

ABC
of
HEALTHY GRIEVING

A companion for everyday coping

HAROLD IVAN SMITH

ave maria press  notre dame, indiana

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Dame, IN 46556.

Founded in 1865, Ave Maria Press is a ministry of the Indiana Province of
Holy Cross.

www.avemariapress.com

ISBN-10 1-59471-127-5 ISBN-13 978-1-59471-127-5

Cover and text design by John Carson

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Smith, Harold Ivan, 1947-

ABCs of healthy grieving : a companion for everyday coping from the
Institute for Spirituality in Health, Shawnee Mission Medical Center ,
Shawnee Mission, Kansas / Harold Ivan Smith ; Steven L. Jeffers ; with a
foreword by Samuel H. Turner, Sr. and Chris Cruzan White.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-1-59471-127-5 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 1-59471-127-5

1. Grief--Religious aspects--Christianity. 2. Suffering--Religious aspects--
Christianity. I. Jeffers, Steven L. II. Title.

BV4909.S575 2007

155.9'37--dc22

2006037659



Introduction

We are not good about admitting grief, we Americans. It is embarrassing. We turn away, afraid that it might happen to us. But it is part of life, and it has to be gone through.

Madeleine L'Engle
Two-Part Invention, p. 229

Death is the most permanent of facts. Death has a way of saying to even the biggest control freak, "You are *not* in control." Death, whether expected or unexpected, is tragically invasive and functions like a cue ball on a rack of billiard balls: "Whack!" As the balls careen wildly across the felt, the breaker scans the table and ponders, "What do we have here?"

A griever asks the same question: "What have we here?" You may have never before experienced the death of someone close. But even if you have, you have not experienced *this* death before. Even if you have expected the death after a long illness or a serious

accident, grief has a way of surprising us with twists and turns, little ambushes that taunt, “Ha! You thought you were rid of me, didn’t you?”

Paraphrasing a popular bumper sticker, “Grief happens,” sometimes grief just marches into our lives, taps us on the shoulder and snaps, “*You’re it!*” Not unlike a tidal wave, grief spreads through family, friendships, neighborhood, and workplace relationships, touching—and sometimes wrecking—a great deal of life’s shoreline. No one can change the reality of death. However, we can change the way we respond when it occurs.

Our response is a decision, or more accurately, a series of decisions in what resembles a maze. Once it was commonly believed that grieverers must go through a sequence of “stages” to reach the desired destination of “over it.” With an uncontrollable loss, we want some semblance of control through predictable ways of dealing with death. The stages approach to grief was comforting, an easy way to gain control of what was being experienced. However, recent research and clinical practice—plus the experience of many grieverers—discount any notion of stages as simplistic and passive. In fact, talking about “stages” is shorthand that gives many a way to avoid listening to a griever’s unique lament. It causes many grieverers to feel frustrated: “I am not doing grief right or I would be over it by now.” Thus, grief is not a drama in which a script is handed to us with our lines highlighted. If anything at all, our performance is ad lib.

Grievers must take responsibility and make decisions about whether they will go through grief or grow through the experienced loss, and either choice has long-term consequences. No few have moaned after a loved one's death, "I wish they would go ahead and bury me, too." But that is not how it works unless you make that decision. Incidentally, some individuals have died with a spouse or child's death, but the funeral was just delayed for another five or twenty-five years!

Grief is a struggle not only with the loss of a loved one but even with God or our understanding of God. People may also struggle with family members, or memories, influences, government bureaucracies and red tape, and, even more importantly, with themselves.

Because of this, too many people want grief to be something that once gotten over, leaves you pretty much the same. No one who goes through grief, though, remains the same. My experience is that grievors can be wiser, more humane, more human, and more tender than before they were touched by grief. As a process within us, sometimes grief's work is very apparent; other times, it is silently conducting business.

To be sure, death has lessons to teach. I have written this book while grieving my mother's death and experiencing my first holiday season without her. I thought I knew something about grief, after all I am a professional grief educator. But I am learning that grief is a demanding tutor and, more than once, I have had my knuckles rapped and heard from grief a stern, "**Pay attention!**"

My hope is that you will not “simply have visited” or “lightly tasted” of grief but that you will be a thorough pilgrim, not just a tourist content with seeing things from the safety of the bus. Take time to explore the side streets, the small shops, and the hidden gardens, to sit and soak up the experience of some small serendipity. Those who think they have experienced Europe on one of those “seven countries in seven days” trips amuse me.

It is my earnest desire that you be blessed with the presence of those who will give you courage, for grief is an awfully big adventure for one person to manage. May there be those in your life who applaud your courage: sometimes three steps forward, sometimes two backwards. May your grief, in time, become good grief—however outrageous that may sound at this point on your path.

I cannot sit with you and listen to your story, but through this book written primarily for griever— which sooner or later will include all of us—I seek to share some of the ideas that I offer through Grief Gatherings and other workshops. *ABCs of Healthy Grieving* contains applications of ideas gained from my work with many griever as well as insights from colleagues in the Association for Death Education and Counseling. If the griever I have worked with could speak directly to you, they would say: “Exercise your rights; do the hard time, and grow!” My colleagues would say, “Engage your grief!”

Admittedly, some readers will browse this book's contents seeking to gain insights into understanding the grieving behaviors of a spouse, family member, friend, neighbor, or work colleague. Others, tired of thinking "I do not know what to do or say," will read it looking for ways to support a griever. However, many will simply read to help themselves grieve in a healthier manner.

Finally, I hope you will dare grief, "Take your best shot!" In your time of loss, give your grief its voice. Remember, your *griefprint* will be as individual as your thumbprint.

Listen to your heart.

Allow grief to teach you its lessons.

A Ask your questions.

Questions are disturbing, especially those which may threaten our traditions, our institutions, our security. But questions never threaten the living God, who is constantly calling us, and who affirms for us that love is stronger than hate, blessing stronger than cursing.

Madeleine L'Engle
Glimpses of Grace, p. 94

One of the ways society disenfranchises grievors is by discouraging questions. The old Southern hymn, "We Will Understand It Better By-and-By," to some translates, "So don't bother to ask questions now." To others, it means, "Keep your questions to yourself, please."

But go ahead. Ask your questions. Take your best shot. Ask your tough, hard-to-phrase questions because many grievors question their way into making meaning of their losses. Questions, although not always

answerable, start us down the road in the direction of answers.

Admittedly, questions that involve God make a lot of people uncomfortable—very uncomfortable. However, it is as natural for a griever to ask, “Why, God?!” as for a swimmer to breathe. Maybe you have seen the movie, *Steel Magnolias*, in which the mother (played by Sally Fields) asks friends at the grave of her daughter, “*I want to know why?*” She concludes her outburst with, “*God, I wish I could understand.*” It is not a question of asking questions but of whom we ask, and what kind of answers we expect. In time, we will understand it better. For now, ask your questions and do not settle for the easy answers.

I can
ask my questions.

B

Be sensitive to “ex” family members.

Grieving ex-spouses may feel a lack of support . . . because the deceased is no longer a family member, the ex-spouse may not be given time off from work or other special considerations, even though he or she is grieving intensely.

Alicia Skinner Cook and Kevin Ann Oltjenbruns
Dying and Grieving, p. 385

Divorce and death do not end relationships; they change relationships. Given the failure of one out of two marriages in this country, millions of divorced people have an ex-mate and numerous ex-in-laws. For individuals who have children from multiple marriages, all of this can create entanglements that leave Miss Manners and Ann Landers bewildered. Unfortunately, society has not worked out the details of post-divorce

interaction, let alone grief, so you make it up as you go.

Sometimes, individuals may feel ambushed by grief for an ex. "After all that went on between us, or after years have passed, how can I be grieving?" one ex asks. It can be equally confusing if you have remarried and your spouse is wondering, "I thought you said he was a jerk?" Should you attend the visitation? The funeral? Send flowers? Some ex-spouses conclude, "You are damned if you go and damned if you do not go." One divorced woman explains, "I attended the funeral not as an ex-spouse but as the mother of his children." Without question, grief can be troublesome if there are unresolved feelings or issues among individuals. However, if you attend the funeral service, remember the clergy and eulogists may focus on the present marriage and ignore your involvement in the relationship and possibly that of your children as well.

On the other hand, some people have genuine affection for ex-in-laws, particularly when she or he is a super grandparent. In cases like this, the grief is natural, for wherever there is love there will be grief.

Finally, sometimes we are grieving our lost chances and hopes for reconciliation. My advice is: "Listen to your heart."

I can

be sensitive to "ex" family members.



Create a cherishable memory.

To love and to cherish, till death us do part.

Traditional wedding vows

The same promise attested in that quote might be extended after the death. One southern gospel song lyric says “Precious memories . . . unseen angels.” Memories, as an inevitable result of our investment in a relationship with a person, are a friend to grievers, not a menace. However, some try to keep memories at bay like a lion-tamer trying to control lions. They crack their whips and yell, “Get back!” Why is this so common? The reason is that not everyone’s private reality corresponds with public perception.

On the surface, a couple appeared to have had a great relationship. Maybe at one time it was great. But by the time of the death, there had been considerable strain and repeated wounding. Furthermore, you may

have been a victim of incest; your loved one may have been verbally or physically abusive when drinking; your relationship with an adult child or teen may have been strained; you may have different memories from other members of the family. But even if it was a bad relationship, there has to be something good somewhere. Relationships cannot be one hundred percent bad. Sift through the relationship, identify something that was good, think about it, and then create a cherishable memory from that. Wise grievors welcome memories as they would an honored guest in order to create cherishable memories. Here's a brief example.

My father was a strong supporter of the Salvation Army. Even though we were poor, he passed out pennies for us to drop in the kettles during Christmas. Now, after his death, it would be easy for me to write a check to the Salvation Army and be done with it. However, I do not pass a Christmas red kettle without stopping to put something in. I find it a warm way to remember my father.

I can
create a cherishable memory.