



# On the Wings of Grief

**A Bereavement Journal for Adults**

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#### Literary Sources

All literary quotations can be found on the Goodreads website at [www.goodreads.com](http://www.goodreads.com).

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Many people respond to that question by saying, “I just want to feel better” and that’s enough. If you can identify the ways you want to feel better physically, emotionally, or spiritually, it can help you along the bereavement journey. The stresses of grieving are hard to bear and learning new ways to take good care of yourself can lessen their effects. Working to realign your spirituality after the death of a loved one; learning to enjoy the simple pleasures of eating, sleeping, and spending time alone or with friends; and tending to the care of your body are all valid desires. So, do your best to be as specific as you can in your answer to that question.

“Grief is a most peculiar thing; we’re so helpless in the face of it. It’s like a window that will simply open of its own accord. The room grows cold, and we can do nothing but shiver. But it opens a little less each time, and a little less; and one day we wonder what has become of it.”

—Arthur Golden, *Memoirs of a Geisha*



## Where are You in this Journey?

Human beings have a need to categorize their collective experiences. In the study of grief and bereavement, there have been theories involving the description of stages, tasks, and phases but when you're in the midst of grieving a major loss, does it really help you to know any of them? Perhaps it does to the degree that you can better understand where you are in your journey of acceptance and adjustment. It's also valuable to know that some of the theories don't actually apply to your bereavement experience.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross proposed a well-known model of grief which includes these 5 stages: *denial, isolation, anger, bargaining, depression* and *acceptance*? She intended them to describe the adjustment process undergone by terminally ill patients in relation to their own death. This means that these 5 stages are not important to us here.

However, you should recognize which phase of grieving you are in as identified by Dr. Gene Scott in the group grief counseling guide "Responding to Grief: Theme Group for Bereavement Support".

### Phase 1

This describes the early days after loss, which involve developing a deepening awareness that your loved one has truly died. It only lasts a few hours or couple of days. Characterized by a bittersweet mixture of feelings and activities, this phase may bring a sense of numbness or relief with the need to notify friends and other family members of the death and attend to funeral arrangements. For some, the need for solitude is overwhelming in this early phase.

### Phase 2

A lengthy intermediate period usually lasts between several months and a couple of years and is the time where we adapt to the situation of not having our loved one in our day-to-day life. It's a period of transition from the early days of coping with the immediate issues of arranging the funeral and dealing with legalities to the assumption of some of the roles played by our now-deceased loved one. Dr. Scott describes these roles as "perhaps mundane tasks like housekeeping or bill-paying" but they may also involve tending to the emotional or physical needs of other family members.

### Phase 3

Dr. Scott refers to this phase as a period of accommodation, which "lasts until our own death." He cautions us that this should not be considered a time of closure, resolution, or healing; "it's more like finding a way to integrate the loss into our on-going daily life." It is, he so beautifully describes, "how we spend the rest of our lives with the memories of our loved ones, celebrating our shared positive moments, while accepting the less-warm pieces of our co-history with them."

There's grief work to be done related to each of these three phases and this journal is designed to support you wherever you are in your bereavement journey. Yet, for the sake of personal clarity, in which phase do you believe yourself to be?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Phase 1:</b> My loved one died recently. I still feel overwhelmed by the loss.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Phase 2:</b> It has been less than eighteen months since the death of my loved one.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Phase 3:</b> I am no longer grieving intensely or for long periods of time.

## The Four Tasks of Mourning

It was Sigmund Freud who first brought up the concept of grief work and although the specific tasks he outlined have been reconsidered in the years since the publication of his book *Mourning and Melancholia* in 1917, the idea that bereavement is purpose-driven continues into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Years later, professor of psychology, James Worden chose to see the work of bereavement as task-oriented. In the 1996 article “Tasks and Mediators of Mourning: A Guideline for the Mental Health Practitioner”, he outlined the following four tasks:

1. To accept the reality of the loss
2. To process the pain of grief
3. To adjust to a world without the deceased
4. To find an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life

The work you have undertaken will focus your attention on achieving each of those goals. It will not occur in any logical order since after all, each of us is different and the path we walk in the bereavement journey is not a straight one. In fact, those of us in mourning naturally fluctuate between sadness and normalcy. It is a process of adaptation, where we juggle our attention between loss-oriented activities (processing the pain of grief) and restoration-oriented activities (adjusting to life without our loved ones by striving to create enduring connections with the deceased.)

While not referring to the labors of bereavement, the famous French writer, Honoré de Balzac captured the value of grief work when he said, “All happiness depends on courage and work.” It really does take both courage and hard work to successfully adapt to the loss of a significant person in your life.

“I have returned from a world beyond knowledge  
And now must unlearn for otherwise I clearly see I can no longer live.”

—Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*



## How Do You Feel about Grieving?

Before we go any further, it's time to examine and change the way you might think of grief and bereavement so you can free your mind for the work ahead. Let's take a moment to complete a short quiz to see what you believe to be true about grieving the loss of a loved one.

1. Following the death of a close family member, how long would you expect the survivors to grieve?
  - 0-3 months
  - 3-6 months
  - 6-12 months
  - 1-2 years
  - 2+ years
2. How long would society expect them to grieve?
  - 0-3 months
  - 3-6 months
  - 6-12 months
  - 1-2 years
  - 2+ years
3. Would you express intense personal feelings of grief publicly?
  - No
  - Yes
  - Depends
4. How long after a death would you begin to worry that someone is grieving abnormally?
  - 8 weeks
  - 3-6 months
  - 6-12 months
  - 1-2 years
  - 2+ years
5. Which survivor do you feel is at greatest emotional risk during grief?
  - Older male
  - Older female
  - Young male
  - Young female
  - Young child
  - Older child
6. After what period of time would you consider it acceptable for a surviving adult to...

Remarry:  
\_\_\_\_\_

Return to work:  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date:  
\_\_\_\_\_

Stop grieving:  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. What is the first task a survivor must complete in order to heal?
  - Accept reality
  - Detach from the past
  - Keep busy
  - Experience the pain
  - Set new goals
  - Don't know

The myths and misinformation about grief can create a great deal of harm and prevent others from helping you through the grieving process. Read through this list of the most common myths and ask yourself if you believe any of these examples of mistaken thinking to be true. Put a check mark by those you feel are a part of your current thinking and then let go of them for good:

<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Myth #1:</b> The goal of grief is to get over it. This is simply not true; the goal of grief is to “find an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life.” (Worden, <i>Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy</i>, 2009)</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Myth #2:</b> If you ignore grief it will go away. Unfortunately, choosing to ignore something this big is only bound to fail. It’s also exhausting to keep up the mental walls required. It’s better to acknowledge and move through your grief.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Myth #3:</b> Staying busy is a good way to cope. Just like myth #2, this is foolhardy thinking and only leads to exhaustion. There is no way that choosing to stay busy will ever help you to complete the essential tasks of mourning; it will only distract and postpone the work of bereavement.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Myth #4:</b> Grief is purely an emotional reaction to loss. The mind and body are tied together, which means grief involves the whole body and impacts us emotionally, physically, spiritually, and cognitively.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Myth #5:</b> Grief is a predictable, ordered process. Has any personal experience in your life been at all predictable? Just like the love you shared, your grief can feel very much like a roller coaster ride. It follows no timeline and is not logical.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Myth #6:</b> Grieving involves letting go of the person who died. We never let go of those we love! Bereavement involves accepting their death in the process of creating an enduring emotional, psychological, and spiritual connection.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<p><b>Myth #7:</b> Grievers should choose to be left alone. While sanctuary and solitude can be very important, those in bereavement need a balance of opportunities to share their feelings, concerns and memories as well as to receive support from others.</p>



## Grief Work and Growing Stronger

Are you familiar with the idea of resiliency? The natural world gives us many examples of this quality. Consider this imagery:

“The oak fought the wind and was broken, the willow bent when it must and survived.”

—Robert Jordan, *The Fires of Heaven*

We can see that resilience is the ability to experience adversity so that we come through it either unharmed or somehow better off for the experience.

It requires us to be courageous and patient, and to some degree stubborn in that we ultimately (despite moments of despair) refuse to surrender. It's our resiliency that allows us to rebound from personal misfortune or trauma.

Could you possibly see your bereavement as a way to develop greater resiliency? Experts believe so and interestingly enough, storytelling is one of the techniques you can use in all phases of your bereavement to help nurture resiliency. In fact, James Pennebaker, psychologist and author of *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma & Emotional Upheaval*, declared, “When we put our traumatic experiences into words, we tend to become less concerned with the emotional events that have been weighing us down.”

# Journal Writing

While you may not consider yourself an avid writer, we're going to use the tool of journal writing. This short journal might not give you enough room so you may want to purchase a composition book, spiral notebook, or beautifully-covered journal for your writing. (Don't forget to get a supply of your favorite pens or pencils, too!) As you write in your personal journal, Pennebaker suggests that you:

- Write continuously for 20 minutes a day.
- Write only for yourself.
- If you feel you're going to flip out, then switch topics.

At the close of your daily writing session, ask yourself the following questions and base your answers on a sliding scale of 1-10 (1 being the least, 10 being the most):

- To what degree did you express your deepest thoughts and feelings?
- To what degree do you currently feel sad or upset?
- To what degree do you currently feel happy?
- To what degree was today's writing valuable and meaningful for you?

Through journal writing, you have an unparalleled opportunity to look inward to identify your strengths and weaknesses, focus on developing resiliency, and grow stronger through your bereavement.

Linda Cherek, a member of the Board of Trustees for the National Catholic Ministry to the Bereaved, notes, "Writing out our losses is a method of therapy. The word 'therapy' comes from the Greek word *therapei* which means the kind of attention one gives the sacred. The way our life was connected with that of our loved one is a sacred story of the unique journey we walked. Keeping a journal is one valuable way to honor that journey."

"And what, you ask, does writing teach us? First and foremost, it reminds us that we are alive and that it is a gift and a privilege, not a right."

—Ray Bradbury, *Zen in the Art of Writing*

## For Now...Just Breathe

Many times when we're under stress, we forget to breathe or we breathe shallowly. Take a few moments to notice your breath so that you become more aware and mindful as it moves through you. These four simple steps will bring you greater peace-of-mind while nourishing every cell in your body.

- Sit in any comfortable position. Whether you're on the floor or sitting in a chair, your spine should be long and straight, yet relaxed.
- Find a comfortable position for your hands, either folded gently in your lap or resting on your thighs or knees with palms up or down.
- Close your eyes if that feels comfortable. If you'd rather keep them open, find a spot on the floor a few feet in front of you and allow your gaze to soften. As you sit, begin to notice the temperature of the air around you and notice any sounds you may hear. Also, notice your body's weight and the feel of the floor beneath you. This is an exercise in expanding your awareness without feeling the need to change anything.
- Focus your attention on the movement of your breath as it moves in and out of your body. As you inhale, notice the temperature of the air as it flows through your nasal passages on its way to your lungs. Notice your belly, your ribs, and your chest as they gently expand. As you exhale, notice the same things.

If you're ready to tackle the first journal writing prompt, then do so now. If not, it's enough to step back from this part of your grief work and just breathe. You may want to consider other self-care ideas:

- Turn off your phone for an hour or two to protect you from needless interruptions.
- Set aside 20 minutes this evening to worry about things so that you don't spend the whole day worrying.
- Wrap yourself up in a warm blanket and drink a nice cup of hot tea or cocoa.
- Do something you're good at to clear your mind of other thoughts crowding in on you.
- Take a nap in the sunshine.



## Writing the Story: Getting Comfortable with Heartache

Especially for those in the early days of grieving, setting down the facts about your loved one's death is one very valuable way of accepting the loss. The details are often etched in our minds for a very long time and part of your healing can be found in the storytelling of their death. In writing down the words, you relive the moments and re-experience the heartaches felt during that time. In this way, you can work through the pain of your loss.

Later in your bereavement, you can also use storytelling but now you will work to capture the moments you shared through their lifetime—the good and the bad.

Storytelling will be the means, your pen and journal the tools, used to heal. It's a way of making sense of things and will help purge and relieve the emotional tensions of bereavement.

### Before You Begin

It's recommended that you get in the habit of writing just three words that describe your feelings at the beginning and end of every journal entry. This helps you to track your feelings over time and gives you an opportunity to notice that emotional shift with time and this process.

*What three words would you use to describe how you are feeling today?*

1.

2.

3.







## Capture a Shared Special Moment

Take a few minutes to think back to a most joyful moment you shared with your loved one. This is really similar to the first prompt where you were asked to chronicle all the details you could about your loved one's death. It's a way to revisit the past, call up the feelings, and continue to work through the pain of your grief. You may need to browse through a photo album or family scrapbook to get yourself started.

**Helpful reminder:** Jot down the three words which describe how you're feeling today:

1.	2.	3.
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Use these questions as if you were a journalist; focus on the who, what, where, when and why of your memory when you write:

- Where were you?
- What were you doing?
- When did this event take place?
- What were you wearing?
- Who else was there?
- What smells, sounds and sights do you remember about the scene?
- What were your emotions at the time?







### **If I Could Talk to You Again, I'd Tell You...**

Ah, but for one more chance to speak to our loved ones again. How much would we give for that opportunity? Unfortunately, it's not realistic, but you can use your journal to capture your desires. Would your words be of kindness and love, or would this be your chance to speak your mind about a wrong done to you at some point in the past? No one will see what you write so be honest and true to your heart. You may wish to use this prompt whenever you have a thought you'd like to share with your loved one.

**Helpful reminder:** Jot down the three words which describe how you're feeling today:

1.	2.	3.
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*Finish the thought: If I could talk to you again, I'd tell you...*

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## One of My Fondest Memories of You is...

Like sugar on the tongue, a sweet memory can enliven the heart and cause our spirit to soar. Take some time to write one of the sweetest memories you have of your loved one.

**Helpful reminder:** Jot down the three words which describe how you're feeling today:

1.	2.	3.
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*Finish the thought: One of my fondest memories of you is...*

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*What emotions do you feel when looking back on this memory?*

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### One of My Least Favorite Memories of You is...

Because life is full of contrasting experiences, you may have a memory of your loved one that is not so sweet. Paint a vivid picture of the event; be the journalist chronicling the moment with the details of who, what, where, when and why.

**Helpful reminder:** Jot down the three words which describe how you're feeling today:

1.	2.	3.
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*Finish the thought: One of my least favorite memories of you is...*

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*What emotions do you feel when looking back on this memory?*

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### Capturing Dialog: Chronicle Your Wishes and Regrets

Similar to the earlier exercise, “If I Could Talk to You Again, I’d Tell You...”, this prompt provides an opportunity to write down the things you wished you had said when they were alive—in the time just before their death and throughout their lifetime. It’s also valuable to write about those things you wished you had not said but you may wish to leave that for another day.

**Helpful reminder:** Jot down the three words which describe how you’re feeling today:

1.	2.	3.
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*Finish the thought: I wish I had told you...*

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"I'm choosing happiness over suffering, I know I am. I'm making space for the unknown future to fill up my life with yet-to-come surprises."

— Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*



# Your Grief, Contained

Thank you for spending time with the *On the Wings of Grief* Bereavement Journal. We know it has only skimmed the surface of the complex emotions, anxieties and concerns you feel today and may continue to feel in the future.

While it can be very helpful to set aside a little bit of time each day to write in your journal with intention, remember that this is grief work. You may want additional support throughout the first year of your bereavement so you are encouraged to sign up for the year-long companion email series on our website.

Rich with insights, education and cross-cultural insights from the latest scholarly research in grief and grieving, the *On the Wings of Grief* series is a perfect addition to your bereavement toolkit.

Think of your journal as a container for your grief. To set yourself up for success, we offer a few tips to ritualize the use of this bereavement tool:

- Look at photos and write stories detailing the events portrayed.
- Listen to your favorite music and allow your feelings to emerge for expression on the page.
- Limit your daily journaling time to no more than 45 minutes.
- Begin and end this time period the same way.

Ritualize your journaling time by lighting a candle at the beginning of each session or ending it with a few moments of silence or prayer. This routine provides a sacred space and gives you the cue that it's time to grieve and acts to hold your grief inside when journaling time is done.

"This is what rituals are for. We do spiritual ceremonies as human beings in order to create a safe resting place for our most complicated feelings of joy or trauma so that we don't have to haul those feelings around with us forever, weighing us down. We all need such places of ritual safekeeping. And I do believe that if your culture or tradition doesn't have the specific ritual you are craving, then you are absolutely permitted to make up a ceremony of your own devising, fixing your own broken-down emotional systems with all the do-it-yourself resourcefulness of a generous plumber/poet."

— Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*





He was still too young to know that the heart's memory eliminates the bad and magnifies the good, and that thanks to this artifice we manage to endure the burden of the past.

—Gabriel García Márquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*



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