

Just as there is no map for our journey through grief, as Dr. Wolfelt teaches us, there is also no map for our parenting journey.

There are times when the dark, stormy skies and steep, rocky paths of two of life's most difficult experiences have one thing in common and that thing is US.

My dad died by suicide in July 2019. I was with all five of my teenagers the moment I found out. It was Free Slurpee Day at the convenience store, 7-11 on 7/11-- and we loved to keep up this silly tradition of rainbow-colored sugary ice. While in the car in my ex-husband's cul de sac where I was dropping a couple of the kids off, I got a call from my step-brother who had never called me before. Upon seeing his name on the little screen of my phone, "Jesse," I knew. I answered the call anyway. The kids were chatting and goofing around when I took the call. Then one of the kids saw my face and I stuttered. I was shocked. I was barely able to say the words. "My dad is dead. He killed himself today."

It doesn't matter how many times I'd heard about the death of someone else's parent or watched movies or read books that deal with the death of a parent, it is a feeling that is so different than I could have predicted. Until that afternoon, I didn't understand the gravity of losing one of the two people who gave me life. I was gutted.

If only I could experience this grief, the acute, immediate experience of it and the unpredictable, never-ending experience of it on a lovely island, separate and free from the pain of my own children's pain of losing their grandfather.

How could I be two things at once? A mother who wanted to help them navigate their first and most painful loss experience and a child who was feeling so alone and in agony at the thought of her dad dying. I felt the strong need to teach, model, guide for them and then an equally strong desire to have someone walk me through this trauma at the same time. Stalemate.

All of that said, I can't imagine losing a child and then continuing to raise my surviving children. As I study Dr. Wolfelt's book, "Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart, I am learning more about what we do have in common as mourners. There are six essential needs he writes about that I will outline and also add in what I believe are the nuances that apply in regard to the teenager/parent relationship that was already in progress before the loss.

Mourning Need 1: Accept the Reality of the Death

Wolfelt says, "You can know something in your head, but not in your heart." This step is about "gently confronting the reality that someone you and your teenager care about will no longer be present in the physical sense."

Try to think back to your teenage years and recall that science proves that human brain development is not complete until age 25. Consider how confusing so many aspects of life occurred for you, how many differing messages were coming into your atmosphere, stirring up all of the doubt and fear that maybe you aren't good enough.

You may remember your parents being forceful in their attempts to get through to you about "the facts" and "reality" and so it would make sense that you may lean toward wanting yourself and your teenager to just "deal with the facts" around the death, once and for all.

Let us instead consider that guiding ourselves gently and subsequently our teens is far more effective for the purposes of nurturing acceptance. It can't be forced. As parents of teens, we can sometimes be reminded many times a day that when we force any outcome, from deodorant application to academic performance we are almost always met with resistance.

Gentle is the way--not only in parenting and relationship, but with your pursuit of accepting your loss. Acceptance will come when it does and there is nothing wrong with however long it takes for you and your teenager, as co-mourners, to meet that need.

Do you believe that allowing yourself and others to come to their own conclusions naturally and without pressure is useful? How can you be more open and patient with your own grief and your teen's?

Mourning Need 2: Let Yourself Feel the Pain of the Loss

It's hard for so many parents to watch their precious children experience pain. In fact, sometimes it can feel like parenting's only goal is to protect our little ones from every kind of pain even though intellectually and experientially, we do know that it is through pain that we emerge stronger and wiser for the next bout that life brings our way. Avoiding pain is not actually possible in life, as we well know.

There's another belief many parents share that has to do with sheltering our children from seeing us as adults experience our pain. We don't want them to feel insecure or afraid that their main source of support in life is a little shaky at times, or totally crumbling at other times. We have to play the part of a strong leader, even to our own detriment and theirs.

Let us instead lead with vulnerability. Let us show our teenagers our most tender, unhealed spots without judgment, without shame. Let us show them that it is only human to experience pain and it is the strongest among us who can look that pain in the eye and really feel it whenever it arises and for as long as we are able. We must make space and create an understanding that however strange or inconvenient our pain may be, we will encourage each other to feel it, if even for a moment.

How can we let our teenagers feel their own loss pain if we don't allow ourselves to feel our own?

Mourning Need 3: Remember the Person Who Died

Of course people have different memories from time spent with the person who has died, but there is also a collective bank of memories that loved ones are able to draw upon. Being open to remembering the loved one who has passed is a gentle way to look this fact of their life ending in the eye. The temptation to avoid the memories only prolongs the suffering. Facing the memories allows us to face the pain and also to experience the love we feel at once. You see, avoiding is thwarting your energy and denying a need while facing our pain is a gift to ourselves which helps us to heal and creates energy.

Since teenagers are often quite tapped into their creative and visual strengths, creating ways to honor memories through art or music can be a really useful project. Imagine putting your teenager in charge of designing a screensaver or a photo collage, something for the refrigerator door that will aid you both in gently recalling happy or sweet times with your common loved one.

Imagine designing a project together for the yard or the garden where you each may go together or alone to take time out for reflecting on the memories and the pain that they may sometimes bring about.

How can we model our own openness to remembering the aspects of our loved one? Is there a conversation you can initiate with your teen regarding creating a physical representation of your love and loss?

Mourning Need 4: Develop a New Self-Identity

One of the most troubling and stressful parts of being a teenager is trying to understand how we identify, who are we? And it's not like we get that magically sorted out as we blow out the candles of our 18th birthday cake either! It can feel like we are shifting and recreating ourselves over and over for our entire life!

Dr. Wolfelt talks about how our identities shift when we lose a loved one. Our titles change, mother of four may become mother of three. And we can even grapple with if that statement is true anymore, aren't we still a mother to four? Imagine being a big sister or brother, or having one, then that person who made you the big or the little no longer exists in the physical realm. It's earth-shaking to say the least.

Again, gentleness is the key to allowing ourselves and our teens to identify as a new iteration of self, yet again. The loss you are both facing is another opportunity to give each other the respect and understanding needed to redefine the version of ourselves that we were sure had been the best one yet!

How can you allow yourself and your child the grace and space that are required to find a new expression of self as roles and titles, relationship statuses and channels for expressing love are now in flux?

Mourning Need 5: Search for Meaning

Though we naturally create comfort for ourselves in life by attaching to specific meaning and significance to, well, anything and everything, when we face a loss, it is often a time to rethink or question those beliefs.

Being an emerging adult is also an intense time of developing and creating our own frameworks and beliefs about life and all of its aspects. There may be a pull for us as parents to think that if we are being successful, then our kids will follow suit with us, value what we value, trust what we trust and need what we need. The more different our kids operate than we do, the more we tend to resist it! As you well know, resistance is futile and what we resist persists.

Oh the agony! We must not only accept this unthinkable loss in our lives, but now we must accept that our kids will process, react, feel and make different meaning out of it? Yes. It's true. It is not our job as parents to tell our children how they may feel or what they may believe about anything. The grief journey will only be complicated by placing any type of expectations on ourselves and/or our children.

Again, allowing is the way. Non judgment is the way. The strongest move we can make as mourners who are leading fellow mourners is to take full personal responsibility for how we

relate to ourselves. Focusing on our own grief journey will effectively provide a model, however imperfect, for our children to see, even when you think they aren't paying attention.

What expectations and attachments can you release regarding how you and your children relate to your collective loss? Can you strip away all of the rules and regulations you have inadvertently set up and just allow yourself to create the meaning that works best for you as you navigate this heartbreak?

Mourning Need 6: Let Others Help You-- Now and Always

It seems humanity is leaning strongly toward hyper independence. We must figure things out alone or suffer alone. We can't be a burden. We must always carry our own weight. That all applies to regular, everyday life, so imagine the guilt we feel and the pressure to "overcome" our grief as Dr. Wolfelt describes, when we are trying to face up to our biggest, most painful challenge yet.

In my coaching practice, clients from 10 years old to 70 years young will talk about their fear of asking for help, their aversion to needing in the first place and especially to seeking it out. I say, imagine if a friend came to you this morning and said, "I am in trouble. I am struggling. Can you please sit with me? Can you please make this call for me? Could you please check in on me this evening?" Would you feel important, special, trusted and proud that your friend asked you for help? Would you think they were weak or actually quite brave? Would you benefit from being the one who could help them meet a few of their tougher to meet needs at that point in time? Everyone always says YES! YES!

I also see parents pushing "getting help," "talking to someone," and "getting involved" with all their might while doing none of the above for their own benefit, to nurture and support themselves. This "do as I say, not as I do" moment is one in which you can cause the biggest breakthrough you can imagine. If you want your child to get help because you know it would help, that they are worthy of that expense, time, care and attention, then consider that all of those truths apply to you as well.

How can you reduce the self-stigma you have around needing help from others? Can you start with a book, or a video? Can you gently challenge yourself to take the same advice you'd give to your child or a dear friend-- to allow others to walk alongside you? Wolfelt is adamant that we cannot heal from our grief without being connected to each other.

Final Thoughts

We instinctively want to protect and love our children and our loved ones. We can use this deep desire that is built into our hearts for our benefit too! Pressuring ourselves to have our grief look a certain way on a certain day and for a certain period of time and then subsequently doing the same to our children as they face their own mourning journey is just plain illogical. As humans, we often love for things to "add up" or make sense, so let me remind you here, with all the love and compassion in my heart, that your grief is perfect as it is. It adds up. It is right. You are perfect as you are. Your experience adds up. You are right. Reality is immovable, but your perspective and approach to reality is in your control.

We can choose the mindset of compassion and non judgment and end up growing in ways we never knew we could. The trick is to meet our angriest, most confused, lost, and pain-filled selves with that same love and compassion that we seek to show to our children.

We can walk shoulder to shoulder with our teenagers as we both traverse the peaks and valleys of our grief journeys. We can be equals, as humans, even though we have different ideas, styles and paces regarding acceptance, feeling the pain, remembering the person who died, developing a new self-identity after the loss, searching and finding meaning and our respective relationships to receiving help.

I really appreciate Alan Wolfelt's approach to helping people understand grief and have benefitted from his role in my journey. If you haven't checked out his books, today might be a great day for that.

