

Ten Steps—A Plan for Healing from Spiritual Distress During Grief

By Nan Zastrow



Quote: “Someone asked me, “What is your religion?” And I said, “All paths that lead to the light.”

Death by suicide is a traumatic event that affects even the strongest families. I thought we had that strong foundation in our faith. We experienced other difficulties in our lives, but none caused the spiritual flame to flicker quite so weakly at Chad’s unexpected death by suicide. It was a time of true spiritual distress that couldn’t immediately be comforted by the Holy Word, prayer, blessings, or confession of weakness. It became a “walk through fire” kind of experience, and it was something we had to work through emotionally and spiritually on our own.

I was protesting. I was angry at God. I questioned my relationship and my faith. I couldn’t understand why God would let such a tragedy happen to our family, and I felt betrayed. The “Why me?” phrase haunted my days and nights. I was ashamed of myself for feeling the way that I did, but nothing seemed to penetrate the wall that I build between my faith and me. When I needed God the most, I felt like I was turning away because I didn’t have the courage to deal with the impact of this death on my life.

Spiritual distress may be defined as: “the state in which a person experiences a challenge to his/her belief system and has concerns about religious or spiritual values that are normally sources of strength and hope. Typically, this is a temporary state of being.” “It became abundantly clear that I needed to take steps to empower me rather than allow me to get stuck in my grief.

Fortunately, this attitude of defeat and inconsolable grief was temporary. I came to such a point of humility that I realized something even greater. I couldn’t do it without God. I finally accepted that some things in life are uncontrollable, and no one was to blame for a moment gone wrong.

CHOICE: This is the first step to making healing happen. A few days after Chad's death, my husband and I took a walk down the road and were discussing the circumstances of our son's death. Both of us committed to one thing: We did not want this tragedy to ruin our life or rip us a part as a family. This choice wasn't difficult to make, but we knew we would need spiritual help to accomplish such a burdensome task.

There are many paths that lead to healing and finding the peace required to live with incredible loss. We definitely explored traditional and non-traditional ways of healing the spirit within. But these general steps helped us connect with God and our foundation of faith.

1. Take care of your physical and mental well-being first. Significant loss creates emotional stress, loss of control, and feelings of not recognizing who you are after loss. You have changed...and sometimes this can be personally frightening. Healing the physical and mental pain is essential before the spirit can give you the peace you desire within. Accept help when needed. Invest in counseling, support groups, circle of friends, and others who can help you achieve physical and mental stability.

Gary and I knew that we had changed, and life would never be the same. We were open to any possible venues that could offer support and healing. Our early years, in grief, were spent listening and, learning through anything we could find that might help us accept and live with our loss.

2. Connect with other people who can serve as a mentor or find an example of someone who has recovered from a life-changing tragedy and borrow their hope. Our world is full of "heroes" who have accomplished things they never dreamed possible. There are also those silent heroes that don't talk about what they've done to help others...they just do it! Either kind of hero can work for you. Observe them. Talk to them. Follow their example. They can motivate you, give you strength, and a vision for hope when you feel hopeless.

3. Find someone you trust to give you feedback occasionally on your progress in dealing with your loss and your setbacks. Be confident enough in yourself to accept constructive suggestions on how to move forward. Don't take others' observations personally. There is good advice and bad advice. Use your gut-instinct to decide what is best for you.

It's difficult to find someone who knows you so well that he or she can see beyond the character you present in public, after grief. We tried to "pretend" that we were healing and moving on through our grief. We wanted to think it didn't interfere with our careers or our social lives. But, inside our hearts were riddled with sorrow and pain. It was only through the companionship of many loving family and friends that we could continue our paths. Their encouragement helped us accept that we were headed in the right direction. Becoming authentic allows everyone a clear picture of "Accept me as I am. This is my grief."

4. Walk away from being a victim. Choose to be a survivor. Choose not to let this tragedy/loss destroy your life or the lives of others who love you. Walking away can be a gentle way of "letting go." Discover the peace that comes with letting go. Early in grief, it's easy to feel like you are a victim of this loss. When one walks away from being a victim of grief, there may be the feeling that you are "forgetting" the person who died. You will never forget those precious moments and memories. Being a "survivor" means to "live beyond." We chose to live beyond the tragedy and honor the experience as a life-changing event that gave us future meaning and purpose.

5. Challenge yourself to "step out of the box." Death causes extreme hurt; and it challenges one's initial interpretation of how long will I grieve and what is the long term impact on my life. Such an emotional toll begins to create hopelessness and deepens the pain. It's normal to cling to the past fearing that moving ahead will cause one to forget. The belief that life can be good once again can bloom when you allow yourself to explore opportunities sometimes disguised as an uncertain choice of "yes", "no", or "maybe". Go for the "maybe!"

6. Remember, God already knows when you are angry. It's no surprise...so feel confident that you can approach Him with anything that troubles you. Your anger is a natural response to threat (real or perceived). Anger is protesting something you feel was unfair, too difficult to handle, or not logical. Anger occurs because something has happened that we have no control over it. Accept that some things are out of your control. It can change your anger to hope.

7. Test your capacity to reaffirm your trust in religion or spirituality. Slowly integrate your religious beliefs and traditions back into your life.

It took some time for Gary and me to “warm” up to our church again. Though we never lost the power of prayer, we were intimidated by going to our church and knowing that parishioners watched our actions. Whether real or perceived, such thoughts existed. Religious music, which once was cherished and soothing, felt like a ton of bricks holding down the emotional pressure on our chests. Every Biblical verse seemed to resonate as a personal message requiring internal reflection. Sometimes we didn’t go to church; other times we went to different churches in our community or another community.

On one of these glorious days, we attended a church in San Francisco... definitely nothing like our home church. But it opened our hearts to music and peace that is still hard to explain. The church was filled with faces white and black. Outside a line of people waited anxiously for their chance to celebrate on this glorious Easter morning. Once inside, we clapped and sang praises of joy and thanks to our universal God. The service went on all day and you could come and leave as you wished. It was a new beginning of feeling God in all the right places and accepting that life goes on.

8. Search for meaning by exploring a new purpose and meaning in life. Act on your instincts and dig deeper into how your chosen religious beliefs direct your meaning in life. What is it that speaks to you? Life purpose and meaning is not something handed down from parent to child. It comes about, often by enduring hardships, disappointments, and loss in life. Challenges like death or critical illness often redefine “what’s really important” and helps you choose those things that create a purpose-driven life. No one can define “meaning” for you. Meaning may be a new life-force that directs your passions and how you can make this world a better place. Or it may mean an improved personal relationship with God. It may mean showing kindness to your neighbor. For Gary and me, our ministry to the bereaved provided both meaning and purpose.

9. Choose ways to remember your loved one. Because someone loved dies, doesn’t mean you should turn off the memories. Love lives on and it’s essential to find ways to honor a life. It can be as simple such as lighting candles, releasing balloons, visiting the gravesite, etc. Rituals affirm the life of someone loved. Practice these diligently for as long as they provide comfort.

10. Believe that you are worthy to be happy and deserve a bright future. Sometimes we allow events in our lives to define us. Although, suicide was very taboo in the 1990’s we didn’t want to be singled out as parents of someone who took his life. We were determined to hold our heads high, honor the beauty of Chad’s life, and create hope for others. Chad was a wonderful son and a joy in our lives. This unintentional act played out in a moment of anger did not define who he was for the 21 years of his life.

When a loved dies, everything changes. Death is a fact of life. It’s not a choice; and we don’t control the timing or event. Nothing we do can bring our loved one back. Our biggest challenge is not coping with the loss as much as it is with the changes in our life that result because of the loss. Everything comes down to living our life differently than we planned.

We took the necessary time to work through the shock and denial and to understand the phenomenon of grief. Our life changed in ways we didn’t realize were related to the loss of a loved one. We didn’t recognize, at first, that the changes occurred because we changed. Our priorities, our dreams, our needs, our expectations. Even relationships with family and friends created change in our traditions, our interactions, and our roles in their lives. We needed to accept and adjust to the “way it is now”, and find ways to fill the void when something changed or something new became an exhausting pursuit. We finally realized that this was not something we could arrange. “Life after” would find us. Our path would emerge if we allowed it, and if we never gave up hope.

About the Author

Nan and Gary Zastrow are the founders of Wings-a Grief Education Ministry since 1993 after the death of their son, Chad, to suicide and his fiance 10 weeks later. As certified bereavement consultants, their ministry of hope provides education to the bereaved. Nan is the author of 7 books, a Free quarterly online grief E-Letter and dozens of articles published through various resources. Additionally, Wings offers support groups, currently through virtual ZOOMGRIEF. Nan continues as a columnist for *Grief Digest* magazine since 2003. Visit the website at: www.wingsgrief.org or the Wings Facebook page.