

# Healing with Haven

June 2006

## Your Not Going Crazy

By Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D., Fort Collins, Colorado

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As strange as your emotions may seem, they are a true expression of where you are right now. Rather than deny or feel victimized by your feelings, I want to help you learn to recognize and learn from them. Naming the feelings and acknowledging them are the first steps to dealing with them. It's actually through this process of becoming friendly with your feelings that will help you heal.

My goal in this article is to help you see how normal grief thoughts, feelings and behaviors are. I have worked with thousands of grieving people and they have taught me about many, many different thoughts and feelings after a death. Rest assured that whatever you are thinking and feeling, while in one sense is completely unique to you, is also usually a common human response to loss. Moreover, keep in mind that although you may have not experienced some of these thoughts and feelings so far, you may do so in the future.

### Disorganization, Confusion, Searching, Yearning

Perhaps the most isolating and frightening part of your grief journey is the sense of disorganization, confusion, searching and yearning that often comes with the loss. These feelings frequently arise when you begin to be confronted with the reality of the death. As one mourner told me, "I felt as if I were a lonely traveler with no companion and worse yet, no destination. I couldn't find myself or anybody else."

This dimension of grief may give rise to the "going crazy" syndrome. Mourners often say, "I think I'm



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going crazy." That's because in grief, thoughts and behaviors are different from what you normally experience. If you feel disorganized and confused, know that you are not going crazy, you are grieving.

After the death of someone loved, you may feel a sense of restlessness, agitation, impatience and ongoing confusion. It's like being in the middle of a wild, rushing river where you can't get a grasp on anything. Disconnected thoughts race through your mind, and strong emotions may be overwhelming.

You may express disorganization and confusion in your inability to complete tasks. You may start to do something but never finish. You may feel forgetful and ineffective, especially early in the morning and late at night, when fatigue and lethargy are more prominent. Everyday pleasures may

not seem to matter anymore. You also may experience a restless searching for the person who has died. Yearning and preoccupation with memories can leave you feeling drained. You might even experience a shift in perception; other people may begin to look like the person in your life who died. You might be at a shopping mall, look down a hallway and think you see the person you loved so much. Or you might see a familiar car whiz past and find yourself following the car in hopes that the person who died is inside. Sometimes you might think you hear the garage door open and the person entering the house as he or she had done so many times before. If these experiences are happening to you, remember, you're not crazy!

Visual hallucinations occur so frequently that they can't be considered abnormal. I personally

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prefer the term “memory picture” to hallucination. As part of your searching and yearning when you’re in grief, you may not only experience a sense of the dead person’s presence, but you also may have fleeting glimpses of that person across the room.

You may also dream about the person who died. Dreams can be an unconscious means of searching for this person. Be careful not to over-interpret your dreams. Simply remain open to learning from them. If the dreams are pleasant, embrace them; if they are disturbing, find someone who’ll understand to talk to about them. Other common experiences during this time include difficulties eating and sleeping. You may experience a loss of appetite, or find yourself overeating. Even when you do eat, you may be unable to taste the food. Having trouble falling asleep and early morning awakening are also common experiences associated with this dimension of grief.

And finally, keep in mind that disorganization following loss always comes before any kind of re-organization. While it may seem strange, feelings of disorganization, confusion, searching and yearning are actually steppingstones on your path toward healing.

If disorganization, confusion, searching and yearning are, or have been, a part of your grief journey, don’t worry about the normalcy of your experience. A critically important point is to never forget those reassuring words—you are not crazy!

The thoughts, feelings and behaviors of this dimension do not come all at once. They are often experienced in a wave-like fashion. You may need to talk and cry for long periods of time. At other times, you may just need to be alone. Don’t try to interpret what you think and feel. Just think and feel it. Sometimes when you talk you may not think you make much sense. And you may not. But talking it out can still be self-clarifying, even if at an unconscious level.

When you feel disoriented, talk to someone who will understand. To heal, grief must be shared outside of yourself. I hope you have at least one person whom you feel understands and will not judge you. That person must be patient and attentive because you may tell your story over and over again as you work to embrace your grief. He or she must be genuinely interested in understanding you. If you are trying to talk about your disorganization and confusion—and the person with whom you are speaking doesn’t want to listen, find someone who will better meet your needs.

During this time, discourage yourself from making any critical decisions like selling the house and moving to another community. With the judgment-making difficulties that naturally come with this part of the grief journey, ill-timed decisions might result in more losses. Go slowly and be patient with yourself.

#### Anxiety, Panic, Fear

Feelings of anxiety, panic, and fear also may be a part of your grief experience. You may ask yourself, “Am I going to be okay? Will I survive this? Will my life have any purpose without this person?” These questions are natural. Your sense of security has been threatened, so you are naturally anxious.

As your head and heart miss the person who was a part of your life, panic may set in. Feelings of anxiety and fear often elicit thoughts about “going crazy.” If you begin to think you are “abnormal,” your level of fear may also increase.

A variety of thoughts and situations can increase your anxiety, panic and fear. For example, you may be afraid of what the future holds or that other people in your life will die soon. You may be more aware of your own mortality, which can be scary. You may feel vulnerable, even unable to survive, without the person who died. You may feel panicky about your inability to concentrate. Financial problems can compound feelings of anxiety.

Your sleep might be affected by fear at this time. Fears of overwhelming, painful thoughts and feelings that can come up in dreams may cause you difficulty

with sleeping. Or you may be afraid of being alone again in bed when you are not used to sleeping by yourself. Again, these are natural, but usually temporary, ways that fear can be part of your grief.

While unpleasant, anxiety, panic and fear are often normal components of the grief experience. The good news is that expressing them can help make them feel more tolerable. And knowing that they are temporary may help you during this trying time. If anxiety, panic and fear are a part of your grief journey, you will need to talk about them to someone who will be understanding and supportive. Not talking about these feelings makes them so much more powerful and destructive.

Under no circumstances are you to allow your fears and anxieties to go unexpressed. If you don’t talk about them, you may find yourself retreating from other people and from the world in general. Many grieving people become prisoners in their own home. They repress their anxiety, panic, and fear, only to discover that these feelings are now repressing them. Don’t let this happen to you. 🏠



*“It’s like being in the middle of a wild, rushing river where you can’t get a grasp on anything”*

# Messengers

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There aren't really such things as negative emotions. There are just emotions. They are the bearers of information. They let you know what's going on for you. They keep you connected to your environment. There's always an interplay going on between you and your environment, and your emotions – all your emotions - are your sonar.

Are you fed up stuck in traffic? Why? Did something disappoint you today? Do you regret your part in an argument with your spouse earlier this week? Are you tired and in need of the comfort of home? What's going on? You're not fed up just because. There are reasons.

A line of cars can't affect how you feel. A line of cars is just a line of cars. All it can do is trigger the things that contribute to your feeling of fed-upness. Likewise, a person can't affect how you feel. Not even a behavior can. It's your reaction to the person and the behavior that affects you.

So when you find yourself experiencing an uncomfortable emotion (or a happy one for that matter), ask yourself the question "What information is being given to me?" Then look below the surface of the obvious and search inward for the answer. Emotions bring information in layers, so you have to search deeply sometimes to get to the root of their origin.

This is the beauty and intelligence of all your wonderful emotions. They guide you to yourself, and this gives you freedom. It gives you freedom to make aware choices



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– including choices about how you feel - and aware choices guide you to deeper connection with the world. Emotions teach you who you are, and in so doing, offer you the opportunity to become who you want to be.

So don't be afraid of your emotions. Don't reject them. Welcome them instead, not just the joyous ones, but the troublesome too. No matter what form they take, they are exquisite gifts and have much to tell you. 🏠

## *The Legend of the Tear Jar*

*By Pleasant White, Ph.D.*

In the dry climate of ancient Greece, water was prized above all. Giving up water from one's own body, when crying tears for the dead, was considered a sacrifice. They caught their precious tears in tiny pitchers or "tear jars." The tears became holy water and could be used to sprinkle on doorways to keep out evil, or to cool the brow of a sick child.

The tear jars were kept unpainted until the owner had experienced the death of a parent, sibling, child, or spouse. After that, the grieving person decorated the tear jar with intricate designs. These jars would then be displayed in the house - kept carefully closed so the tears in the jar would not evaporate. Examples of these can still be seen throughout modern Greece.

This ancient custom symbolizes the transformation that takes place in people who have grieved deeply. They are not threatened by the grief of people in pain. They have been in the depths of pain themselves, and returned. Like the tear jar, they can now be with others who grieve and catch their tears. 🏠

## *Grief & Loss Seminars*

The next seminar will be held July 27th from 7pm-8:30pm @ 2895 Temple Ave, Signal Hill. The topic of the seminar will be on "Anger" presented by Laura Insley, licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. Light refreshments will be served. For more information please contact Tina Stephenitch at 562-426-7500 ext 406. This event is free and open to the community.

## *Make a Difference in Someone's life*

Do you have a few hours a week to listen, give support, or assist in the office? Haven Hospice is seeking people who would like to give some of their time visiting patients, helping in the office or doing community outreach. If you are interested in this rewarding opportunity, or know anyone who maybe interested in volunteering their time, please contact Tina Stephenitch, Volunteer Coordinator (562) 426-7500 ext 406 for more information.

## *Help us keep our mailing list current!*

Are you moving and still wish to receive Healing with Haven? Or perhaps you no longer wish to receive our monthly newsletter? Please, call Tina Stephenitch at (562) 426-7500 ext 406.

## *Individual/Group Support*

Haven Hospice offers individual support and group support to all people in the community who are going through the difficult journey of bereavement. For more information on our groups or to make an appointment for individual support please contact Tina Stephenitch, Bereavement Coordinator at (562) 426-7500 ext 406



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