

Reflecting back on my first couple of years of widowhood, I remember the day when I was tired of crying and being sad all the time. I struggled to find a way to jump over the fence to the other side of my grief journey. The 'other side' meant I was willing to go on with my life without the physical presence of my husband. While I knew he would continue spiritually with me on my life journey, I had to define what that looked like before I could build my strength to jump the fence. I fought to find a way to build the much-needed strength since I knew I was the only one who could take the leap, regardless of who was providing guidance and support.

When I finally did find the courage to jump the fence, I found a new world waiting for me on the other side. Personal qualities I had doubted, such as inner strength, ability to cope, decision-making and the willingness to go on with my life, were waiting with open arms and all I had to do was apply them into my daily activities and thoughts.

As I continued to find strength, I looked for ways to 'pay it forward' to the next round of widows who were walking similar paths and were as lost as I

was. I searched for books, classes and programs that would accomplish the following: allow griever to work on their grief while maintaining a connection to their lost love; give griever the ability to share their thoughts with others around them; help griever prove to themselves that they are making progress as a griever; and enable griever to jump-start their new lives on the other side of the fence.

My search, unfortunately, did not produce much, so I decided to develop a program addressing the challenges above, which resulted in a four-week program titled "Facing the Mourning." The program is designed to meet four consecutive weeks with each week introducing a new tool and technique to help the participants with their personal grief journey. The weeks consist of building memorials, writing letters, journaling and setting goals with milestones. HeartLight Center has offered this program successfully for six years, watching the transition of participants as they grow through their grief with each project. In addition, a train-the-trainer program was developed in order to educate and support group facilitators desirous of bringing the program to griever in their communities.

Facing the Mourning

Finding the Other Side of the Fence

by Rachel Blythe Kodanaz

What follows is a synopsis of the program for Living with Loss™ Magazine readers. Whether you are a griever looking for support or a caregiver providing support, these tools will be helpful for any grief journey.

Building Memorials

A memorial is a remembrance of a loved one in the form of a tribute or dedication; they can be ‘things to make,’ ‘things to do’ or ‘places to go.’ The reasons to create a memorial are to keep your loved one ‘alive’ and to provide an opportunity to reminisce and mark an important chapter in your life. I continue to be amazed at the creativity and emotional thought that is expended when participants are creating a memorial. I have witnessed the creation of memory quilts, treasure boxes of personal items, park benches with plaques, volunteering at charity functions, planting of a tree or garden, creation of a family scholarship in the deceased loved one’s honor and so much more. While these memorials differ in size and magnitude, they represent the life of the loved one who has passed and provide a connection for the survivors.

Creating a memorial is a great way for a family to work together. The project creates a vehicle to express the loss in a positive way. There is no right or wrong way to build a memorial – gather a few friends and family to talk about ideas and find an appropriate memorial that can be built by everyone.

Writing Letters

Letter writing is probably the most difficult of the four tools, yet it is one of the best ways to express thoughts, release anger and guilt and share the memory of a loved one. The main purpose of writing letters is to dig

deep into your emotions and write from your heart, not your brain. The letters may or may not be sent to the recipients, depending upon to whom they are written and whether or not anything will be gained by sharing them. We have witnessed an array of letters – to the grievers’ deceased loved ones, to medical professionals, to religious affiliations, to children, grandchildren and others. The letters vary greatly in length, style and content, but the common response at the end of the writing process is generally about how helpful it was in allowing the grievers to release anger and other emotions.

Journaling

People journal for different reasons – we encourage journaling to help provide a written account of progress while you are grieving. It is often difficult to feel the advancement of your grief journey since you may not ‘feel better.’ Logging your thoughts, daily activities and feelings in a journal will provide an opportunity on a ‘bad’ day to actually ‘see’ your advancement. Journaling has no rules or format but success will depend on follow-through – possibly setting aside 10-15 minutes per day and carrying your journal with you to capture midstream thoughts.

Creating Goals with Milestones

Every year, regardless of our grieving, we set goals for ourselves which can become very overwhelming as achieving them often becomes stressful. When defining goals with milestones, the goals are broken down into smaller, achievable pieces, thus reducing the overwhelming feeling of not being able to accomplish the entire goal. Milestones allow for the feeling of success along the way and help with motivation. The program helps the participant choose a goal

that is achievable and usually related to their grief journey.

The name of the program describes the desired outcome of participating – providing a mechanism to help with individual grief and provide a favorable outcome – allowing the participants to face their own mourning.

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Rachel **RECOMMENDS:**

Finding the Other Side of the Fence for Grievers:

- Build a Memorial
- Write a Letter
- Journal Your Thoughts
- Create Goals with Milestones

For additional information on the “Facing the Mourning” program visit www.heartlightcenter.org or contact Rachel directly at Rachel@heartlightcenter.org.



Rachel Blythe Kodanaz entered the grief world in 1992 when her husband suddenly passed away leaving her with a two-year-old daughter. She spent several years trying to find her path through grief and as part of her recovery became active in supporting

others who were suffering a loss. Currently, Rachel is the Executive Director of HeartLight Grief and Loss Center located in Denver, Colorado. She facilitates numerous groups including a Baby Boomer Widow Support Group, multi-day workshops, keynote addresses and training classes. In addition, her experience in large corporations led her to develop and publish material to support the workplace when dealing with a grieving employee or workgroup, with emphasis in educating managers and co-workers. Rachel presents to corporations, communities, not-for-profit organizations, funeral directors, and conferences. Rachel has published numerous articles and participated in a grief segment on Good Morning America. Rachel@heartlightcenter.org
www.heartlightcenter.org
www.griefintheworkplace.com