

The Critical Importance of Seeking Support

Learning from the Geese

By Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D.

If there is ever a time in life when we need others to support and nurture us, it's when someone we love dies. In many ways, grief work is the most difficult work we will ever do. And hard work is less burdensome when others lend a hand.

Sharing the devastation that results from the death of someone precious won't make the hurt go away, but it does make it more bearable. In reflecting on this need to support each other during times of grief, we might be well-served to observe the five natural instincts for support and companionship demonstrated by wild geese.

Observation One

When the flock is on a journey, the flapping of the wings of each individual goose results in an uplift for the bird that follows. By flying in a "V" formation, the entire flock achieves 71 percent greater flying range than if each bird flew alone.

Implication

When we are grieving the death of someone loved, we too are on a journey. Others who are grieving are on a similar journey, and we can all be uplifted by journeying together. No, you need not travel alone, nor should you try!

Observation Two

Whenever a goose falls out of formation, it experiences the drag and resistance of trying to fly alone. The goose then realizes it needs to get back into formation to take advantage of the collective lifting power of the flock.

Implication

Just as geese are well served to stay in formation with those on a similar journey, we as humans are better off if we accept the lifting power of those who go before us. We are grace-filled when we open ourselves to the support of our fellow travelers.

Observation Three

If any one goose has a problem, two other geese will always drop out of formation and follow the wayward goose to help support and protect it. They stay present to the goose that has special needs until it is able to continue the journey on its own.



Remember, help comes in different forms for different people.

The trick is to find the combination that works best for you and then make use of it.

Implication

If we humans can learn from the wisdom of geese, we will always companion each other in difficult times. Receiving help from others strengthens the bonds of compassion and love that help us survive when we are devastated by loss.

Observation Four

When the goose leading the flock gets tired and overwhelmed, it rotates back into the formation, and another goose flies at the point position.

Implication

No one person on a grief journey can lead the way all the time. At times it is wise to acknowledge that you are tired and need others to care for you and protect you from the headwinds.

Observation Five

While flying in formation, the geese honk to each other as a form of encouragement and mutual support.

Implication

There are times in life when we all need encouragement from those around us to remind us of our interconnectedness. We must allow ourselves to rely on each other, otherwise when we are in grief we end up feeling totally alone and completely isolated.

Where to Turn for Help

“There is strength in numbers,” one saying goes. Another echoes, “United we stand, divided we fall.” This is a time in your life when you need to let other people in. You needn’t let everyone in all the time, but I encourage you to make room for those you trust the most. Carefully chosen friends and family members with whom you feel

safe can often be at the center of your support system.

Seek out people who encourage you to be yourself and who acknowledge your many thoughts and feelings. Open your broken heart a little at a time to those people in your life who are compassionate and loving listeners. In an ideal world, this is your family and friends. If this is not true for you, my hope is that you will seek out other sources of support.

The darkness that grief brings into your life is a place from which you might be tempted to judge others, particularly their motivations. True, they cannot feel your profound loss the way you do, so don’t expect them to be able to do so. Except in cases in which there is evidence that you can’t trust someone’s intentions, try to be open to letting others be of support to you. Remember, you are doing the best you can, from moment to moment, from day to day.

You may also find comfort in talking to a minister or other religious leader. When someone loved dies, it is natural for you to feel ambivalent about your faith and question the very meaning of life. A clergy member who responds with empathy to all of your feelings can be a valuable resource. Just be certain the clergy person you look to for support is a good match for your unique needs.

A professional grief counselor may also be a very helpful addition to your support system. In fact, a good counselor can be something friends and family members can’t be: an objective listener. A counselor’s office can be a place of sanctuary where you can give voice to those feelings you may be afraid to express elsewhere. As with everything else in this overwhelming grief journey, counseling is an intensely personal choice. However, when you find the right counselor, you may well have found a safe haven in which to experience the terrifying jumble of feelings impacting you.

Many mourners discover that grief support groups are one of the best helping resources. In a group, you can connect with others who have experienced similar thoughts and feelings. You will be allowed and gently encouraged to talk about the person who died as much and as often as you like. In these groups, each person can share his or her unique grief experience in a nonthreatening, safe atmosphere. Fellow group members are usually very patient with each other and understand your need for compassionate support with no set time limits.

As a grief counselor, I have been privileged to have thousands of grieving people reach out to me for help. Among the lessons they have taught me is that sharing their grief with others is an integral part of the healing process. Perhaps it is helpful to remember that by definition, mourning means “the shared response to loss.”

Remember, help comes in different forms for different people. The trick is to find the combination that works best for you and then make use of it. I hope this article has helped you understand the importance of reaching out for help during this time in your life. Please don’t try to confront your grief alone. Wrap your arms around yourself, but also open your arms to the loving support that wants to embrace you. You need and deserve companions—friends, relatives, counselors, and others who have experienced similar losses—who will walk with you as you make the difficult journey through grief. ★

*A 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* (co-authored with TAPS President Bonnie Carroll.) Visit www.centerforloss.com to learn more about grief and to order Dr. Wolfelt’s books.*

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