of guilt may also make you feel unable to open up when you're around others for fear of disclosing something you're embarrassed about or feel ashamed of.

Think of guilt as a wall you're building around your heart, knowingly or unknowingly. It's likely blocking affection and companionship. It's getting in the way of close relationships. It's time to dismantle the wall, brick by brick.

## Spiritual

Guilt shuts you down and can make you feel isolated, anxious, and burdened. Good spiritual health feels the opposite — light, curious, open, loving, and free. However, life's spiritual journey also includes encountering and wrestling with spiritual challenges as they arise, and the guilt of grief is one such challenge. So don't be

afraid to draw upon, question, or confront your spiritual beliefs as you work to understand and restoratively express your guilt. Just remember, in the long term, ongoing, unrelenting guilt will get in the way of spiritual experiences like awe, gratitude, and joy.

## Befriending and Restoratively Expressing Your Guilt, Shame, and Regret

Your feelings of guilt, shame, and regret are not your enemies. Yes, they are causing you pain, but they are there for a reason. They are there to teach you about your past, your ingrained thoughts and behaviors, and your choices moving forward.

To befriend your feelings is to be present to them. It is to turn toward them instead of away from them. It is to bear witness to them and honor them. Consider that your grief — including your guilt — is your love in a different form. Regard it with compassion and tenderness, just as you do your love.

Expressing your guilt is also essential. Why? First, all grief feelings must be expressed, or mourned, to be worked through and healed — no exceptions. Second, guilt requires social review and affirmation because, as we've said, it is based on self-judgment about social rules. The only way to fully bear witness to your guilt is to have it heard and considered by members of your community. If you never share your guilt outside of yourself, you will always carry that feeling of secrecy and, likely, shame.

No matter what you are feeling, it's necessary to talk about it. Guilt is a very normal, understandable human experience. Rest assured that most of the time, feelings of guilt are associated with behaviors or decisions that those who care about you will readily empathize with. We have all made mistakes. We all experience guilt and regret. We understand.



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 Guilt of Grief: How to Understand, Embrace, and Restoratively Express Guilt, Shame, and Regret after a Loss*, from which this article was excerpted. Visit [centerforloss.com](http://centerforloss.com) to learn more about grief and to order Dr. Wolfelt's books.



# Letting Nature *Lead*

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

It's time to get outside and take a deep Breath of Fresh Air — on the coast, in the woods, along the river, on the prairie, in the park, and out your front door. Whether 60 seconds or 60 minutes, time in nature is critical to our well-being, providing lasting impacts, like reduced stress, anxiety, and isolation, and increased social connection and enhanced mood. Add a dose of awe, and you have a prescription for improved overall well-being and a heart and mind open to new perspectives.

Nature is the great teacher — the great companion, the great reflection. What we see in nature often allows us to find what we seek within ourselves.

## Like the Tide

The tide rolls in much faster than you expect. You think you have time — that it's slow — but it's constantly moving, ebbing and flowing, taking over more and more beach by the minute. You sit to

watch for just a while, then the water meets your feet, and you realize you've been enamored — captivated by the undulation, the soundscapes, the salty air, the way you feel whole and connected. You're truly in awe, wondering how the seconds turned to minutes, then hours.

For two weeks, our family traveled along the Pacific Coast Highway as part of an epic, awe-inspiring, eight-week Breath of Fresh Air Road Trip across the nation. Starting in southern Illinois, then traveling west to the coast just north of Los Angeles, before heading north to Oregon, back east to Maine, and culminating in Arlington, Virginia, at the TAPS National Military Survivor Seminar, we connected families with the healing power of nature.

In 58 days, we visited over 20 national parks and countless national forests, public lands, and waters. We made camp in desert canyons, coastal forests, vast prairies, woodlands, and wetlands. On military installations, campgrounds, and dispersed,

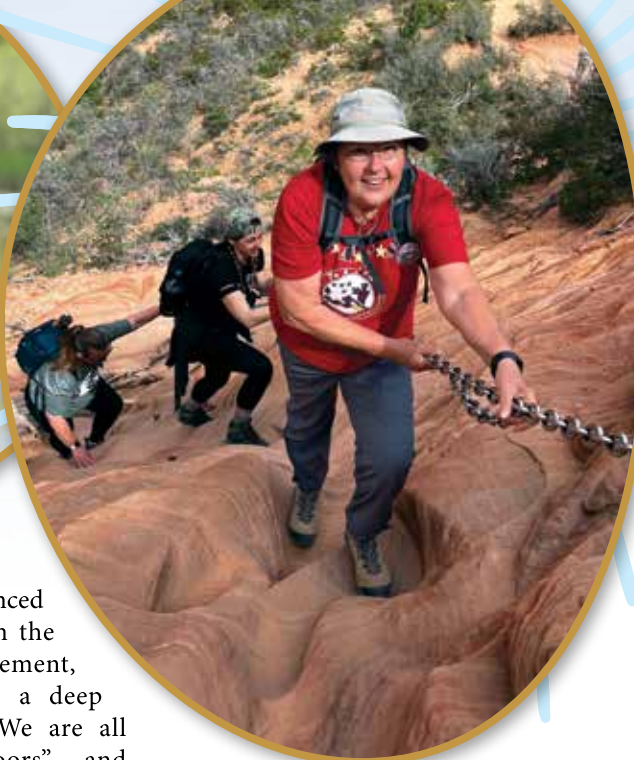
rugged sites, we took in mountain views, ocean soundscapes, birdsong, conversation, laughter, and connection. We packed up each morning and hit the road to a new place with new people, new vistas, and new environments. Each day, we opened our hearts to new experiences, talked through challenges, shared memories and dreams, and gifted ourselves with present-moment living. Each evening, we set up camp, started a fire, and marveled at the stars above.

Like the tide, we felt the end of our time on the road hit our feet before we expected, yet we knew the time we spent traveling the northern half of the United States changed us. Like the tide, it washed away much of the suffering we carried, the expectations of others, and the ways of living that never really served us. And, with the tide came opportunity, a newfound flexibility and openness to life's relentless movement. Connecting with hundreds of survivors, both in person and online, we were continuously inspired and reminded

*Nature is the great teacher — the great companion,  
the great reflection. What we see in nature often allows us  
to find what we seek within ourselves.*







that we are never alone on this journey. In the darkness of grief, there is always another survivor standing shoulder-to-shoulder with us, ready to let in the light when we need it most.

Watching the waves, I see life, both literally and metaphorically. Inside, there is such vitality, power, and complexity — always moving, always adapting. Looking out past the breaking waves, though, far off into the distance, there is a stillness in this somewhat chaotic scene — a knowing that movement is life. Challenge and celebration, deep grief and full life, are meant to be held all at once. Watching the waves has me overcome with awe.

## We Are All *Connected*

Writing this, I'm sitting along the coast of Northern California. My brother would have been 39 years old today. I don't know that he ever saw anything like this, but I do know that he's here with me. They are all with me — my brothers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, and the hundreds of loved ones shared with me by my fellow survivors. Every single one of them, I feel here, watching the tide roll in wave after wave.

The most healing I've experienced in my journey was rooted in the awe of nature, mindful movement, and opening myself up to a deep knowing I've always had: We are all connected. "Going outdoors" and "getting outside" are really just methods of returning to ourselves. Connecting with nature is ultimately connecting with ourselves and the entire ecosystem inside our bodies and minds that needs care, community, and space for growth and evolution.

This is at the heart of my work, my healing, my purpose — one that my dear brother, Kyle, helped guide me to. Getting A Breath of Fresh Air is more than the act of filling your lungs with life, a 90-second video on social media, or a tool-packed newsletter. This initiative is an invitation to return to yourself, to nature. It is an invitation to begin a practice of opening yourself up to awe in everyday life. It's learning that grief and life mimic the ever-moving ocean waves; the ever-shaping sandstone walls of desert canyons; the ever-resilient redwood trees; the gritty, steadfast ways that nature and you continue to show up every single day — choosing to truly be alive instead of just existing.



### About the Author

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



### JOIN US OUTSIDE

Access the tools and community Rachel described through TAPS Outdoor Programs. Scan the QR code to learn more, subscribe to the weekly newsletter, view weekly episodes, and find events in your community.

**>> [taps.org/outdoors](https://taps.org/outdoors)**



# What Your Kids Want You to Know

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

After a life-altering loss, we — as parents and caregivers — want to know how to support our children, ensuring they grow into successful, happy, and healthy adults despite knowing grief. When they seem OK on the outside, we worry about thoughts and feelings we can't see. And, even when they are outwardly distressed or their behavior indicates something more is happening, they may not necessarily be communicating their needs in a way we can understand.

If this describes your circumstances, please know that you are not alone. Understanding our kids' needs and communicating with our children are common challenges for most parents

under normal circumstances, let alone in the wake of loss. In our work with bereaved military children, we have come to know some of the things your kids may want you to understand about them and some of the things they may want to know from you.

## What They Want You to Know

*They Are Grieving Their Way* — Children and teenagers fare better in their grief when the adults in their lives affirm the notion that everyone, including children, has a unique way of comfortably facing the world and grief. Rather than trying to control their grief, let's first seek to understand their grief style. A good place to start is observation. Pay attention to how they react to difficult situations. Do they tend to withdraw and isolate, or do they usually talk things out or express themselves outwardly?





There is no right or wrong way to grieve, but there are tools we can share with our children based on their natural inclinations. For example, if your child withdraws or isolates themselves, create opportunities to be with them in a quieter, nonconfrontational space. Play a game, work on a puzzle, or try another activity together. You might be surprised by what they bring up in that type of setting.

**They Worry About Your Safety** — Children who have experienced the death of a family member often worry about the other adults in their lives. They know on a personal level that people they care about and depend on can die. This is normal, and you do not have to fill the space with statements like, “You have nothing to worry about,” or “I’ll be OK.” You can acknowledge that this is a normal concern and focus more on how you are taking care of yourself and what the plan will be should something happen to you.

**They Want Safe Boundaries** — They may not seem to like rules and boundaries, but children and teenagers thrive in environments with clear, established boundaries. Boundaries provide a sense of safety, particularly in grief, when their sense of safety might be compromised. Clear behavioral expectations and consistency in both consequences and positive reinforcement regarding their boundaries offer predictability, which supports healthy development, even amid grief.

**Their Grief Is Enduring** — Our goal is not to get rid of our children’s grief — the reality is that grief is enduring. It ebbs and flows throughout a child’s growth and development. They revisit their grief in ways old and new as they mature and their brains develop. As adults, we do not need to

“fix” or “get rid of” our children’s grief, but we can help them learn ways to cope, make good decisions for their lives, and how to carry grief when they find themselves in the midst of thoughts and feelings.

### What They Need to Know From You

**You Are Doing Everything You Can to Take Care of Yourself** — Children worry about the safety of the surviving adults in their lives. Demonstrating to our children that we are doing everything we can for our health and safety — diet, physical health, and mental and emotional health — goes a long way to acknowledge and calm their concerns. We are all different and may have our unique physical, emotional, and mental health challenges, but they don’t need us to be perfect. Modeling healthy behaviors and choices for our children in grief can be both a comfort and a way to teach healthy behaviors.

**A Plan Is in Place Should Something Happen to You** — Though it might be difficult, it is important to consider what would happen to our children if something happened to us; devise a plan; and share that plan with our children. Though they will still worry about our safety, knowing that they will be taken care of, whatever might happen, will relieve some of the stress of the unknown. You might say something like, “I am doing everything I can to take care of myself so I will be around for a very long time, but if something unexpected does happen to me, I want you to know who would take care of you.”

**You Are Glad They Are Your Child(ren)** — As parents and caregivers, we often praise our children’s accomplishments. This is healthy and certainly warranted,

but children fare better when adults also express how much they love and value them. Then, if we take it one step further and demonstrate to them that they are valued and important to us, we reinforce these sentiments. For example, saying, “I am proud of you,” is positive, but often connected to a behavior or activity. Going a step further by saying, “I love you so much, and I am glad you are my child and a part of my life,” expresses that they are valuable because of who they are, not just what they do.

Saying all of this (or recognizing what is often unspoken from our children) is important in grief — and anytime. But, supporting the words (spoken or unspoken) with action through quality time spent with our children further solidifies familial bonds, a sense of safety, and that you are glad they are part of your world.



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.



#### LEARN MORE WITH TAPS

TAPS Youth Programs are much more than grief camps (though they are an important piece). Our experts and volunteers are dedicated to supporting the entire family along the grief journey. See how we support surviving children and you, as their parent or guardian, by scanning the QR code.

[taps.org/youthprograms](https://taps.org/youthprograms)

# EVERY STEP A *TRIBUTE*

Tatiana Mendoza ★ Surviving  
Sister of Retired U.S. Army SFC  
Wriishxer Mendoza

In the quiet of early mornings, I often find myself lacing up my shoes, thinking of my sister. I can hear her laughter echoing from those countless miles we ran together. My sister, SFC Mendoza, was always faster than me. She ran with a force, a natural ease that I could never quite match. But I didn't mind. I never chased her speed; I chased the joy of being beside her, in the rhythm of our shared experience. It was the act of running together that mattered most — not the finish line, but the moments in between.

Growing up, we were like two runners on parallel tracks — each forging our own paths, but always with the unspoken understanding that we were in it together. When she was stationed in Iraq, I often

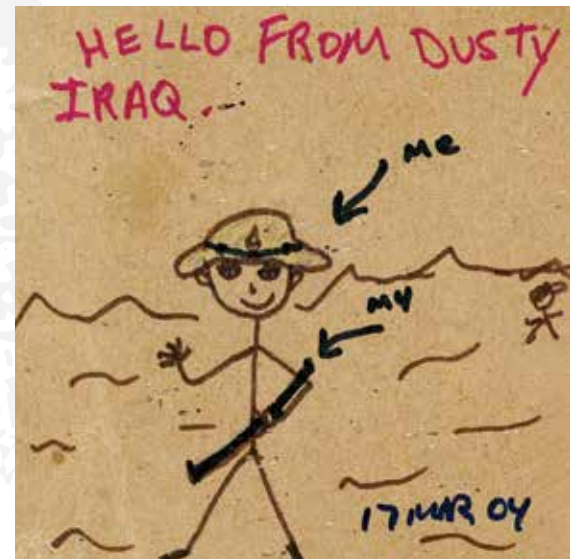
thought of her as I ran around the track at our high school. I imagined her running the same laps, on the same path, though thousands of miles away. It wasn't about the miles. It was about the space between us closing, if only for a fleeting moment — the same air in our lungs, the same earth beneath our feet.

After her passing, I found myself walking these same paths without her. The joy of running together, once so effortless, became an act of solitude. The streets of the San Fernando Valley, the hills of Topanga Canyon — these were the places we had shared. These were the spaces where we once laughed, where I could keep up with her pace, where I could feel her energy,

even in her absence. Now, I walk them alone. But it's not a lonely walk. It's a walk in her memory, a journey to honor her life, her service, and the joy she shared with me and so many others.

This year, I created a Carry the Load fundraising team named "Worst Pace Scenario" — a nod to the way we ran together, never racing against time, but always chasing the joy of the experience. My family, friends, and I committed to logging miles throughout May, as part of Carry the Load — every step a tribute to my sister, her courage, her laughter, and her service. It was a chance to grieve, but, more than that, it was space to honor the sacrifice she made for this nation and the

**GRIEF DOESN'T END.  
BUT IT CAN BE CARRIED  
— TOGETHER.**







sacrifices made by so many others who served alongside her.

Grief doesn't end. But it can be carried — together.

The act of walking and running has become my way of connecting with her — of feeling, if only for a moment, like she's beside me again. Worst Pace Scenario isn't about who finishes first; it's about finishing together — sharing

the load of loss, remembering that even in grief, we find strength when we move forward side by side.

Walking through the valley or breathing in the scents of sage and eucalyptus, it's as if she's there with me, running beside me once more. These places are sacred now, filled with memories of her, of us. Each step is a tribute, a quiet acknowledgment that she once moved through this world with grace, strength, and laughter. Even

now, she continues to inspire my every move — not walking for her, but with her, not running for her, but carrying her in every stride, every breath, every heartbeat.

As Worst Pace Scenario logged miles in May, we did so knowing that grief is not something we bear alone. And though my sister's footsteps have faded, her impact remains. I will continue to carry her with me, and in my footsteps, she will always live on.

## CARRYING THE LOAD WITH TAPS

TAPS was proud to once again participate in Carry the Load's Memorial May campaign, empowering survivors, like Tatiana, to honor their fallen heroes at locations nationwide through TAPS Togethers and Team TAPS, and raise funds for critical TAPS programming.

If you missed this year's Carry the Load events, we hope to see you at one of the relay locations in 2026. In the meantime, scan the QR codes to learn more about participating in events year-round with Team TAPS or to find TAPS Togethers happening in your local community.



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



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





2025

# TAPS Family Album

We were proud to honor service and sacrifice with many members of our TAPS Family at the 31st Annual National Military Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp in Arlington, Virginia. Thank you for spending Memorial Day weekend with us, and thank you to our many guests and supporters who contributed to this memorable event. Healing, gratitude, connection, and compassion were all around.

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES











# 2025 UPCOMING EVENTS

Whether you are new to grief, new to TAPS, or ready to pursue growth or a new experience alongside fellow survivors, the TAPS Family will welcome you with open arms. Join us for a seminar and Good Grief Camp or a unique event for your peer group. New events are constantly being added to our website, so check [taps.org/events](https://taps.org/events) regularly or scan the QR code above for current openings and application windows.

## SEMINARS

### NORTHEAST REGIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP

JULY 11-13  
Buffalo, NY

### WESTERN REGIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP

AUG. 22-24  
Scottsdale, AZ

### SOUTHERN REGIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP

SEPT. 26-28  
San Antonio, TX

### NATIONAL MILITARY SUICIDE LOSS SURVIVOR SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP

NOV. 14-16  
Scottsdale, AZ  
*Open to Suicide-Loss Survivors*

## RETREATS

### YOUNG ADULTS: WARRIOR RIZEN

OCT. 1-5  
Morgan, UT

### WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

OCT. 13-18 & NOV. 16-20  
Savanna, GA      North Bend, WA

### LAKE OF THE OZARKS MEN'S

OCT. 15-19  
Lake Ozark, MO

### LAKE OF THE OZARKS MOM'S

OCT. 22-26  
Lake Ozark, MO

### TEXAS FAMILY CAMP

DEC. 5-7  
San Antonio, TX

### WIDOWS/UNMARRIED PARTNERS SUICIDE LOSS

DEC. 5-9  
North Bend, WA

### YOUNG ADULTS: HOPE FOR THE HOLIDAYS

DEC. 10-14  
Arlington, VA

## ADVOCACY WEEK

### 3<sup>RD</sup> ANNUAL TAPS ADVOCACY WEEK

SEPT. 15-17  
Arlington, VA

## SELF-FUNDED EVENT

### 7-NIGHT MEXICAN RIVIERA CRUISE

OCT. 10-17  
Los Angeles, CA



# An Angel's Comfort

Kathleen Doll Cristofaro, U.S. Air Force Veteran ★ Surviving Sister of U.S. Air Force Sgt Joseph Cristofaro

That I fell was not surprising. My eyes had been blurry from crying. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?" I looked up into concerned, but stunning, eyes as a strong pair of hands placed me safely back onto the walking trail.

I awkwardly laughed at my clumsiness. "I'm OK. Thanks," I replied.

"If you're sure, then..." He paused in hesitation, as I stood there in silence.

No, I was not sure. The truth was, I was not sure of anything much these days after experiencing recent hurtful events. Yet when I thought about it just now, I felt confident that, somehow, I would be all right.

The sudden change struck me as odd. As I looked at the gentleman, I got the

impression that perhaps it was his calm manner and his gentle touch on my arm that might have made the difference. My outlook had been gray, like the dusk in the settling night, but I suddenly felt a calm peace within myself.

A soft mist of fog covered me in its invisible cloak as I looked down the street at the retreating back of the tall, handsome stranger. Somehow, he must have sensed my intense stare because he turned slightly while in mid-stride and smiled back at me; then he was gone.

"Oh, my goodness!" I whispered out loud. I rubbed my eyes. Surely it had been a trick of the night in combination with my sleep-deprived nerves. How ridiculous, but I could have sworn that I saw a pair of angel wings fan out from

the stranger's shoulder blades just before he turned the corner.

Was it only a coincidence that he should appear at the very moment that I felt so alone, full of despair, and needed help? I guess I will always wonder about what I really saw that evening.

Though, with the passing of time, his handsome face has escaped my memory, there is no question that his kindness will always remain in my heart.

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*Kathleen Doll Cristofaro originally published this story in a 2023 issue of Woman's World. She has kindly shared it with TAPS after realizing it might resonate with anyone who lends a hand of kindness in hard times, just like the staff, mentors, and volunteers at TAPS.*





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

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# Helping Hands

THE COMFORT, RESOURCES, AND PROGRAMS  
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GENEROSITY OF DONORS.

From an annual golf tournament or memorial event to a local car wash or lemonade stand, fundraising for TAPS means extending a helping hand to survivors.

Support a fellow survivor and host a fundraiser for TAPS.



PHOTO: TAPS ARCHIVES



SEND QUESTIONS & IDEAS TO [DEVELOPMENT@TAPS.ORG](mailto:DEVELOPMENT@TAPS.ORG) OR **DONATE TODAY**

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