

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

T★A★P★S[®]

Comfort and Support Since 1994

MAGAZINE

FOR THE LOVED ONES OF THOSE WHO SERVED & DIED



VOLUME 17 • ISSUE 1

TAPS Magazine is dedicated to the brave men and women who died while serving in the Armed Forces, and to their survivors. The magazine is written by surviving family members, friends, and care-giving professionals. We hope you will find comfort, support, information, inspiration, and a sense of connection within its pages.

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★ **About TAPS Magazine** ★

Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) is a national nonprofit 501(c)3 Veterans Service Organization which publishes TAPS Magazine in furtherance of its mission to provide support services to the survivors of servicemembers who have died while serving.

TAPS Magazine is published quarterly and sent free of charge to survivors, their friends and family, servicemembers, and professionals who work with U.S. military survivors.



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Comfort and Support Since 1994

TAPS offers immediate and long-term emotional help, hope, and healing to anyone grieving the death of a loved one in military service to America, regardless of their relationship to the deceased or the circumstances of the death.

**TAPS is here for you
24 hours a day
7 days a week**

**Call us at 800-959-TAPS
Or visit us at www.taps.org**



SUPPORTS the bereaved survivor through a network of Peer Mentors. Mentors are trained volunteers who have also lost a loved one in the Armed Forces and are now standing ready to reach out and support others.

PROVIDES a national toll-free help and information line 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 800-959-TAPS (8277). Support is available from leading experts in the field of grief and trauma.

HOSTS the TAPS Online Community of survivors, providing secure chat rooms, message boards, peer group discussion sites, and an extensive website at www.taps.org.

SPONSORS Military Survivor Seminars for adults and Good Grief Camps for young survivors in locations across America, giving survivors the opportunity to share, grow, and help each other heal.

CONNECTS families to resources in their local communities and provides grief and trauma resources and information.



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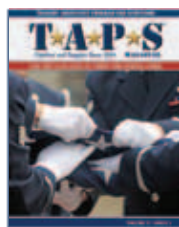


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**COVER PHOTO PROVIDED BY
USAF Staff Sergeant Charity Barrett**

*Courtesy of the United States Air Force
Ramstein Air Base, Germany*



Letters To T★A★P★S



We want to know your thoughts, perspectives, and opinions on TAPS programs and publications. Tell us what you think, send ideas for future topics, or submit an article. Submission Guidelines can be found online at www.taps.org. Your TAPS family is waiting to hear from you. ★

TAPS Online Chats

The chat room is one of the few places where people understand us, where we are not judged, where there is genuine support, where we can let the tears flow freely and it is all right. No one feels uncomfortable because we have all been there. We can also laugh at times and know that we are not being criticized. The chats have given me strength and insight into my feelings on my personal grief journey. It helps me to know that I am not alone. We are all here to support each other.

Kim Bernard Suggs, Louisiana
Surviving spouse of
CW4 Milton E Suggs

Sibling Support

I received my first issue of TAPS Magazine and read the article about losing a sibling. It really hit home and was what my other son needed to read. It is hard to relate to your other children about your and their loss; they are totally different. Our surviving son found he wasn't alone in his feelings or reactions. Thank you so much for putting that piece in the magazine for all of us who are experiencing this terrible situation.

Laura Landaker, California
Surviving mom of
1st Lieutenant Jared Landaker

Professional Praise for Webinars

Thank you for arranging a very helpful seminar [TAPS Webinar, Child Traumatic Grief, November 16, 2010] on military families and traumatic grief.

Andrew Griffin, PhD
Texas

Thanks! Great webinar with lots of other applications. I think the aspect of the intergenerational support of families is valuable, as is the community informal support network angle, in addition to the unique intervention strategies.

Bertine Loop-Schenken, LICSW, BCD
Nebraska

Magazine Mention

I have enjoyed reading TAPS magazine in the four years since we lost Doug and praise you for the care and consideration you show survivors. In the beginning the magazine would be set aside until I could gather the strength to open its cover. Then, I gradually began to look forward to receiving copies.

I have shared articles with my fellow mental health professionals, and they have been appreciative.

Cindy Surprenant, Florida
Surviving mom of
Specialist Douglas DesJardins

Good Grief Camp Mentor

Mentoring at the Good Grief Camp in 2010 was an amazing experience. I can think of nothing I'd rather do next Memorial Day and many more to come. The kids were great; the volunteers were great. I tend to sometimes get wrapped up in my own goals, my own life, and my own problems. I benefited immensely by just being able to give to someone else for a change.

Marine Staff Sergeant Miles Johnson
New York

Run and Remember

My sister-in-law told me about the TAPS Team, and there was no question in my mind that I wanted to run. In training I sometimes had very emotional runs, crying one minute and laughing the next. Thinking of Peter provided encouragement. Running a race in his memory was a humbling, yet proud experience. TAPS provided an opportunity to continue the healing process, not just for me but for my family and all the families who are dealing with a loss.

Phoebe Courcy, Texas
Surviving aunt of
Specialist Peter J. Courcy



editor@taps.org



From the Online Community

Dear TAPS Family,

It's a new year—a time when people make resolutions and focus on new beginnings. New beginnings can be difficult when we are grieving. Finding strength through the community of survivors at TAPS provides us a foundation of strength as we face each new day.

We can often feel as if we are on an emotional roller coaster, with ups and downs that test our strength and cause us to grow weary. We manage to make it through the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, and we start settling into the New Year—then comes Valentine's Day, with hearts and themes of love surrounding us. Spring brings vibrant colors and signs of life returning, all while our days can still be filled with uncertainty and darkness, especially in the early stages of grief.

Throughout the holidays and *all* the days we walk along our grief journey, there is always a place of comfort and support with your TAPS family. Reflecting on sixteen years since my fiancé died on Valentine's Day in

1995, I can attest to the strong and lasting friendships discovered through TAPS. We are brought together through pain, yet we embrace each other and form a circle of love and understanding. Our circle reaches out across the miles, providing a vital link for us to reach out and discover that we are not alone.

Whether at our regional seminars held around the country, our Online Community with chat rooms and message boards, or connections through our peer mentor network, there are a variety of ways you can connect, finding help, hope, and healing. You can meet others from your local area at our regional seminars, have real time conversations with survivors from across the country in our chat rooms on the internet, and stay connected through our message boards and peer group sites. Our peer mentor network provides you a personal connection to others who have experienced their own grief and pledged to be available to new members of our family.



I invite you to participate in our outreach programs. Sharing time with others who have a personal empathy for your grief can provide solace in an otherwise chaotic life. Although we may each be at different places along our grief journey, and we may have arrived here through different circumstances, we share the common bond of missing someone that we love so very much.

This issue of *TAPS Magazine* provides heartwarming stories of grief and resilience. We can share in the journey of others, reading their words, and finding kindred spirits between the pages. These kindred spirits provide us with comfort and strength as we venture through this new year and beyond.

As we come through the thaw of winter and into the warmth and beautiful colors of spring, let us not forget the beauty that was given to us by our loved ones. Their laughter and their love will forever bloom in our hearts, and their warmth will provide us hope as we go forward.

Ellen Andrews

★ Manager, Online Community ★



The Journey through Grief

The Mourner's Six Reconciliation Needs

By Alan Wolfelt, PhD

The death of someone loved changes our lives forever. And the movement from "before" to "after" is almost always a long, painful journey. I have learned that if we are to heal, we cannot skirt the outside edges of our grief. Instead, we must journey all through it, sometimes meandering the side roads, sometimes plowing directly into its raw center.

I have also learned that the journey requires mourning. There is an important difference, you see. Grief is what you think and feel on the inside after someone you love dies. Mourning is the outward expression of those thoughts and feelings. To mourn is to be an active participant in our grief journey. We all grieve when someone we love dies, but if we are to heal, we must also mourn.

There are six "yield signs" you are likely to encounter on your journey through grief—what I call the "reconciliation needs of mourning." For while your grief journey will be an intensely personal, unique experience, all mourners must yield to this set of basic human needs if they are to heal.

Need 1

Acknowledging the reality of the death

This first need of mourning involves gently confronting the reality that someone you care about will never physically come back into your life again. Whether the death was sudden or anticipated, acknowledging the full reality of the loss may occur over weeks and months. To survive, you may try to push away the reality of the death at times.



Grief is what you think and feel on the inside after someone you love dies. Mourning is the outward expression of those thoughts and feelings.

You may discover yourself replaying events surrounding the death and confronting memories, both good and bad. This replay is a vital part of this need of mourning. It's as if each time you talk it out, the event is a little more real. Remember: this first need of mourning, like the other five that follow, may intermittently require your attention for months. Be patient and compassionate with yourself as you work on each of them.

Need 2

Embracing the pain of the loss

This need of mourning requires us to embrace the pain of our loss—something we naturally don't want to do. It is easier to avoid, repress, or deny the pain of grief than it is to confront it, yet it is in confronting our

pain that we learn to reconcile ourselves to it. You will probably discover that you need to "dose" yourself in embracing your pain. In other words, you cannot (nor should you try to) overload yourself with the hurt all at one time.

Sometimes you may need to distract yourself from the pain of death, while at other times you will need to create a safe place to move toward it. Unfortunately, our culture tends to encourage the denial of pain. If you openly express your feelings of grief, misinformed friends may advise you to "carry on" or "keep your chin up." If on the other hand, you remain "strong" and "in control," you may be congratulated for "doing well" with your grief. Actually, doing well with your grief means becoming well acquainted with your pain.

Need 3

Remembering the person who died

Do you have any kind of relationship with someone when they die? Of course! You have a relationship of memory. Precious memories, dreams reflecting the significance of the relationship, and objects that link you to the person who died (such as photos, souvenirs, etc.) are examples of some of the things that give testimony to a different form of a continued relationship. This need of mourning involves allowing and encouraging yourself to pursue this relationship.

But some people may try to take your memories away. Trying to be helpful, they encourage you to take down all the photos of the person who died. They tell you to keep busy or even to move out of your house. But in my experience, remembering the past makes hoping for the future possible. Your future will become open to new experiences only to the extent that you embrace the past.

Need 4

Developing a new self-identity

Part of your self-identity comes from the relationships you have with other people. When someone with whom you have a relationship dies, your self-identity, or the way you see yourself, naturally changes.

You may have gone from being a "wife" or "husband" to a "widow" or "widower." You may have gone from being a "parent" to a "bereaved parent." The way you define yourself and the way society defines you is changed.

A death often requires you to take on new roles that had been filled by the person who died. After all, someone still has to take out the garbage; someone still has to buy the groceries. You confront your changed identity every time you do something that used to be done by the person who died. This can be very hard work and can leave you feeling very drained. You may occasionally feel child-like as you struggle with your changing identity. You may feel a temporarily heightened dependence on others as well as feelings of helplessness, frustration, inadequacy, and fear.

Need 5

Searching for meaning

When someone you love dies, you naturally question the meaning and purpose of life. You probably will question your philosophy of life and explore religious and spiritual values as you work on this need. You may discover yourself searching for meaning in your continued living as you ask "How?" and "Why?" questions: How could God

let this happen? Why did this happen now, in this way? The death reminds you of your lack of control. It can leave you feeling powerless.

The person who died was a part of you. His death means you mourn a loss not only outside of yourself, but inside of yourself as well. At times, overwhelming sadness and loneliness may be your constant companions. You may feel that when this person died, part of you died with him or her. And now you are faced with finding some meaning in going on with your life even though you may often feel so empty. This death also calls for you to confront your own spirituality. You may doubt your faith and have spiritual conflicts and questions racing through your head and heart. This is normal and part of your journey toward renewed living.

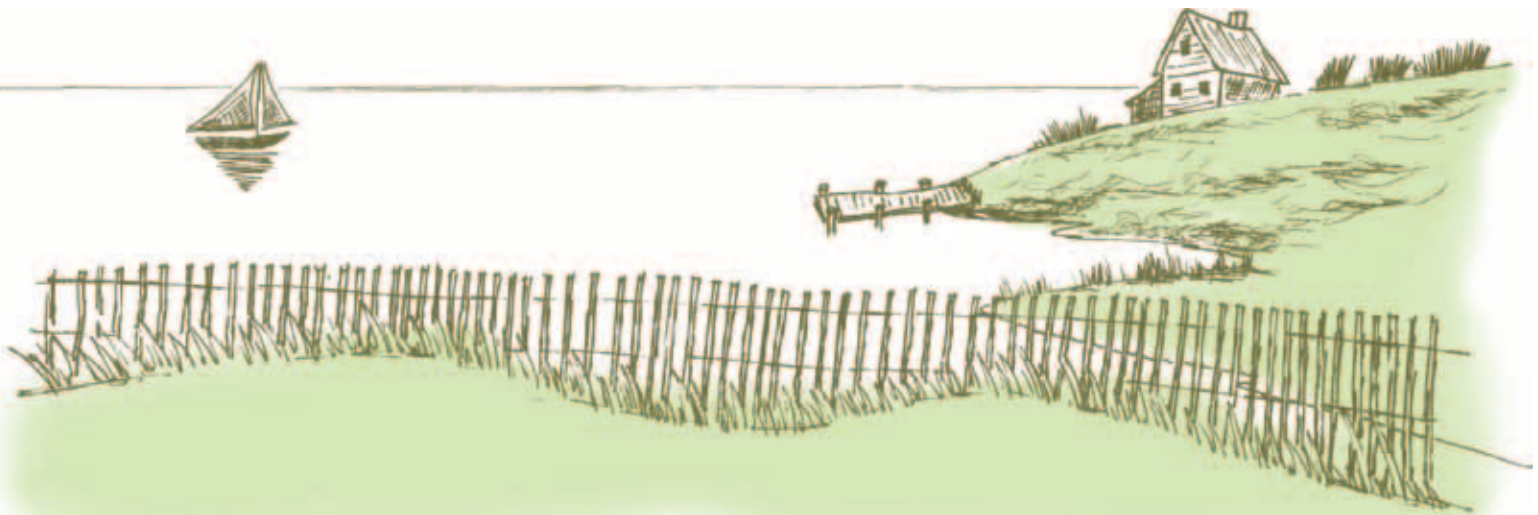
Need 6

Receiving ongoing support from others

The quality and quantity of understanding support you get during your grief journey will have a major influence on your capacity to heal. You cannot—nor should you try to—do this alone. Drawing on the experiences and encouragement of friends, fellow mourners, or professional counselors is not a weakness but a healthy human need. And

Continued on next page

The person who died was a part of you. His death means you mourn a loss not only outside of yourself, but inside of yourself as well.



Continued from previous page

because mourning is a process that takes place over time, this support must be available months and even years after the death of someone in your life.

Unfortunately, because our society places so much value on the ability to "carry on, keep your chin up and keep busy," many mourners are abandoned shortly after the event of the death. "It's over and done with" and "It's time to get on with your life" are the types of messages directed at mourners that still dominate. Obviously, these messages encourage you to deny or repress your grief rather than express it.

To be truly helpful, the people in your support system must appreciate the impact this death has had on you. They

must understand that in order to heal, you must be allowed — even encouraged — to mourn long after the death. And they must encourage you to see mourning not as any enemy to be vanquished but as a necessity to be experienced as a result of having loved.

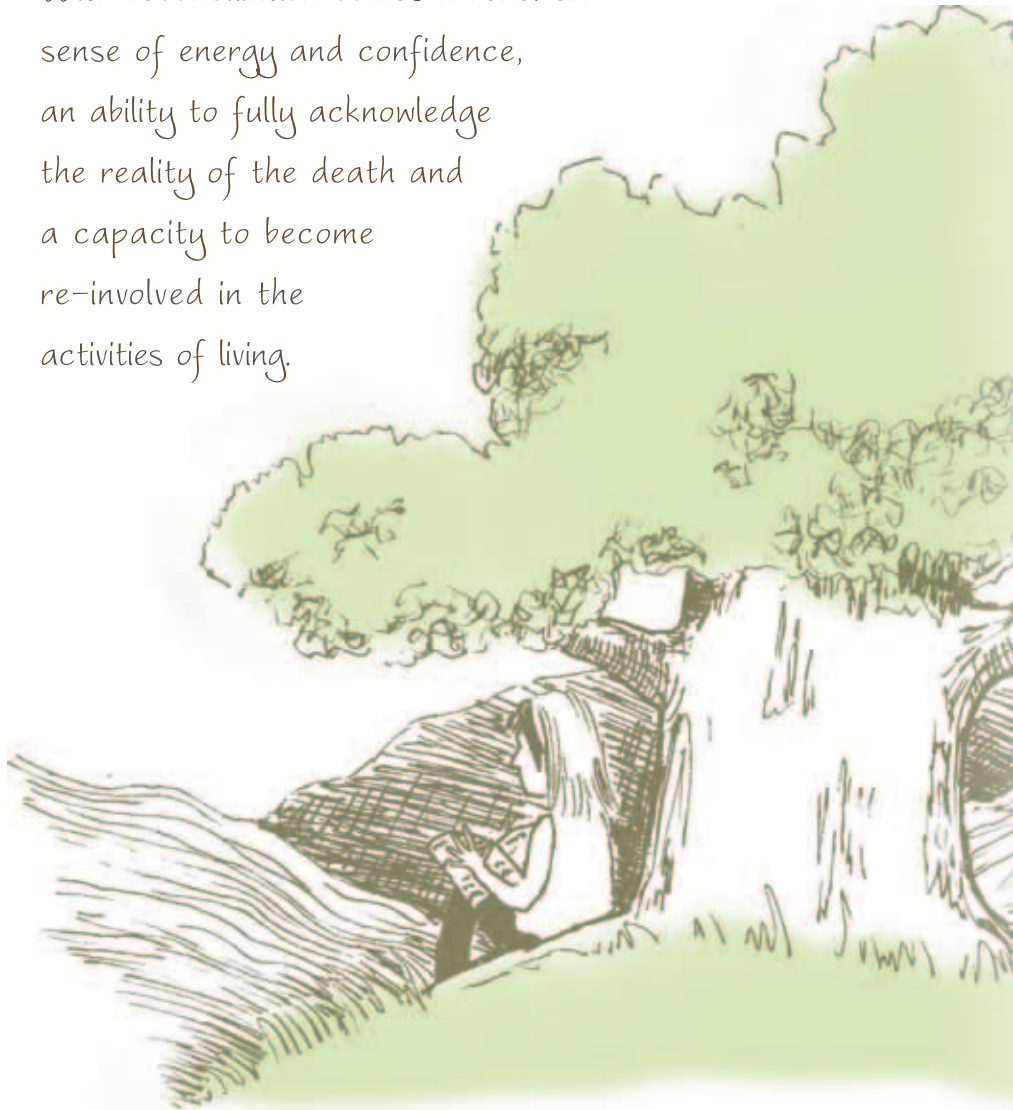
Reconciling your grief

You may have heard—indeed you may believe—that your grief journey's end will come when you resolve, or recover from, your grief. But your journey will never end. People do not "get over" grief. Reconciliation is a term I find more appropriate for what occurs as the mourner works to integrate the new reality of moving forward in life without the physical presence of

the person who died. With reconciliation comes a renewed sense of energy and confidence, an ability to fully acknowledge the reality of the death and a capacity to become re-involved in the activities of living.

In reconciliation, the sharp, ever-present pain of grief gives rise to a renewed sense of meaning and purpose. Your feelings of loss will not completely disappear, yet they will soften, and the intense pangs of grief will become less frequent. Hope for a continued life will emerge as you are able to make commitments to the future, realizing that the person who died will never be forgotten, yet knowing that your life can and will move forward. ★

With reconciliation comes a renewed sense of energy and confidence, an ability to fully acknowledge the reality of the death and a capacity to become re-involved in the activities of living.



About the Author



Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD, is a noted author, educator, and grief counselor. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School Department of Family Medicine. Dr. Wolfelt is known for his compassionate philosophy of "companioning" versus "treating" mourners. Among his many publications are the books *The Journey Through Grief*, *Healing Your Traumatized Heart*, *The Mourner's Book of Hope* and *Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart*.

For more information visit:
www.centerforloss.com



Because of You

Thoughts of my T★A★P★S family

By Laurie Cherry ★ Written in gratitude to her TAPS Peer Mentor

*Because of you, my burden is shared.
Because of you, my heart is not so heavy.
Because of you, I can start to heal.*

*Survivors have a champion in you:
A kindred spirit in a family we wish we didn't need.*

*Your loved ones left a legacy that is a priceless gift,
A heritage of compassion, hope, and courage
In the face of horrific tragedy.*

*As much as you'd like to return the gift, you cannot.
You can only give this gift away to others in the family.*

*It may be hard for them to accept,
But you are persistent and patient and kind.*

*Others will come behind, accepting your support,
Making your burdens a little lighter
And their pain less consuming,
Until one day they are able to pass the gift
To new members of the family.*

*Don't worry; they'll do it with care,
Because they learned how from you.*

*Your loved ones are healing others through you every day.
Their strength, intelligence, and humor
Are part of the fabric of who you are,
Allowing you to heal others
Despite your own sadness and pain.*

*We all look forward to a glorious reunion...one day.
But until then we have some work to do,
Some lives to save,
Some souls to comfort.*

*Thank you for lighting the way,
Walking with us and sharing the legacy.*

Our loved ones will never be forgotten. ★



Photos, TAPS archives



About the Author

Laurie Cherry is the surviving mom of Hunter Byles, a former West Point cadet and football player. After a series of significant emotionally painful events over the course of the last four years, Hunter took his own life. Laurie is grateful for the support of TAPS and the strength and commitment of her peer mentor.



*Laurie Cherry's son,
Hunter Byles*

Photo Courtesy of Laurie Cherry

HARD BOILED

The case for allowing rituals to bring healing

By Michele Hiester Marcum, surviving sister of MSG Michael Hiester

I was in search of vinegar when it happened. I had just checked on my infant son and was on my way to the cabinet to get the vinegar when the phone rang. And I knew. I just knew. It wasn't the words my sister-in-law spoke. It was her tone that spoke volumes. I fell to the floor and just like that, my husband and daughter were in on the horrible truth as well. Funny how it's what we don't say that screams loudest at times like this.

So there it was... the news we all dreaded, obliterating our joyful Easter holiday weekend. Just two weeks from coming home on leave, my brother Michael was coming home for good. Not the way we had envisioned, but the way we had feared. In a flag-draped casket.

I'd lost people in my lifetime. People I'd loved and mourned. Grandparents, friends of the family, neighbors. But nothing could have prepared me for the death of my own brother. News spread like wildfire in our little hometown, and sunrise services across the county were shattered by the unwelcome news that we'd lost one of our own.

What does one do to survive this anguish? How does one cope? I didn't have the answer then, and I surely don't have it now. But I did the only thing I knew to do at the time. I went back in search of the vinegar.

Growing up, I was the one who clung to tradition. I loved the repetition, the familiarity, the memories we were creating without even knowing it. Even in college, I was the one who would come home and color eggs, with or without my siblings. We grew up with what Mom and Dad referred to as a galley kitchen. It was long and narrow, and along the east wall, a long

counter ran with barstools tucked beneath. We three kids would huddle there every spring, assorted coffee cups lined up single file, halfway full of tinted vinegar water. With windows on three sides, the lighting was always perfect in that little nook. Perfect for soaking up the sunshine and perfect for mixing every imaginable hue.

We'd begin with the three primary colors: red, blue and yellow. And then we'd work together, filling every cup in the house with every color variation we could concoct. And when we had colored every egg Mom had boiled for us, we'd leave one lonely egg in each color. Leave them there long enough to draw the tint all the way through their rubbery white layers. So long that we nearly forgot about them. Sometimes long enough to destroy their fragile, paper-thin shells.

We never understood the science behind egg dyeing. Nor did we care. We didn't know that it was the combination of vinegar and the passage of time that intensified those colors. We didn't know that vinegar was the magic ingredient for making those shells disappear. We only knew that vinegar was what we always used. Hot water, a splash of vinegar, a drop or two of dye. The ritual we grew up loving, and the ritual I love even now is healing for me.

This will be our seventh Easter without Michael here with us. My seventh season of dyeing in his memory. Yes, dyeing in his memory, not dying with his memory. I used to think that I, myself, would die from the heartache of losing him. But I've found that



I am stronger than I ever thought I was. And every year, as I dye eggs with my own children and sometimes with his, I reflect on Michael's life and on my own. On the lessons learned in a tiny kitchen with nothing more than a few dozen eggs and a bottle of vinegar.

Traditions and rituals are much like vinegar. We often don't really understand where they began or why we continue them. We just know that there is comfort in repetition, in doing what we've always done. Even when nothing is like it once was. And so, I color eggs every year. Not to forget, but to remember.

I have learned that submerging myself in the rituals is healing. It gives meaning to Michael's life and to the life I am honored to live because of soldiers like him. I am no different than those eggs I color every year.

I am changed on the inside... hardened... hard-boiled. But I am finding that it is the ritual I cling to that prepares my outer layers to accept the healing that has begun to seep inside. It's in the remembering that I find it easier to celebrate. Not celebrate like I once did, but to honor, reflect, and commemorate.

We are all in this carton together. All of us fragile. We may look similar on the outside, but some shells are thinner than others, some yolks a bit harder than their neighbor's. Our whites are no longer liquid and fluid, shifting with every move to help keep us balanced. No one can tell by looking at our outsides that we are fundamentally different from our uncooked friends. But all of us, sheltered together, are changed. Some of us were hauled from the blistering heat quite some time ago. Others are still desperate to be plucked from that rolling boil. Because of the death of our loved ones, we have all experienced a boiling process for which we could never be prepared. For which there is no universal description. And in the aftermath, we are all wondering who we've become.

For whatever reason, I have always chilled our eggs before dyeing them. Perhaps it's because they are simply too hot to handle. Maybe they're more fragile at warmer temperatures. Or perhaps it's because the eggs just weren't ready to accept the dye until they'd had some time away from the heat. I think we survivors are much like that, too. It isn't until we have fully experienced the boiling process, and then been allowed to spend some time cooling, away from the intense heat, that we are able (or ready) to accept the dyeing. The softening of our outer shells and the healing.

We are all different, and yet, we're the same. No one can tell the temperatures to which we've been subjected without

I have learned that submerging myself in the rituals is healing. It gives meaning to Michael's life and to the life I am honored to live because of soldiers like him.

looking inside, deep within our beings. All of us are changed. Hard-boiled to differing degrees. But it is in the softening, vinegar-based dyeing process that we get new life. A life that honors our loved ones and heals us. Our colors are all different, dependent upon the rituals we keep and the passage of time. Our colors may intensify, but never fade. No two of us are alike. We grieve differently and heal differently.



Did you know that when you boil an egg which has a cracked shell, a little vinegar in the water will help keep the white liquid from running out? Rituals are like that... they help hold us together.

As for me, I keep the vinegar close and the memories closer. Every year now, instead of leaving the last of the eggs to soak... forgotten... we've begun a new tradition in our family. The first egg colored each year gets carefully tinted on both ends, one in red and one in blue. Around the middle is the band of white, pure and untouched. And that is the egg that gets saved to be eaten last. It is interesting to see how my children guard that egg, as though to keep Michael's memory present throughout the entire Easter season. As though to save the best for last. As though to honor even the newest of the traditions so necessary for our healing. With each tradition we remember. And we learn to celebrate.

I am who I am. My shell may be cracked, and I may be so stained that the hurt continues to seep into my core. But I have survived hotter water than I ever dared imagine. And deep inside at the center of my being, I know my yolk is pure yellow, as brilliant as the shining sun. Because of that, I have hope. Hope that each day will be a little easier than the one before. Hope that allows me to celebrate life and tolerate a new beginning. I'm a survivor. A hard-boiled, vinegar-dunked survivor. *

*With each tradition,
we remember...
and we learn
to celebrate.*

Adjusting to a New Normal

When Normal Isn't Normal Any More

By Darcie D. Sims, PhD, CHT, CT, GMS

Today I started to take down the tree and put away the holiday decorations. Yes, I know it's March, but after the effort of creating a new holiday routine in my life, it didn't seem right to simply discard it after a few short weeks. After all, creating a new way of looking at the holidays took a great deal of energy.

I tried a new decorating scheme this year (we hung all the stockings – whether that person was with us or not), we played musical chairs so there were no empty seats at the table and we even changed tables. We ate out. Things were different this year, but different in a more positive way. So, after all of that emotional effort, it just seemed silly to pack it all away so soon. So the decorations have remained.

I just wish other things could stay so easily. Do you remember what your loved one's voice sounds like? The voice in my mind is beginning to fade. I can't hear the melody as clearly anymore. Some of the pictures are beginning to fade as well. I can't always remember the importance of everything in the closet anymore, and I think I got carried away last spring, cleaning and tossing a few things. I can't remember.

What did he smell like? Even that secret shirt I saved no longer has his special scent. After this many years, I guess I'm lucky it doesn't have any smell, but it's harder for my memory to call up the special scent of him. I can't smell beyond the years anymore.

What did he feel like? My arms used to ache because they felt so empty. And then, later, I learned to wrap them around others, and some of that warmth returned.

Now I still wrap my arms around people, but they feel like themselves, not like him. Have I lost his touch? Why don't other people feel like him anymore? I still remember his hands, but I used to see his fingers in other people's hands. Now I see that their fingers belong to their hands, not his. I used to see his eyes sometimes... in the face of another. I used to feel his gaze on my shoulder. I used to sense his breath on my neck. I used to "see" him just ahead of me in a crowd or across the street or grown older in another person's body. I sometimes waved at him across a room or talked with him aloud as I rode the bus... Few people in my town ever ride the bus with me anymore. I used to fill my grocery cart with his favorite foods and I even ate beets (only once) because he loved them. I used to keep his favorite cookies around, and I used to watch the clock every evening...waiting.



I used to wait a lot. And I used to cry a lot. I used to hurt a lot, but then even that began to fade a little bit. As I began the holiday odyssey last year, I noticed that Halloween was kind of fun and Thanksgiving seemed less annoying though I still spent time with a bunch of turkeys! And even the big winter holiday wasn't nearly as bad as others have been. Of course, that's probably because of all the changing we did this season. I imagine we can't go back to that restaurant ever again. How could I explain the musical chair routine? Only other bereaved families would understand that one.

I used to hate Valentine's Day and Easter and spring and summer and the beginning of fall and the holiday season most of all. They only brought emptiness and renewed pain and despair. Over the years, I had learned to decorate with the holiday blues. Then, this year, I realized that red and green (and pink for the flamingos) had returned to the color scheme, and the new ways of doing things that we developed were becoming routine. There was no question about hanging what number of stockings. We hung them all!

I guess grieving, which had become a way of life, was beginning to change as well. Or maybe it is normal to have a roll of toilet paper at the dinner table. A box of tissues was never sufficient. Maybe it has become normal to play musical chairs at a restaurant: each family member trying to figure out where to sit, after so many years of knowing exactly who sat where. Maybe it has become normal to feel that bitter-sweetness brush past my heart occasionally. Maybe we are learning to redefine normal.

NORMAL:

It's not just a setting on your dryer!

nor·mal

-adjective

1. conforming to the standard or the common type; usual; not abnormal; regular; natural.
2. serving to establish a standard.
3. approximately average in any psychological trait, as intelligence, personality, or emotional adjustment.
4. free from any mental disorder; sane.
5. free from any infection or other form of disease or malformation, or from experimental therapy or manipulation.
6. of natural occurrence.

-noun

1. the average or mean: Production may fall below normal.
2. the standard or type.

Maybe there will be a valentine for me this year and I can cherish it for what it is rather than ache for what it isn't. Maybe I'll leave the tree up and just keep changing the decorations! Icicles for winter; hearts, bunnies and eggs for spring; tiny flags for summer. Maybe I'll keep the flamingos in the yard all the time, not just at the holidays. I can hear the neighbors now...

Maybe every day is beginning to become a celebration of life, not a memory of death. Maybe I'm beginning to remember love first. Are you? *

About the Author



Darcie Sims is a bereaved parent and child, long time friend and keynote speaker for TAPS, author, thanatologist, pastoral bereavement specialist, licensed psychotherapist, and president and co-founder of GRIEF, Inc.

For more information visit:
www.griefinc.com

A Garden Spade Can Help Heal

Fertile ground for a fundraiser

By Christi Larsen ★ Surviving mom of PFC Cole Larsen

Gardening can be such a personal journey; it's not just about planting a seed and watching it grow. It is a process in which you tend and nurture and then stand back and watch in amazement. It can be extremely therapeutic: interacting with the plants and the earth, creating your own comforting environment without explanation or apology, making a place to escape and decompress.

I didn't always have this view of gardening. Growing up in Southern California in the 1960's does not bring forth many fond childhood memories. In reality, it wasn't gardening as much as it was yard work! Ugh! I despised spending my valuable time mowing grass, trimming shrubs, raking leaves, and weeding when I could have been roller skating, tree climbing, skate boarding, or any number of other assorted important activities.

We lived in the suburbs of Los Angeles where you could hear the occasional dog barking, bird chirping, or plane flying overhead. I really didn't get a true sense of gardening until my family moved to the Palos Verdes peninsula. There our home was situated on a quarter acre, which allowed room to plant and experiment. One of my memories is of my mother feeding her prized pansies with an awful smelling fish emulsion. Even though I didn't participate in this particular gardening ritual, I did enjoy the results of my mother's new-found hobby. Through the years I watched my mother's garden evolve, and it was a true inspiration although at times somewhat intimidating!

Years later when I was married with two children of my own, I really didn't have the time or energy to take on such a task as gardening. I did plant annuals in a variety

of containers; but that was the extent of it. It wasn't until we purchased a home with a yard that I became an active gardener. I regarded my parcel of dirt as an open palette where I could create my own little plot of paradise.

Gardening is a process of trial and error. The successes are so rewarding that the occasional set backs are overshadowed. Although many plants met their demise during my learning process, that didn't discourage me at all. If anything, I became more determined. I can safely say that my green thumb came only as a result of the mistakes I made while learning.

Life was good until November 13, 2004, when we were notified that our only son PFC Cole William Larsen was killed in Iraq. Our world came crashing down around us. The community where Cole and his sister Haley grew up was supportive of our family in the aftermath of Cole's death. Like many others, we were

invited to events where Cole was honored, and we received a number of flags, quilts, portraits, books, and plaques from anonymous supporters who wanted to show their appreciation for Cole's heroism.

But the dark winter months cloaked me with such sadness that I had no interest in anything that brought me joy. I prevented myself from feeling anything. It was a process I needed, much like the dormant period of a garden. But when spring emerged I wanted desperately to see new life come forth. My garden provided that outlet for me. Gardening is a tactile experience... digging in the earth, pulling out those uninvited plants we call weeds, planting bulbs, finding a new or unusual species from a catalog. I rearranged, transplanted, dug holes, and planted seeds. I needed to create a memorial garden for Cole.

During the dark days I had reached out to TAPS and was received with open arms. I felt understood and supported. We were a family connected by an unenviable bond. I wanted to somehow thank our TAPS community for their unwavering and continued support. And that is when the idea of an annual fundraising garden tour was born. For years I had attended a garden tour which supported a woman's shelter in another community. I thought, "This is exactly what our community needs!" I could organize a tour, and the donated funds would support this beloved organization.

Each year for six years, the annual Memorial Garden Tour has raised awareness and funds for TAPS. And the attendance increases each year. The garden tour is made up of exhibitors scattered throughout our town. They are real gardeners who have generously consented to share their gardens. It is a self-



guided tour, and the donations are freewill offerings. Attendees let their hearts dictate what they give, and their generosity has been overwhelming.

To this day I still struggle to think I will never hear Cole's voice again and get those big hugs I so desperately miss. But gardening has been an avenue of healing for me. While digging in my garden I have actually unearthed little green Army figures and the Army trucks that Cole once played with. I believe they are small signs from heaven.

I feel closest to Cole when I am outdoors in the garden. I can still hear his voice in my head, and I remember all the times when he was a little boy digging in the sand box and playing with his Tonka trucks and Army men. Cole loved to fish, so we even put a small pond in the garden. Near the edge is an engraved rock reading Cole's Memorial Garden.

Over the years I have met many gardeners who are motivated to garden because of challenging events in their lives. If you have a rake, a spade, and a few bulbs or seeds, consider joining our ranks. Go outside and welcome Mother Nature with open arms and enjoy what this earth has to offer. Once you get started, you may even want to organize a fundraiser of your own!

Gardeners love to share their passion and knowledge with others. The first year of organizing the tour I was overwhelmed by the number of gardeners who wanted to participate. If you are interested in starting a fundraising community garden tour, please believe that if I can organize one, anyone can!

For more information on how to raise funds while honoring your loved one, email Christi at Clarsen@memorialgardentour.com and visit memorialgardentour.com. ★

Photos courtesy of Christi Larsen

The Memorial Garden Tour is an annual event that supports TAPS and the Wounded Warrior Project through The Cole William Larsen Foundation, a 501(c) 3 public charity.



Forgiveness, a Key to Healing

Allowing peace into your life

By Andrea Hug, MaPC, MPS, LPC

He died at the hand of another and I was left to raise our three small children alone. Chris was my husband, my best friend, and my soul mate. Simply put he was everything to me, and instantly I felt as if I had nothing. How could I go on?

Chris, an avid cyclist, had gone out for a bicycle ride down a country road in the late afternoon on August 1, 1993 and was struck from behind by a man driving while intoxicated. Before he left, I had kissed him twice—one kiss for him, one kiss for me—until we met again. But he never returned.

Less than 24 hours later, I stood alone in my kitchen listening to the voices from the dining room. The tone and the words and the cadence betrayed the anger that an unjust, premature death stirs. If left unchecked, that anger could set the tone for the rest of my life, my children's lives, and for everyone who knew and loved Chris. I asked myself again, "How can I go on?"

My husband's legacy was love, care, and compassion. I understood that about Chris the moment I met him, and I wanted to honor that legacy. What was happening at my dining room table was not consistent with his legacy. In that moment I made a decision that affected every moment of my life and the lives of my children since then: I decided to forgive the man who killed Chris.

I took a deep breath and walked into the dining room. The conversation stopped and everyone looked up at me. The only sound in the room came from the family room where my daughters were watching cartoons as they munched their Cheerios. I began slowly, uncertain about what I would say.

I acknowledged the enormity of the loss we faced and how much we would need each other as we moved forward. I honored the love we all felt for Chris and the relationship that we each had with him. And then I said, "I know you're angry and I cannot and will not take that away from you. But if we speak mean, hateful words, the children will learn to be mean and hateful. Chris would not have wanted that. He was kind and loving. He wanted kindness and love for his children, and so do I. But if we speak the natural anger we feel in their presence we destroy his legacy for them. And so I'm asking you not to say those kinds of things around our children. They need you. And they need to hear from you how much they are loved, because Chris is not here to say that to them anymore, and I can only do so much. I need your help."

As the words tumbled out of my mouth I immediately felt their importance. I knew they could direct my path and help me make decisions that honored Chris's life and gave hope to our children. That morning at the dining room table was a pivotal moment in my grief. It required me to make a decision to forgive, and it offered an option that released my family from the trap of bitterness.

Anger is a reaction that surfaces immediately when something unjust happens. When a loved one dies, anger is a natural emotion that surges from within us regardless of the cause of death. We can feel anger toward the one who caused the death, at God for allowing it, at ourselves for our inability to prevent it, or even at our loved one for putting himself in harm's way. And when we are ready, we can choose our response. I humbly suggest that forgiveness might be an option to consider.

Forgiving offers freedom that ultimately allows you to absorb the pain of that inflicted harm. Though it is a relatively simple concept, it is not necessarily easy to do. Regardless of the difficulty, it is worth doing.



According to the Mayo clinic, forgiveness is a decision to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge. The act that hurt or offended you may always remain a part of your life, but forgiveness can lessen its grip on you and help you focus on other, positive parts of your life. Forgiveness doesn't mean that you deny the other person's responsibility for hurting you, and it doesn't minimize or justify the wrong. You can forgive a person without excusing the act. The forgiveness brings a measure of peace that helps you go on with life. Although forgiveness is a concept that is often attributed to religious experiences, it can also be considered from the standpoint of its psychological implications. Deciding whether or not to forgive is a cognitive process that requires a person to make a choice and then act on that decision. When a loved one is harmed, a natural response is revenge. An injustice occurred, and punishment is an appropriate response. But even as you experience the effect of that harm you can make a choice that gives life rather than denies it. You can choose: "I will forgive." Forgiving offers freedom that ultimately allows you to absorb the pain of that inflicted harm. Though it is a relatively simple concept, it is not necessarily easy to do. Regardless of the difficulty, it is worth doing.

As humans with the ability to reason, we start with a decision but equally important is acknowledging our pain. Naming our sorrow and identifying exactly what we need to forgive starts the process. For some, the phrase, "forgive and forget" implies a "shut up and get over it" feeling that denies a survivor's pain. I do not advocate that

kind of forgiveness because it causes more harm than good. A survivor has already had enough pain. They deserve to have their story heard by someone who cares and offers permission to feel the pain. Sharing our story deepens our understanding of our loss and ultimately allows the pain to dissipate. We can find a good counselor who can help us through this process or journal to pour out the poison. As we process our need to forgive and voice our pain, not only will the bitterness decrease but



studies show that we also decrease stress and depression, lower our blood pressure, and experience healthier relationships while increasing compassion and inner peace.

I know from my own experience that forgiveness

began when I stood in the dining room and looked at the faces around the table. I knew that the bitterness would harm me. I knew it would harm my children. Their father's death already caused more heartache than any child deserved. Adding to that grief by feeding my anger seemed like a terrible choice. So instead, I chose to allow myself to consider the possibility of forgiveness. That is when the true work began.

Every time the anger came up, I tried to follow it with an internal mantra that said, "I choose to forgive." Whether I stood at the gas pump and filled my tank (a task I never did before Chris died) or got up with a sick child for the 14th time in one night, I reminded myself of my decision to forgive. In addition, I told my story of pain, loss, and sorrow to a companion who honored the immensity of the experience. I worked hard at reconciling a grief so profound and so devastating in order to honor my husband and his life.

Working toward forgiveness became a daily process that I remained faithful to because I love: I love my children, I love my husband, and I love my life. It has been 17 years since I stood in my kitchen so soon after Chris died. I've repeated the forgiveness mantra too many times to count. I have told the story over and over and over. I have journaled and prayed. It has taken time, but slowly, as my grief eased, so did my anger. Forgiveness started to come easier, and I faced the days finding more joy than sorrow.

My children are nearly grown and they know the value of forgiveness because they saw it in me, chose it, and lived it for themselves. They are healthy, happy young adults who have hope and joy instead of anger and bitterness. It is possible, but only because we worked hard at it and decided to choose forgiveness. I hope you will too. *

About the Author



Andrea is the surviving spouse of Lieutenant Christian A. Hug, USNR, a search and rescue helicopter pilot who died in 1993. At the time of his death, their three young children were four, two, and 4 months old. Andrea holds master's degrees in both Pastoral Counseling and Pastoral Studies from Loyola University in Chicago, and is a Licensed Professional Counselor. She works with TAPS Survivor Support Services, having spent the past six years working in hospice care with young surviving widows and children.



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Celebrate the Life, Share the Journey*

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- The seminar registration fee of \$185.00 includes selected meals, workshop materials, ground transportation to all special events, and a TAPS shirt and tote bag.

- The Good Grief Camp registration fee of \$50.00 per child assists in paying for selected meals, transportation for field trips and events, two Good Grief Camp shirts, a TAPS backpack, and other camp materials.

- A limited number of scholarships are available if you are facing financial challenges. Please call TAPS at 800-959-TAPS (8277) for more information.

- To make your hotel reservation, sign up as soon as possible. Visit the seminar webpage at www.taps.org to get our special conference rate of \$119.00 per night.

- Events begin with registration on Friday morning, so plan to arrive before noon on Friday, May 27 for attendance at our opening session. Departures should be scheduled after 3 p.m. on Monday, May 30, to allow for our return from Arlington National Cemetery. Should your plans require that you return home to participate in local Memorial Day ceremonies, you may wish to schedule departure Sunday evening, May 29, after our last session ends at 4 p.m. *



TAPS photo by Jackie Ross



Will Trauma Grief Counseling Help?

By Janice Harris Lord, ACSW-LCSW/LPC

Sudden death in the military isn't the same as an anticipated death. That's why "stages of grief" and books about grief following illnesses or advanced age seldom make sense after a traumatic death. Those who don't know better may tell you, "Well, when he signed up for the military, everyone knew that this could happen." Yes, most families consider the risk, and at the same time pray and expect that their loved one will return home safely. Email, phone calls, and other "real time" communications, add to the family's assurance that the person across the country or in combat around the globe is fine. Then, suddenly, he or she is dead, and military officials find their way to your doorstep.

Military deaths usually come suddenly and, all too often, violently. Usually they come to those who are young and fit and serving their country. This makes their loss all the more difficult to comprehend because they are at the prime of their lives and ready to meet all challenges that come their way. You may sometimes think that because you are proud that your loved one died while serving, you should not grieve — or at least not grieve deeply. That is not so. It is not an "either/or" situation.

You can be proud that your loved one served our country and, at the same time, deeply mourn all that you have lost.

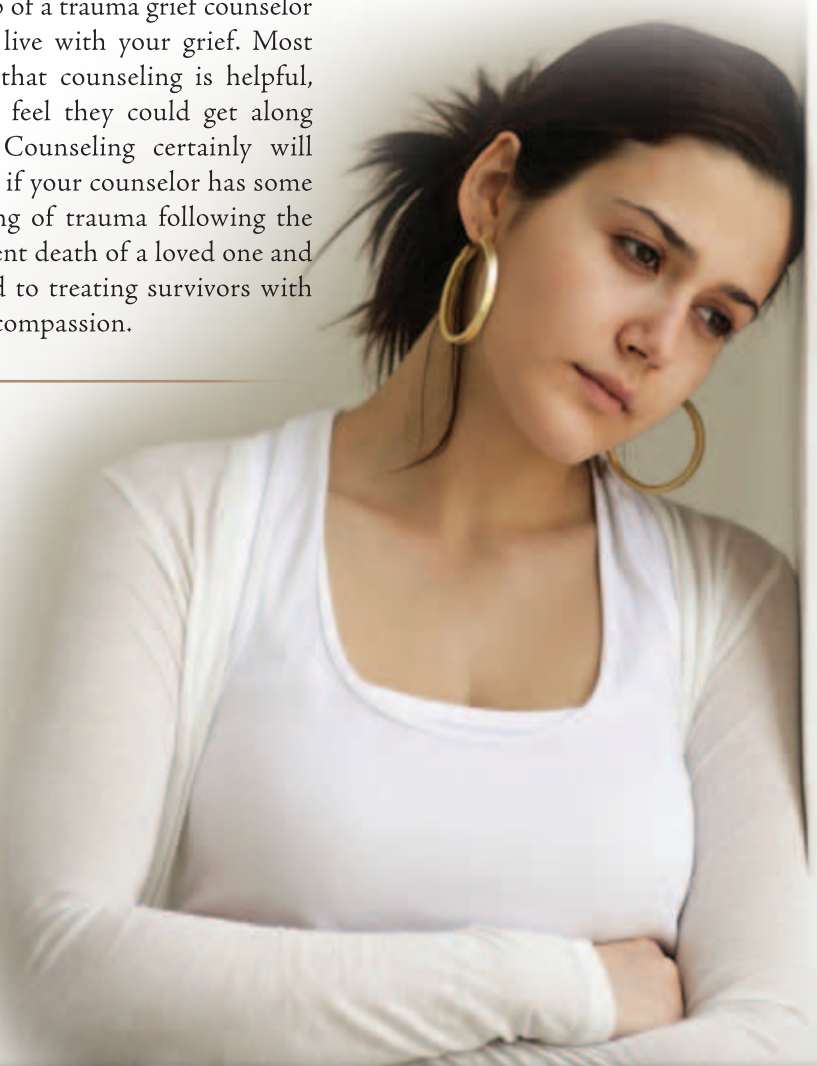
Trauma death differs from other types of death in some critical ways, and a survivor's reactions can differ too. Unlike deaths that come from natural causes, your loved one's death may have been someone's fault or even intentionally caused by someone else, been sudden and unexpected, involved terrible harm to your loved one's precious body, and/or happened very far away. All of these factors can make grief work following a loved one's death more complicated.

It is not easy to decide if or when you need the help of a trauma grief counselor to help you live with your grief. Most people find that counseling is helpful, even if they feel they could get along without it. Counseling certainly will not hurt you if your counselor has some understanding of trauma following the sudden, violent death of a loved one and is committed to treating survivors with dignity and compassion.

Trauma grief shares many symptoms with clinical depression:

- ♦ Appetite changes
- ♦ Sleep disturbances
- ♦ Physical aches and pains
- ♦ Decreased sexual desire
- ♦ Loss of energy
- ♦ Inability to concentrate
- ♦ Need to withdraw

IT IS NOT EASY TO DECIDE IF OR WHEN YOU NEED THE HELP OF A TRAUMA GRIEF COUNSELOR TO HELP YOU LIVE WITH YOUR GRIEF. MOST PEOPLE FIND THAT COUNSELING IS HELPFUL, EVEN IF THEY FEEL THEY COULD GET ALONG WITHOUT IT.



These trauma grief symptoms can be misdiagnosed if the counselor is not fully aware of what you have experienced. Some counselors are not aware that natural grieving often becomes clinical depression, particularly if the death is traumatic.

Other common reactions among trauma survivors include:

- Unanticipated periods of crying (grief spasms)
- Dreams and flashbacks
- Anger that is difficult to focus
- Difficulty deciding what to do with mementos, clothing, and other possessions of the deceased
- Deep sadness, including irrational death wishes such as homicidal or suicidal fantasies
- Fear and anxiety, particularly about getting out in the community alone

No one knows for sure how long you should grieve, how many symptoms you should expect, or how intense a particular symptom will be for you. We do know that, for most people, the grieving hurts, and it lasts a long time.

On the other hand, it is crucial for you to realize that you will feel better over time. Time certainly does not “heal all wounds,” but it does promote healing. The problem, however, is that we want to push the time it takes. We are a society of quick fixes, but there’s no way that this will be fixed quickly. Anne Lamott says it well in her book, *Traveling Mercies*.

“All those years I fell for the great palace lie that grief should be gotten over as quickly as possible and as privately. But, what I’ve discovered is that the lifelong fear of grief keeps us in a barren, isolated place, and that only grieving can heal grief. The passage

of time will lessen the acuteness, but time alone, without the direct experience of grief, will not heal it.”

Many survivors begin to rejuvenate on their own if they have family and friends who accept them, support them, and join them in their grieving. You will need to talk about the circumstances of the death and to share memories of your loved one over and over again. If your family or friends are unable or unwilling to be with you and hear you, you can find support from reading books of stories of other trauma grief survivors and by affiliating with organizations like TAPS. Many survivors find that support groups help them regain emotional health. If a group is not available, or you find that a group does not help, you may decide to seek professional help. Some choose professional help along with support groups.

Most people know when they need professional help. They know because their symptoms are severe or because they are not improving. Some know they need help because their emotional pain is too difficult to endure. They are exhausted, but can’t sleep because of disturbing thoughts, memories, or nightmares. Sleep deprivation leads to irritability, anger outbursts, and depression. A professional trauma grief counselor can help you assess your thoughts, feelings, and symptoms to determine if they are appropriate to your loss and grief. It is paradoxical that sometimes when you are feeling unsure, you are actually progressing well through your grief. If you are better today than you were a week ago or a month ago, you are probably making reasonable progress. If you are the same or worse, you will probably benefit from help.

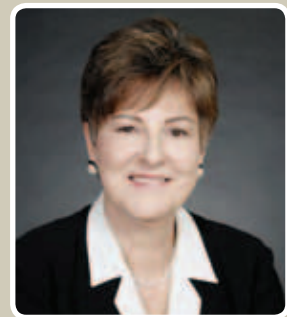
The most important rule in finding the right professional counselor is to trust your “gut” feelings. If, after two or three sessions, you do not feel supported, understood, and comfortable, you have the right to go

elsewhere. You cannot get better in therapy unless you feel emotionally connected to the therapist in a way that makes you feel safe to share your thoughts and feelings honestly. Therapy can be painful. At the same time, you will find yourself looking forward to the sessions because you trust your counselor will treat you with dignity and compassion. ★

For help connecting with a grief counselor in your local area call TAPS at 800-959-TAPS(8277) or email jessica@taps.org

TAPS connects you with individual counseling through programs that offer free, unlimited counseling such as the VA’s Vet Centers and Give an Hour.

About the Author



Janice Harris Lord received her MSSW degree from University of Texas at Arlington and is a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) and professional counselor (LPC). She is a Fellow in Thanatology with the Association of Death Education and Counseling and is a member of the International Society of Traumatic Stress Studies. Her classic book, *No Time for Goodbyes: Coping with Sorrow, Anger, and Injustice After a Tragic Death*, has recently been updated to the 6th edition and is available at www.amazon.com.



SURVIVAL OF THE WITTY-EST

Creating Resilience through Humor

By Steven M. Sultanoff, Ph D

Originally published in *Therapeutic Humor*, Publication of the American Association for Therapeutic Humor, Fall 1997

EDITOR'S NOTE: In the first weeks and months after a death, we wonder if we will ever laugh again, enjoy a joke, or find humor in anything. At some point something makes us laugh and then we feel guilty for our lightheartedness since our loved one is dead. It can take a long time to regain our balance and rediscover joy. The documented evidence, though, is that laughter is good for your health. Perhaps if we consider regaining some humor as a daily "doctor's order," we can allow ourselves to find momentary relief and help ourselves find healing.

Just as our physical immune system protects us from toxins in our environment, our psychological immune system protects us from the toxins generated from psychological stressors we experience in the world around us. While the physical immune system produces antibodies to help protect us from biochemical toxins, the psychological immune system produces "antibodies" to help protect us from psychological toxins—often referred to as stressors.

Humor strengthens both our physical and psychological immune systems. The physical immune system is bolstered through biochemical changes such as an increase in Immunoglobulin A during laughter. Humor helps to sustain the psychological immune system by altering how we feel, think, and behave.

Resilience is the ability of the human organism to spring back from stressors in the environment. As human beings we are resilient and, therefore, able to encounter stressors and return to our previous levels of functioning. In order to be resilient it is important that we "maintain" both our physical and emotional immune systems. Maintenance of healthy immune systems comes in many forms. Physical maintenance can be sustained through good nutrition, rest, and exercise. Emotional maintenance can be supported by sustaining realistic beliefs and attitudes about our world and possessing feelings of self-value and self-worth. By changing one's biochemistry, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, humor can help build physical and emotional resilience as it stimulates the production of physical and psychological antibodies.

THE IMPACT OF STRESSORS

As we experience distress, antibodies (whether physical or emotional) are utilized to help us cope with the stressor. Multiple stressors deplete our immune systems and, without a regeneration of antibodies, our systems become increasingly susceptible to emotional or physical toxins.

After the occurrence of each stressful event in our lives, our immune systems contain fewer antibodies. These antibodies, therefore, need to be regenerated. If a sufficient quantity and/or intensity of stressors persists and there is no opportunity for the immune systems to recharge, a "breakdown" occurs. Breakdowns may be in the form of distressing emotions, rumination, inability to work, physical ailments, etc. When our immune systems are compromised,





emotional distress (such as excessive anger, depression, anxiety, guilt, or resentment) or physical distress (such as colds, headaches, or stomach aches) often occur.

CREATING PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE

Humor not only helps relieve distress and fights environmental toxins when they occur; it also regenerates our "antibodies" so that the impact of the toxins is minimal. This regeneration bolsters antibody levels and helps sustain resilience. As we experience humor, we "stock up" on psychological antibodies. When a potentially stressful event occurs, psychological antibodies are then "activated" to address our emotional distress.

As mentioned above, humor changes our biochemistry as well as our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

Biochemically, humor has been shown to increase Immunoglobulin A and decrease stress hormones. It has also been shown to increase our tolerance to pain.

Cognitively, humor helps break rigid thinking resulting in our ability to perceive the world more realistically and without distortions. Our emotional state is greatly influenced by our perception of the events around us. A stressor is not inherently stressful. The intensity of stress we experience is directly related to the way in which we perceive the stressor. Shakespeare stated, "Nothing is good or bad. It is thinking that makes it so." Because one person's view of a particular stressor influences the impact of that stressor, a variety of people experiencing the same stressor may have vastly different reactions—depending on the meaning they place on the stressor. For

example, someone who feels excessive anger often believes that the world must treat him fairly, and when it does not treat him so, he becomes angry. Humor helps adjust this particular belief system by providing a more realistic perspective on an unfair world.

Someone who experiences excessive anxiety often believes that she must perform well to be accepted or valued. When an environmental stressor challenges her performance, she experiences anxiety. Humor again can provide a clearer perspective placing her performance in a healthier relation to the specific environment so that she changes her thinking pattern from "I must perform to be okay" to "I would like to perform well, but I'm okay even when I don't do as well as I hoped."

Emotionally, humor not only relieves distressful feelings, but it helps teach us that we have the ability to manage our emotional states. One can't experience distressing emotions such as anger, anxiety, depression, guilt, or resentment and experience humor at the same time. You may have heard someone who is very angry say, "Don't make me laugh. I want to be angry." You cannot maintain a high level of anger and laugh at the same time. I asked one of my clients (who was very dedicated to her depression) what upset her about my "humorous" interventions, and she replied, "When you make me laugh, I do not feel depressed." My humor momentarily relieved some of her depression which she seemed committed to maintaining! Humor and distressful emotions cannot occupy the same emotional/psychological space.

Since the experience of humor affects our emotions, we can learn to manage our emotional distress through humor. While humorous interventions may not remove chronic depression they can, for a few moments, relieve emotional upset teaching us experientially that depression (as is true of other distressing emotions) can be lessened or temporarily relieved when we experience humor.

Behaviorally, humor can energize and recharge us and increase our desire and ability to choose activity over inactivity. We are more likely to greet and connect with others when we experience humor.

OUR COMIC VISION

We are more likely to live healthy and happy lives if we maintain our physical and emotional resilience. To do so we can develop our "comic vision," a way of perceiving the world that allows us to be receptive to the humor around and within us. Heightened receptivity to humor can stimulate our ability to be increasingly interactive with, and even proactive toward, the world around us. In this way we can perceive humor in our environment and experience the healing potential of humor as it assists us to become healthier beings through its ability to help us change and manage our biochemical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral states. *

About the Author



Steven Sultanoff is a psychologist, university professor, professional speaker, past president of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, and internationally recognized expert on therapeutic humor. With nearly 25 years in the therapeutic humor field, he has written many innovative articles, and has appeared on national television (The Morning Show, Lifetime, and PBS). Dr. Sultanoff is frequently quoted in national publications. His web site, humormatters.com, provides a wealth of information on therapeutic humor as well as a wide range of topical humor.





The Serendipity of Volunteering

By Natalie Milani, CVA

A flower's fragrance clings to the hand that bestows it.

CHINESE PROVERB



Outside the building where TAPS is headquartered are a number of planters filled with young trees and lovely clusters of lavender. Even as winter neared the determined little blooms remained fragrant. Having spent nearly five years stationed in England (where lavender fields abound), the scent is a sweet reminder of our time across the pond. This is especially true for my daughter, now 20, who spent most of her adolescence there. Leaving England was especially hard on her.

One afternoon last November I clipped a sprig of the flower to take home to my girl. As expected, her face lit up when she caught sight of my tiny gift. Later that evening, my nine year old son asked, "Mama, why did you give Mona a flower?" After listening intently to my explanation, he declared how nice of me that was. In return, I shared a secret with him. That tiny bloom had filled my car with its lovely scent, so I'd had the pleasure of enjoying it all the way home.

It occurs to me how often I've heard similar stories from the many volunteers I've had the pleasure of working alongside over the years. It's a common misconception that volunteers work for free. While it is true they don't receive financial compensation, the rewards—at times unexpected—can be many. For some, it's an opportunity to do some good while fulfilling a requirement of their job or school. Others recognize that helping a cause is a wonderful way to gain experience or make friends. Still others just like how they feel about themselves when they lend a hand.

If you have ever been a volunteer—whether at your child's school, your place

of worship, or at a local charity—you know that feel-good feeling. What you might not know is that volunteering is also good for your health. According to *The Health Benefits of Volunteering*, a 2007 research review by the Corporation for National and Community Service, the health benefits of volunteering have been well-documented for years. Giving the gift of time to help others has been found to have a positive impact on blood pressure, to lessen the incidence of heart disease, and to lower the rates of depression. They have even found a correlation between high volunteer rates and greater longevity.

But much like the scent of lavender in my car that evening, the health benefits are really just a serendipitous bonus of volunteering. I have yet to meet a volunteer who donates his time because he wants to lower his blood pressure. The truth is there are about as many personal reasons for volunteering as there are volunteers. And whatever the reasons, people who are willing to share their time and talents are special; they are a true blessing to the organizations they serve.

By their very nature nonprofits rely on the help of volunteers to fulfill their missions. This is especially true at TAPS. Every day, TAPS volunteers have a huge impact on the quality of service and care we are able to deliver to our families. More than 500 registered Peer Mentors, all survivors of a loved one lost in service to our country, are prepared to walk alongside new survivors on their journeys through grief. Our network of hundreds of Good Grief Camp mentors are young men and women of the military who give their time and compassion to children who are dealing with the loss of a loved one.



During our Good Grief Camps they spend the weekend with these children, helping them at times to work through their feelings and at other times, to laugh and play and forget for a while.

Of the many volunteers who give their time to TAPS, our Peer and Good Grief Camp mentors are probably the most recognized, and deservedly so. There are, however, many unsung heroes who step forward at a moment's notice to help with any number of important tasks. Our Run and Remember Team, many of whom are also survivors, participate in marathons and other races across the nation to help us raise money for TAPS. Members of our Care Teams are counselors, clergy, and mental health professionals who are present at our seminars for families who might need extra support or who just want to talk one-on-one.

What I have found since I joined TAPS is that once people hear about us, they want to help. We have wonderful relationships with many organizations that want to partner with us: fraternities, sororities, schools, and universities. Military related organizations, like spouse's clubs and enlisted club councils, also provide volunteers. Recently the Coast Guard Wives of Washington, DC baked up a huge batch of goodies for our runners and families during the Army Ten-Miler.

Not all of our volunteers are affiliated with a group, however. Many hear about us on the news, read about us in a magazine, or know of us from a friend or colleague. These individuals come to us and ask, "How can I help?" They sometimes work our booth at an expo or serve as airport greeters to families who fly in for our events. They help us make the hero picture buttons that survivors wear at our seminars or laminate the photos pinned to runners' shirts. Volunteers work in our office, answering the phone or sorting the mail or helping find community resources for our families. Sometimes they fold t-shirts or organize our stock room. Our volunteers are professionals, students, homemakers, and businesspeople. They are secretaries, artists, writers and retired persons. TAPS is

blessed with a huge cadre of amazing men and women who are willing to support our promise to the families of our nation's heroes. It would be impossible for TAPS to do what we do without the help of these guardian angels.

In a few short months, the TAPS 17th Annual National Military Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp for Young Survivors will take place in our nation's capital. We expect record attendance. As the number of families we serve grows, so must our volunteer force. This year, we hope to focus on building volunteer teams that can adopt projects for the seminar. One wonderful team, led by a former Army logistics officer, has already offered to coordinate the buses that transport seminar attendees to various events in the city. We hope to have many other such teams who are willing to adopt a project during our largest event of the year.

As for me, I consider it both my responsibility and an honor to make sure these unsung heroes are recognized for their invaluable contributions to the TAPS family. In coming months, I hope to share their stories with you and tell you more about the unexpected joys they find through volunteering. In the meantime, I think I'll take a moment and stop to smell the lavender. *

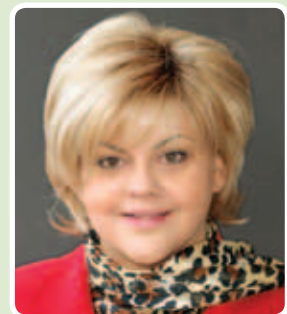
TAPS WELCOMES NEW VOLUNTEERS

If you'd like to find out more about how you can help or are interested in forming a volunteer team to help at our Annual National Military Survivor Seminar, please email Natalie Milani at volunteer@taps.org



Photos, TAPS archives

About the Author



Natalie Milani is the Director of Volunteer Services at TAPS. A Certified Volunteer Administrator (CVA), she was previously Station Chairman of the American Red Cross at RAF Lakenheath, in England. Natalie is married to an Air Force major. They have two children and currently live in North Bethesda, Maryland.



The ART of Healing

National Suicide Survivor Seminar

By Sharon Strouse, MA, ATR

I lay in bed with my eyes closed this Monday morning, this ninth anniversary of my daughter Kristin's death. She ended her life on October 11, 2001. She was just 17 years old, a freshman at Parsons School of Design in New York City, with dreams of being a fashion designer. She succumbed to a misdiagnosed bi-polar illness, an illness that reared its head in January of her senior year, an illness we did not understand, an illness that destroyed all of us. My mind drifted over the past nine anniversaries. I remembered the initial shock and numbness, the emptiness, the tears, and my pain-filled body. I remembered my depression and anger and shame and regret. I remembered the full range of emotions that moved through me and noticed that today there was sadness and there was joy. Sadness and joy rested comfortably in my heart together as I opened my eyes to a beautiful clear day, just like the one nine years ago. I had come a long way.

As I made my way to the kitchen and a cup of coffee, I continued to remember, and my remembering turned to the past weekend and my time at TAPS National Suicide Survivors Seminar and Good Grief Camp in Arlington, Virginia. I had spent the past several days with a few hundred suicide survivors at TAPS.

I facilitated the Rita Project Open Art Studio as an art therapist and as a survivor. I facilitated as a professional who had found my way toward healing through the 100 collages I had created over an eight year period.

The studio opened its doors on Friday morning as the seminar began with its welcome and introduction. I wandered between the Rita Project Studio, just off the main lobby, and the large conference room where a few hundred had gathered. I was sure no one would be interested in creating so early in the morning. I turned my back on the large panes of glass that let in light as well as the view of a reed-lined pond. I entered the studio, which was intimate and quiet. Two rows of small tables filled the room. Fifty magazines lay on the credenza to the left. Beyond, a table held hundreds of pre-cut images. In the front of the room several more tables held materials: paper, scissors, glue sticks, colored

tissue paper, bottle caps, string, beads, pastels, and watercolors.

I sat down and decided to look for images that might capture the moment, when someone peeked around the corner and asked if the studio was open. She entered the room and shared, "I couldn't handle the talking. I had to leave." I welcomed her in and showed her around. She didn't seem to need much from me other than what the Rita Project Studio offered, and that was a place to pour out feelings, to express the unspeakable, to quiet the mind, and open the heart. Within a short period of time others joined her. They, too, were overwhelmed. The energy of their grief permeated the room along with a pregnant stillness interrupted only by the sound of paper tearing and tears. It was 11:00 a.m. and my fear that no one would be interested in creating early in the morning dissolved in the realization that grief has its own timetable and agenda.



The sharing was rich. I will never forget the images that poured out of their broken places.

By the end of the day the room had filled and emptied several times over, with those new to the experiencing their grief through a creative process and those who had tried this approach at the first Art of Healing program at the survivor's seminar in San Diego. Some created quickly and left, while others stayed and spent hours. The sharing was rich. I will never forget the images that poured out of their broken places. I will never forget the stories that we silently witnessed as sacred observers to a sacred process.

I was moved by the woman who entered the studio and said, "I just want to look around. I'm not creative." I welcomed her. Ten minutes later I noticed her sitting with a piece of paper and a magazine. She had torn out a few images. An hour later she was still working and two hours later she was still working. She was surprised. She laughed at herself and the notion that she couldn't make anything, in light of the fact that something was moving through her and onto the page. Her story became visible before her, no longer trapped inside but freed. There was a sense of release.

I will never forget the young woman who sat with me in San Diego last year and cried her way through her evocative creation. I was so glad to see her again. She courageously cut and pasted images of the life she shared with her husband

and his death. The white paper held it all.

I will never forget the tall young woman who pasted images of high heels into her collage, granting herself permission to move into her future.

I will never forget the woman who said she was not an artist and then sat down and made a powerful pastel drawing that captured the fullness of her anger.

I smiled when it was suggested that the studio be open all night, understanding the healing power of a creative process unleashed on those newly initiated into its warm embrace. As I cleaned up late in the afternoon, I was filled with the grace of giving and receiving. I was overwhelmed by the courage of so many survivors and their willingness to be seen through their artwork. I felt at peace.

All the TAPS artists shared their creations on tables that were set up in the lobby. The Rita Project Exhibition was healing for the creators as well as those who walked by and entered into conversations over the images they observed, images that told their story, too.

Rita Project Studio was open again on Saturday from 9:00 until 5:30 and Saturday was equally powerful. Fathers and brothers joined mothers, sisters, and wives. The tapestry of healing was made rich by the

images of grief displayed in the lobby. I lingered a moment just before leaving and took it all in. After the hugs and goodbyes, I drove home on Saturday night after the banquet, opening the sunroof to the stars and the stillness of the night. I remembered a poem by Rumi that advised, "Don't turn away! Keep your gaze on the bandaged place. That is where the light enters you." I felt the deepest gratitude for all those who kept their eyes on the bandaged place, who entered the wound of loss, who did not turn away, but found their way through... with their creations.

I realized that Kristin's ninth year anniversary was held in the context of my weekend with the TAPS community. There was sadness and joy; there was room for it all. I had come a long way. I sat at the kitchen table and opened a magazine. It was now my time to enter into the heart of the matter and enter into the light. *

About the Author



Sharon Strouse holds a bachelor's degree in Psychology and a master's degree in Art Therapy. She has 25 years of clinical experience with adults in both group and individual settings. Over the past 15 years she has devoted herself to further study which incorporates expressive arts psychotherapies, spiritual awakening, and intuitive and energy healing. Sharon has presented nationally for Bereaved Parents of the USA, The Compassionate Friends, and TAPS. Look for Sharon and the Rita Project Art Studio again this year at the national seminar.

You are invited to the
Rita Project Art of Healing Studio
Memorial Day Weekend ★ May 27-30, 2011 Washington, DC

*Explore the place that has no words.
Quiet your mind and open your heart.
Touch the edges of your joy and sorrow.
Play with images, line, color, and form.
Let go and create with others.
No talent is required, only your willingness to explore.
Come in and share your journey.
Our door is open... welcome.*



Spring Ahead

With the T★A★P★S Run & Remember Team

Throughout the year, TAPS fields teams of runners who have a special reason to run: fundraising for TAPS while honoring a loved one who served and died. Amid the thousands of runners all over America who tackle marathons, half marathons, 10 Milers, and 10K races, our TAPS team members proudly wear their TAPS signature singlets in memory of fallen service members.

This spring is the perfect time of year to make a commitment and ready yourself for a fall event. Join the Run and Remember Team, honor your loved one, and do something healthy for your body. Buy those running shoes and set yourself a goal!

Our Run and Remember Team members have found many rewarding moments as they run and honor our fallen heroes, and in the last ten years they have also raised more than 750,000 dollars to support the TAPS mission. You don't have to worry about being a top notch athlete. The Run and Remember Team has a wide variety of runners. Many of our participants are novices. Some run, some walk, and some do both.

Since our Run and Remember Team is spread out across the entire country, we offer support in various ways. After runners register, TAPS provides a website to post a photo of their fallen hero and keep track of their fundraising. We also provide support through emails and a monthly chat session.

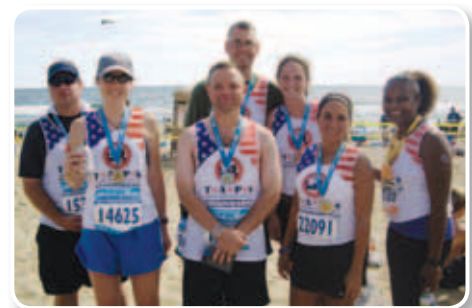
The chat session gives runners the opportunity to meet fellow teammates and receive training tips and advice.

Check the website for upcoming events. If you don't see an event listed near you, find one in your community! Participating with the TAPS Run and Remember Team is truly a rewarding experience. We hope you'll join us in 2011! *

For more information about the TAPS Run and Remember Team and all of our running events, please visit www.taps.org or write to run@taps.org for complete information on how to get involved!



Fredericksburg, VA
MARINE CORPS HISTORIC HALF



Virginia Beach Rock N Roll
MARATHON & HALF MARATHON

Photos, TAPS archives



San Antonio Rock N Roll
MARATHON & HALF MARATHON



Washington, DC
ARMY TEN-MILER



Houston, TX
YMCA KATY TURKEY DASH

50-50 Runner

One man's mission to support T*A*P*S

We live in an amazingly beautiful country, blessed not only by physical beauty, but with a rich cultural diversity. Every state I've run in is a gem of natural splendor, each city a monument to American prosperity, every person a testament to our unique national character. Our country is truly exceptional. And the wisdom I've gained thus far in my travels is that Americans still love their country, and they love one another. It's this love, more than anything else that makes America what it is. ~ George Kraehe

For the last two years George Kraehe has been running all over the place. In fact he has run 14 marathons in 14 states for the TAPS Run and Remember Team. Each time he laces up his shoes for a 26.2 mile race, he runs in memory of a fallen hero from that state. But he's not ready to hang up his shoes just yet. His goal is to run 50 marathons, one in each of our 50 states.

"During the race, I think about the fallen heroes I'm running for," said George, "especially when I'm hitting a hard stretch. The thought of their sacrifice and of the loved ones they left behind never fails to inspire me to run harder and to finish the race strong."

George lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico, with his wife Kelly and his two sons. He's a lawyer and federal prosecutor with the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of New Mexico. He is also a major in the New Mexico Army National Guard. As an Army JAG officer, he deployed to Iraq from September 2006 to October 2007 and was stationed in Tikrit, Baghdad, and Mosul.

That's where he first heard about TAPS. In December 2006, TAPS sponsored the

Honolulu Marathon Forward in Iraq, giving deployed service members the opportunity to run in memory of a fallen hero and raise funds for TAPS. George ran in honor of Marine Corps Captain Juan Guzman.

Then in 2009 he decided to run in all 50 states for TAPS. His reason?

"When I was in Iraq, I didn't as much fear death as I feared leaving my wife and boys without a father and without my love and support. TAPS helps answer these fears by supporting the families our fallen heroes leave behind," said George. "I wanted to support TAPS by commemorating a fallen hero from each state." George says he could not do this without the support of his wife and sons. His 12 year old son Benno has started accompanying him to races and ran the quarter marathon in Madison, Wisconsin.

To date George has run in: Little Grand Canyon Marathon, Utah; Detroit Marathon, Michigan; Ridge to Bridge Marathon, North Carolina; Rock 'n Roll Las Vegas Marathon, Nevada; Rock 'n Roll Mardi Gras Marathon, Louisiana; B&A Trail Marathon, Maryland; Knoxville Marathon,



Photos courtesy of George Kraehe



♦ George Kraehe in Iraq ♦

Tennessee; Hogeve Marathon, Arkansas; Lincoln Marathon, Nebraska; Madison Marathon, Wisconsin; Chicago Marathon, Illinois; Gulf Coast Marathon, Mississippi; and the Kiawah Island Marathon, South Carolina.

He said, "I've been greatly affected by seeing each of the places our fallen called home and meeting the people in the communities they came from. And I've had the privilege of meeting the families of the fallen. I am always moved by their great faith, strength, and wisdom." *



Creating a New Normal...

After the Death of a Child

By Sandy Fox

Reviewed By
Barbara Nickles-Kaliszek

When my only child, Captain Mark Robert Nickles, died in a military jet mishap on February 9, 1997, I reached out to several support groups including TAPS during my horrible pain and despair. Talking to other grieving people helped me a lot. I also read every book I could find about the loss of a child.

It was then that I learned about *I Have No Intention of Saying Good-bye* by Sandy Fox. Her daughter Marcy was killed when a drunk driver smashed into her car in 1994. I immediately related to her grief journey. That book gave me encouragement, inspiration, and a feeling of not being alone in my devastation as I read the many stories from Sandy and other parents.

Sandy has just published a new book on surviving grief called *Creating a New Normal... After the Death of a Child*, which has 80 articles of coping techniques and informational strategies for the bereaved, inspirational stories, other book recommendations, and a very large resource section for all needs.

After reading this book, I again found many new helpful ideas to cope with my emotions, sorrow, and pain. It doesn't matter whether you are newly bereaved or a seasoned griever. These techniques can be of use to everyone.

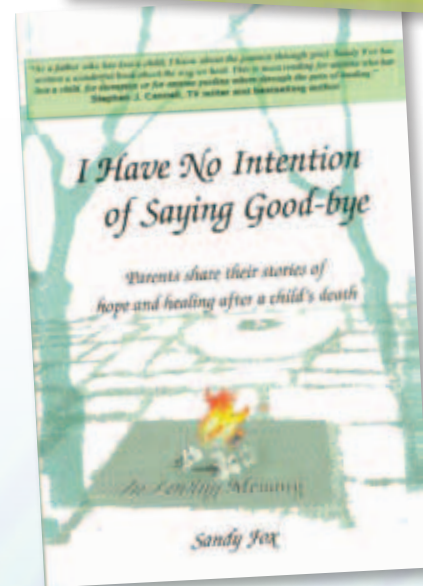
In addition to helping bereaved parents, this new book is also for family members,

friends, therapists, and anyone who wants to know how to act, to react, and what to say to those who have lost a child.

Some of the topics in the book include: journaling, taking care of yourself, making a marriage work, preserving a child's memory, grief triggers, confronting negative statements, workplace grief, anger, guilt, suicide, and getting through the holidays. One of the articles that interested me the most was on issues that confront childless parents since my son Mark was my only child.

Sandy's book is full of uplifting stories and ideas for all of us. A statement used by her in one of her coping articles I found to be so true is, "Life isn't waiting for the storm to pass; it's about learning to dance in the rain." I'm learning that grief is not about getting over it. It's about coming through it and finding a way to deal with all that has happened by moving forward with my life.

In addition to speaking around the country at national grief conferences, Sandy has chaired two national Now Childless Conferences, writes a blog every Sunday on surviving grief (www.survivinggrief.blogspot.com), and writes for the Open to Hope Foundation. A copy of either book can be purchased through BarnesandNoble.com, Amazon.com, Centering.org, or the iUniverse.com bookstore. *

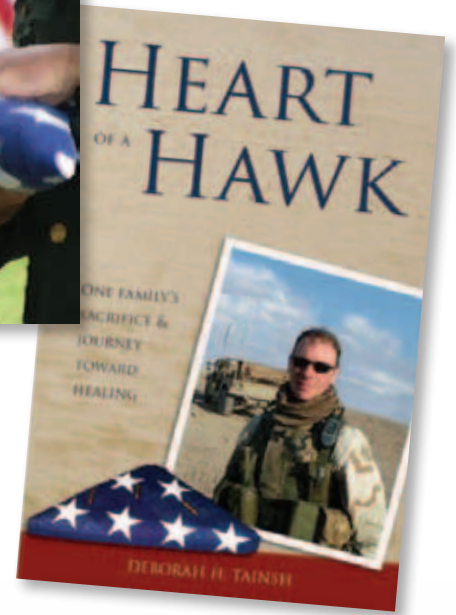




Surviving the Folded Flag

Parents of war share stories of coping, courage, and faith

By Deborah Tainsh



While attending their first TAPS National Military Survivors Seminar in 2005, Deborah and David Tainsh connected with other parents of children who died while serving in the military. After the death of their son, Sergeant Patrick Tainsh, on February 11, 2004, they discovered that the journey through grief was eased by reaching out to others suffering the same experience.

As TAPS peer mentors, Deb and Dave became acquainted with moms and dads across the country. After attending several events with parents joining together to share emotions and stories of their children, a number of parents agreed that a book would be beneficial for sharing stories, emotions, and personal coping methods with parents who didn't have local support systems.

Deborah, the author of *Heart of a Hawk: One family's sacrifice and journey toward healing* (2006), offered to help parents write their stories. Parents volunteered to be a part of the project, not only because they believed that sharing their stories could help others, but also to memorialize their children through the written word.

Deborah created a guide with questions for survivors, and the answers were molded into a book of 27 stories titled *Surviving the Folded Flag: Parents of war share stories of coping, courage, and faith*. The book debuted at TAPS 2010 national seminar in Washington, D.C.

Contributor and TAPS peer mentor Carol Lane, surviving mom of Marine Sergeant Bryon Lane, wrote: "Although I don't think there will ever be a time I don't miss Bryon, I feel there is a reason I am still here. We have to continue with our lives while still including Bryon in our family's consciousness."

John C. Powledge, Command Chaplain of the 335th Signal Command, states in the Foreword: "These are stories of triumph, and in each family's story we find the reason for America's strength... and while this is a book about the heroism of those who made the ultimate sacrifice on the battlefield, it is also about the heroism of those who continue to live and serve our nation despite their devastating loss."

In a book review Reverend George Morelli wrote: "A very important part of the book is the last section titled Advice from Gold Star Parents. It actually is an annotated checklist for families who will walk the path of losing a loved one. Prominent among these counsels: Grieve at your own pace; wait on big decisions; stay connected with others; give people permission to talk about your child; indulge in hobbies; and accept help."

A mom and reader in Arizona sent a message saying: "Deborah, I purchased *Surviving the Folded Flag* at TAPS. I haven't finished reading it yet, but I wanted to tell you how much your book is helping me. I relate to all the stories because they say things I've wanted to say. Thank you for putting this together."

Surviving the Folded Flag: Parents of war share stories of coping, courage, and faith has received the 2010 Gold Medal awards for anthology from Military Writers Society of America and Branson's Stars & Flags Book Awards. Books can be obtained from www.militaryfamilybooks.com. Partial proceeds benefit TAPS. *





Homeowners Assistance Program

Support to Surviving Spouses of Fallen Warriors



Attention Homeowners

The Department of Defense is proud to offer the Homeowners Assistance Program (HAP) to eligible service members and federal civilian employees. The program is authorized by law, and administered by the US Army Corps of Engineers to assist eligible homeowners who face financial loss when selling their primary residence homes in areas where real estate values have declined because of a base closure or realignment announcement.

HAP Expansion

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) temporarily expands the HAP to financially assist, among others, surviving spouses of service members or DoD employees who were killed or died of wounds while deployed.

Military Surviving Spouse Eligibility

The spouse of a member of the Armed Forces or a civilian employee of the Department of Defense or the United States Coast Guard is eligible for the program if:

»» The member or employee dies as a result of a wound, injury, or illness while deployed (or forward deployed for civilian employees) on or after September 11, 2001, and Disabled to a degree of 30 percent or more as a result of such wound, injury, or illness; and

»» Reassigned or relocate in furtherance of medical treatment or rehabilitation, or due to medical retirement in connection with such disability; and

»» The spouse relocates from the member's or civilian employee's primary residence within two years of the death of the spouse.

Military Survivor of Service Member Eligibility Tied to Deployment

»» **Deployment:** Performing service in a training exercise or operation at a location or under circumstances that make it impossible or not feasible for the member to spend off-duty time in the housing in which the member resides when on garrison or installation duty at the member's permanent duty station, or home port, as the case may be.

Civilian Employee Survivor Eligibility Tied to Forward Deployment

»» **Forward Deployment:** Performing service in an area where the Secretary of Defense or the Secretary's designee has determined that Service members are subject to hostile fire or imminent danger under Section 310(a)(2) of title 37, United States Code. *

For detailed information related to eligibility requirements, visit our website at hap.usace.army.mil



VA Office of Survivors Assistance

Helping Survivors in a Time of Transition

The death of a loved one is a life changing event, and the VA Office of Survivors Assistance (OSA) is ready and available to assist survivors in making the necessary transitions during what is most often a difficult time.

“Taking care of survivors is as essential as taking care of our Veterans and military personnel,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. “By taking care of survivors, we are honoring a commitment made to our Veterans and military members.”

OSA was established in October 2008, designed to serve as a primary resource for information on benefits and services furnished to Veterans’ survivors by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). OSA also serves as a principal advisor to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and promotes the use of VA benefits, programs, and services to survivors through outreach.

OSA monitors VA’s delivery of benefits to survivors, makes appropriate referrals to VA offices for survivors seeking benefits, and explores innovative ways of reaching survivors who are not receiving VA benefits for which they are eligible. These benefits can include education assistance, home loan guaranties, health care insurance, and Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC). OSA spearheaded updates to the benefits book by clarifying the language regarding bereavement counseling for survivors, which will ultimately make counseling more accessible for all survivors.

“We are your advocate to ensure fairness, equity, and appropriateness of all survivor benefits and to serve as the liaison for inter- and intra-agency collaboration and coordination on survivor issues,” said OSA Director Debra A. Walker. “We are also fully committed to staying in step with the needs of survivors to advocate for the survivor community.”

To fulfill its mission, the Office of Survivors Assistance has been working closely with senior VA leadership to provide the most up-to-date information on the unique issues faced by the survivor community. OSA gleans much of its information through direct interaction with the survivors themselves. The steady and constant feedback informs many decisions at OSA.

On many occasions, OSA is called upon to assist with an individual’s claim. While the thrust of OSA operations is to serve in a policy capacity, OSA staff know that every VA employee has the responsibility and privilege to provide the excellent customer service that our clients so deserve. On any given day, OSA staff may be found working the issues of individual survivors who have contacted OSA directly.

OSA has established multiple partnerships with Department of Defense agencies and Veterans Service Organizations to explore new ways to ease the transition of survivors into the VA system. They also maintain a website to help survivors navigate through resources that may be available to them. *



Benefits survivors may be entitled to:

- Burial
- Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC)
- Parents’ DIC
- Death Pension
- Aid and Attendance/Homebound
- Education and Training
- Fry Scholarship
- Home Loan Guaranty
- Health Care
- Life Insurance Benefits
- Education Program Refund
- Civil Service Preference
- Commissary and Exchange Privileges
- “No Fee” Passports
- Other

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

For more information about specific benefits contact VA’s toll-free telephone assistance line at 1-800-827-1000.



For more information visit OSA’s website at www.va.gov/survivors. You may also call 202-461-1077 or email officeofsurvivors@va.gov.



TAPS has been blessed with partners who understand our mission and care about our families. The United Services Organization (USO) is just such an organization, and TAPS is proud to count the USO as a leading partner program in so many ways.

For nearly seven decades, the USO has been on the front lines with our troops, strengthening the morale and uplifting the spirits of our men and women in the Armed Forces. As America headed into World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt saw the need for an organization that could provide a home away from home for our troops. He envisioned a group of civilians and volunteers who would remind our heroes in harm's way that America cares about and supports those who defend her. As a result, six service agencies joined forces to become the USO. They paved the way for the myriad of service organizations that have formed since then and that dedicate themselves to our military members and their families.

Life has changed a great deal since the 1940s. While the needs of our troops and their families may be much the same, our awareness of how to serve them has grown expo-

Teams with T★A★P★S

entially. In 1994 the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) was born as a result of the increased awareness of supporting those whose loved ones died while in military service.

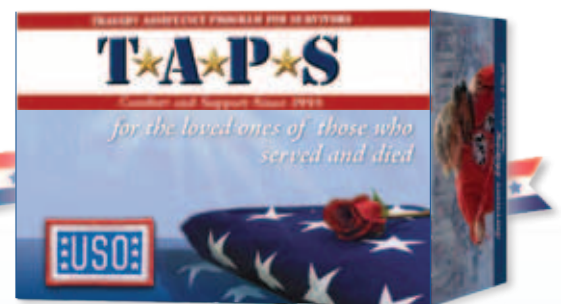
It is no surprise then that TAPS and the USO often partner to enhance the quality of service provided to troops and their families. TAPS trains volunteer USO staff supporting newly bereaved families arriving at Dover Air Force Base to view the dignified transfer of a loved one's remains from abroad. The USO helps TAPS provide meals at regional and national Military Survivor Seminars and Good Grief Camps, as well as providing volunteer teams at regional TAPS events. TAPS participates in Operation Enduring Care, the USO's national initiative to engage citizens across the country in supporting our troops.

In 2009 and 2010 TAPS and the USO partnered in Arlington National Cemetery in conjunction with Worcester Wreath Company's "Wreaths across America." This joint outreach effort provided holiday wreaths to decorate the graves of our recently fallen military heroes and offered support to surviving families during the critical holiday time period.

Beginning this year, TAPS and USO have partnered to ensure that newly bereaved families now receive an updated and improved Resource Kit. "The USO's generosity in sponsoring this kit, including funding the overnight delivery by FedEx, means our surviving families will have them when they need them most," said Bonnie Carroll, founder and chairman of TAPS. "We are so grateful."

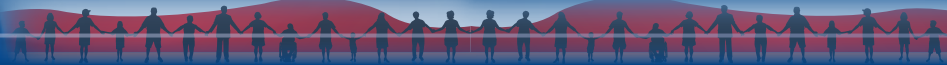
Also this year, USO and TAPS have teamed with the Moyer Foundation to host Camp Erin programs that help children facing the loss of a loved one. These camps, benchmarking the very best care possible for surviving children, will take place across America in 2011.

TAPS and the USO are committed to building a strong, long-term partnership that will provide the very best care for the families of our nation's fallen heroes. Sloan D. Gibson, President and CEO of the USO, said, "We are honored to be affiliated with TAPS and the noble work they do to care for the families of the fallen." ★



Photos, TAPS archives





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