The Art of “Companioning” the Mourner: Principles and Practices to Compassionate Caregiving

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featuring

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TEXAS & NEW MEXICO HOSPICE ORGANIZATION
Tenet One: Companioning is about being present to another person’s pain; it is not about taking away the pain.

Tenet Two: Companioning is about going to the wilderness of the soul with another human being; it is not about thinking you are responsible for finding the way out.

Tenet Three: Companioning is about honoring the spirit; it is not about focusing on the intellect.

Tenet Four: Companioning is about listening with the heart; it is not about analyzing with the head.

Tenet Five: Companioning is about bearing witness to the struggles of others; it is not about judging or directing these struggles.

Tenet Six: Companioning is about walking alongside; it is not about leading or being led.

Tenet Seven: Companioning is about discovering the gifts of sacred silence; it does not mean filling up every moment with words.

Tenet Eight: Companioning is about being still; it is not about frantic movement forward.

Tenet Nine: Companioning is about respecting disorder and confusion; it is not about imposing order and logic.

Tenet Ten: Companioning is about learning from others; it is not about teaching them.

Tenet Eleven: Companioning is about compassionate curiosity; it is not about expertise.
## Treatment Model

- To return the mourner to a prior state of homeostatic balance ("old normal").
- Control or stop distressful symptoms; distress is bad.
- Follows a perspective model where a counselor is perceived as expert.
- Pathology rooted in sustained relationship to dead person.
- Positions the griever in a passive role.
- Grieving person ranges from compliant to noncompliant.
- Quality of care judged by how well grief was "managed."
- Denial interferes with efficient integration of the loss and must be overcome.
- Establish control; create strategic plan of intervention.
- Provide satisfactory answers for all emotional, spiritual questions and dilemmas.

## Companioning Model

- Emphasizes the transformative, life-changing experience of grief ("new normal").
- Observe, "watch out for," "bear witness," and see value in soul-based symptoms of grief.
- Bereaved person guides the journey; "teach me" is the foundational principle.
- Is a normal shift from relationship of presence to relationship of memory.
- Recognizes the need for the mourner to actively mourn.
- Grieving person expresses the reality of being "torn apart" as best he can.
- Quality of care monitored by how well we allowed the griever to lead the journey.
- Denial helps sustain the integration of the loss from head to heart. It is matched with patience and compassion.
- Show up with curiosity; willingness to learn from the griever.
- Honor the mystery; facilitate the continuing "search for meaning"; no urgency to solve or satisfy the dilemma.

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Excerpted from *Companioning the Bereaved: A Soulful Guide for Caregivers*  
by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.  
www.centerforloss.com
Inappropriate Assumptions Surrounding Our Modern Understanding of Grief and Loss

Grief is not an Illness

As a teenager who had come to experience my own life losses, I set out to discover the principles that help bereaved people heal in grief. I hoped to communicate those principles to anyone interested in honoring my story. To my dismay, I discovered that the majority of caregiving models for grief counselors were intertwined with the medical model of mental health care.

For many caregivers, grief in contemporary society has been medicalized and perceived as if it were an illness that with proper assessment, diagnosis, and treatment can be cured. This paradigm dictates that we as caregivers, having studied and absorbed a body of knowledge and become experts, are responsible for “curing” our patients. How arrogant!

The language we use to describe the practice of grief support exposes our attitudes and beliefs about counseling as well as determines our practices. Because numerous historical roots of psychotherapy are deeply grounded in a medical model, because the medical model appears more scientific than other alternatives, and because the economics of practice are interfaced in a healthcare delivery system, the natural tendency has been to adopt medical model language.

As I explored the words used in counseling the bereaved, I was taken aback: symptoms of pathology; disorders; diagnosis and treatments. In my own search to learn so I could teach, I found that these more clinical, medical model approaches have limitations that are profound and far-reaching.

I discovered that our modern understanding of grief all too often projects that for “successful” mourning to take place, the person must “disengage from the deceased” and by all means “let go.” We even have all sorts of books full of techniques on how to help others “let go” or reach “closure.” At bottom, I discovered that our current models desperately needed what we could refer to as a “supplement of the soul.” It seemed glaringly obvious to me that as fellow travelers in the journey into grief, we needed more life-giving, hope-filled models that incorporated not only the mind and body, but the soul and the spirit! I found myself resonating more with the writings of people like Ram Das, Stephen Levine, Victor Frankl, James Hillman, Thomas Moore, and Carl Jung.

Actually, it was Carl Jung’s writing that helped me understand that every psychological struggle is ultimately a matter of spirituality. In the end, as we as human beings mourn, we must discover meaning to go on living our tomorrows without the physical presence of someone we have loved. Death and grief are spiritual journeys of the heart and soul.

Yet our modern Western culture’s understanding of grief often urges mourners to deny any form of continued relationship with the person who died. For many mental health caregivers, the hallmark of so-called “pathology” has been rooted in terms of sustaining a relationship to the dead. In reality, the mourner actively shifts the relationship from one of presence to one of memory. Or, as the playwright Robert Anderson wisely noted, “Death ends a life, it does not end a relationship.”
Our modern understanding of grief all too often conveys that the end result of bereavement is a series of completed tasks, extinguished pain, and the establishment of new relationships. I discovered that many mental health caregivers, in attempting to make a science of grief, had compartmentalized complex emotions with neat clinical labels.

Our modern understanding of grief all too often uses a “recovery” or “resolution” definition to suggest a return to “normalcy.” Recovery, as understood by some mourners and caregivers alike, is erroneously seen as an absolute, a perfect state of reestablishment. We seem to want to go around any so-called “negative’ moods and emotions quickly and efficiently. Yet it occurred to me that if our role as caregivers is to first observe the soul as it is, then we need to abolish what I call the “resolution wish.”

Our modern understanding of grief for some is based on the model of crisis theory that purports that a person’s life is in a state of homeostatic balance, then something comes along (like the death of someone loved) and knocks the person out of balance. Caregivers are taught intervention goals to reestablish the prior state of homeostasis and a return to “normal” functioning. There is only one major problem with this theory: it doesn’t work. Why? Because a person’s life is changed forever by the death of someone loved. We are transformed by grief and do not return to prior states of “normal” based on interventions by outside forces.

Our modern understanding of grief all too often “pathologizes” normal experiences. Traditional psychology has focused the majority of attention on the diagnosis and treatment of pathologies and in the quest for “fixes,” little attention has been paid to the nature of emotional or spiritual health. As one author observed, “The exclusive focus on pathology that has dominated so much of our discipline results in a model of the human being lacking the positive features that make life worth living.”

Critical self-observation would suggest that perhaps we rely too much on psychosocial, biological, and psychodynamic constructs that we have been taught to “treat away,” such as depression, anxiety, and loss of control. In our attempt to gain scientific credibility, we may have become our own worst enemies! In our attempt to be respected as part of established mental health care, we may be disrespecting the very people who need our compassionate care.

Without doubt, the grief journey requires contemplation and turning inward. In other words, it requires depression, anxiety, and loss of control. It requires going to the wilderness. Quietness and emptiness invite the heart to observe signs of sacredness, to regain purpose, to rediscover love, to renew life! Searching for meaning, reasons to get one’s feet out of bed, are not the domain of the medical model of bereavement care. Experience has taught me that it is the mysterious, spiritual dimension of grief that allows us to go on living until we, too, die.
“Self as Instrument”  
(Are you congruently matched to this work?)  
*Personality  
*Life Experiences  
*Strengths and Weaknesses

Empathetic Relationship Qualities  
(Are you naturally high on the core qualities/conditions of helping?)  
*Sensitivity and Warmth  
*Communication of Acceptance  
*Desire To Understand

Open Learner  
(Are you interested in the mysterious body of knowledge surrounding grief and loss?)

Counseling Skills  
(Are you interested in learning and practicing high-level helping skills to facilitate the six reconciliation needs of mourning?)  
*For Perceiving  
*For Understanding  
*For Responding  
*For Expressing  
*For Confronting

Self-Care  
(Are you interested in caring for yourself while, at the same time, you care for others?)

See Dr. Wolfelt’s book titled, Companioning You: A Soulful Guide to Caring for Yourself While You Care for the Dying and the Bereaved

ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS FOR Companioning THE MOURNER

By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., www.centerforloss.com
Resources For the Adult Mourner
Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart
Understanding Your Grief Journal
Understanding Your Suicide Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart
Understanding Your Suicide Grief Journal
Living in the Shadow of the Ghosts of Grief: Step into the Light
Eight Critical Questions for Mourners... And the Answers That Will Help You Heal
The Wilderness of Grief: Finding Your Way (Also available in audiobook)
The Wilderness of Suicide Grief: Finding Your Way
The Journey Through Grief: Reflections on Healing
Loving from the Outside In, Mourning from the Inside Out
The Mourner’s Book of Hope
The Mourner’s Book of Courage
The Mourner’s Book of Faith
Grief One Day at a Time: 365 Meditations to Help You Heal After Loss

When Your Soulmate Dies: A Guide Through Heroic Mourning
The Paradoxes of Mourning: Healing Your Grief with Three Forgotten Truths
Healing Your Grieving Heart
Healing Your Grieving Soul
Healing Your Grieving Body
Healing A Friend’s Grieving Heart
Healing A Grandparent’s Grieving Heart
Healing A Spouse’s Grieving Heart
Healing A Parent’s Grieving Heart
Healing The Adult Child’s Grieving Heart
Healing Your Grieving Heart After Miscarriage
Healing Your Grieving Heart After Stillbirth
Healing Your Traumatized Heart
Healing the Adult Sibling’s Grieving Heart
Healing Your Grieving Heart After Stillbirth
Healing Your Grief About Aging
Healing Your Grieving Heart After a Military Death
Creating Meaningful Funeral Ceremonies: A Guide for Families
Transcending Divorce
Transcending Divorce Journal
The Wilderness of Divorce: Finding Your Way

Resources For & About Grieving Children and Teens
Healing a Child’s Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends & Caregivers
Healing Your Grieving Heart For Kids: 100 Practical Ideas
A Child’s View of Grief (book or DVD available)
How I Feel - A Coloring Book for Grieving Children
How I Feel – A Coloring Book for Kids During and After Divorce
Sarah’s Journey
Jeremy Goes to Camp Good Grief
Finding the Words: How to Talk with Children & Teens
Companioning the Grieving Child: A Soulful Guide for Caregivers

Companioning the Grieving Child Curriculum Book
Healing a Teen’s Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends & Caregivers
Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens: 100 Practical Ideas
The Healing Your Grieving Heart Journal for Teens
A Teen’s View of Grief (DVD)
Healing After Divorce: 100 Practical Ideas for Kids
Healing A Child’s Heart After Divorce: 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends and Caregivers
Resources For Bereavement Caregivers

Reframing PTSD as Traumatic Grief: How Caregivers Can Companion Traumatized Grievers Through Catch-Up Mourning
Companioning You! A Soulful Guide to Caring for Yourself While You Care for the Dying and the Bereaved
Creating Meaningful Funeral Experiences: A Guide for Caregivers
Educating the Families You Serve About the “WHY” of the Funeral Workbook
Why We Have Had Funerals Since the Beginning of Time Brochures and Posters
Funeral Home Customer Service A-Z: Creating Exceptional Experiences for Today’s Families
The Pocket Consultant for Funeral Service: Customer Service A-Z
A Tale of Two Funerals

Companioning the Bereaved: A Soulful Guide for Caregivers
Companioning the Dying: A Soulful Guide for Caregivers
Companioning at a Time of Perinatal Loss
The Handbook for Companioning the Mourner: Eleven Essential Principles
Understanding Your Grief Support Group Guide
Understanding Your Suicide Grief Support Group Guide
Transcending Divorce Support Group Guide
Helping People with Developmental Disabilities Mourn
The Handbook for Companioning the Mourner
Caring For Donor Families: Before, During & After

Other Resources
When Your Pet Dies
Healing the Empty Nester’s Grieving Heart
Healing a Friend or Loved One’s Grieving Heart After a Cancer Diagnosis
Healing Your Grieving Heart After a Cancer Diagnosis
Healing After Job Loss: 100 Practical Ideas
Healing Your Holiday Grief: 100 Practical Ideas for Blending Mourning and Celebration During the Holiday Season
Healing Your Grief When Disaster Strikes
Healing Your Grieving Heart When Someone You Know has Alzheimer’s
Healing Grief at Work: 100 Practical Ideas After Your Workplace is Touched by Loss

Wolfelt’s Grief Gardening Model Poster
The Depression of Grief: Coping with Your Sadness & Knowing When to Get Help
Afterwords… Helping You Heal (Available in English and Spanish)
Helping Series Brochures (37 Titles Available)
Wallet Cards: The Pet Lover’s Code, The Mourner’s Bill of Rights (English & Spanish), My Grief Rights (Poster also available), The Bereavement Caregiver’s Self-Care Manifesto, Ten Freedoms for Creating Meaningful Funeral Ceremonies Under Reconstruction Pin
Empathy Cards

Training Resources
The Center for Loss & Life Transition works towards its mission of “Helping People Help Others” by providing bereavement caregivers quality training in a four-day educational seminar format taught by Dr. Wolfelt. These courses have evolved out of a demand for concise yet comprehensive training in the growing field of death education and counseling. If you want to learn practical skills to “companions” people in grief or continue to enhance your bereavement skills, our educational seminars are perfect for you. These courses are held in Fort Collins, CO or Scottsdale, AZ.

Request a free Companion Press Publications or Center for Loss Educational Seminars catalog or order publications online:
(970) 226-6050 info@centerforloss.com www.centerforloss.com

The Writings of Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., C.T.
Workshop Evaluation

Title:

Importance of the information presented:
1  2  3
not important somewhat important very important

Overall, the workshop was:
1  2  3
not important somewhat important very important

The most valuable aspect of this workshop for me was:

The least valuable aspect of this workshop for me was:

How did you learn about this workshop?

Comments:

Please return this form to: