

5 Healing  
Conversations to  
Support a Griever

# *Healing Conversations*



*Sacred Grief*

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## *Healing Conversations*

### Introduction

First of all, thank you for being a caring and supportive companion to others in the depths of their grief. One of the most significant elements for healing through our losses is **how others respond to us** in our pain and confusion.

*Grief companions are essential!*

Grief companions are people who are caring and non-judgemental, who have some awareness about the grief process and have a few helping skills up their sleeves. They understand that their job isn't to take away the pain of another but to be a companion to them – to walk alongside them in their grief journey. They are able to be present in the discomfort of grief without feeling like they need to fix anything. And they listen to the stories and experiences that the griever shares. I borrow the concept of 'companion' from well-known and respected grief counsellor, Dr. Alan Wolfelt, whom I have had the pleasure of being taught by.

*Simply put - grievers need to be witnessed and heard in their pain, and to feel comfortable in telling and re-telling their stories without fear of judgement.*

This need has historically been met by our family and fellow village members, because, once upon a time, we all had an intimate knowledge of how to be with our grief and it was the community's responsibility to support one another. With the loss of smaller community living and with the pressures of Westernized culture focused on individualism and stoic productivity, we have largely lost our ability to be with grief.

Instead we are faced with pervasive societal stigma that insists grief is a weakness, illness, burden and something that we need to just 'get over' and 'move on' from. Historically, grief was never something done in isolation nor was it an 'individual' problem like present-day societal myths now insist.

Therefore, most of us don't grow up learning the skills it takes to help others, or ourselves, through difficult times. Unless you choose a career in counselling or a helping profession, this opportunity to learn is just not readily available. Luckily, there is now a blossoming of grief-related resources and programs to help combat these detrimental societal myths.

It is my hope that we regain our intimate understanding of grief not only as a normal and necessary human experience, but also as a profound opportunity for growth, connection, and wisdom. And, I hope that we can bring back community healing in our experiences of grieving because grief is sacred work.

*My grief, is your grief, is our grief.*

## *Healing Conversations*

### This Resource Booklet

Through experiences of loss, transition and change we can find ourselves navigating a new reality and new identity. Along with this, our feelings, perceptions, expectations and deep yearnings can be shaken up. We can be left questioning who we are and how we can regain our vibrant life-force while still honouring our sadness and expressions of grief and love.

*Healing Conversations* aims to provide you with awareness and skills for helping a griever through this.

*Healing Conversations* emerged from my experiences companioning others, facilitating support groups for traumatic loss, facilitating trainings on how to offer grief support, and learning from my teachers. Especially in my trainings, I needed a succinct way to teach a therapeutic process to non-therapists.

In the following pages, I outline five prompts and intentions you can follow as a guidepost for having healthy and healing conversations with someone who is grieving. Each prompt is relevant to a griever who has experienced either the loss of a loved one, or a major transition in their life, such as a job loss, moving, divorce, illness etc. Rather than having you remember a list of 'helpful questions' to ask, I have included an **intention** behind each healing conversation prompt.

Focusing on the intention allows you to gain a deeper understanding of how to approach healing conversations, and to find your own words that are comfortable and suitable to the context of your support role.

I have also included stories from my experiences companioning others to give you concrete examples.

These five prompts are not written with the assumption that you will just have one healing conversation with a griever, covering all five intentions in one 'sitting'. They are meant as a guide for your ongoing supportive presence and conversations with them. That being said, even just one conversation can be a significant help, and that conversation may just revolve around one prompt and intention. **Meet the griever where they are at, and trust your intuition.** These prompts are guideposts for you to check in with as you are companioning. The more familiar you become with them, the better you will be able to weave them effortlessly into a healing tapestry of support.

The conversations you have with a griever will likely not happen in a linear sequence; in fact, these kinds of conversations are better thought of as a 'meandering unfolding'. However I have purposefully aligned the prompts in this sequence to follow a therapeutic path towards a griever's healing and integration of their loss experience.

For a few grievers, professional support may be needed, especially if there was a complex situation surrounding the loss, if there are mental health factors present, or if there have been many losses that have gone unsupported and unresolved for an extended time. Be aware of your own comfort/discomfort areas when supporting others, and always have other resources on hand to make a referral to a local counsellor, community program or online support.

## Healing Prompt One: Life Before the Loss



**Intention:** to explore the griever's experience before the loss event happened and to honour those memories.

**Introduce me to your loved one. (i.e. Who were they? What was your relationship with them? What kind of person were they?)**

**Tell me what it was like before the change happened? (i.e. What did your days look like? What did you enjoy? What will you miss? What won't you miss?)**

Allowing the griever to introduce their loved one or life experiences before the loss or change happened helps them explore their lived connections to the person or events, and to acknowledge the meaning the loss has for them.

Often, grief support focuses solely on the griever's emotional journey *after* the loss has happened, and doesn't honour the memories of the living person or event that is being grieved.

To fully grieve we need to fully understand what it is we are grieving, and what that means for us.

In other words, without a sense of the past and an understanding of its place in our lives, it is difficult to integrate the loss experience in a meaningful way and to regain vitality.

I often start out my grief support session with a new client with exactly this prompt. It is an open-ended question which allows the griever to respond in whatever way is meaningful for them in that moment. What they share then provides me with insight into what their grief wishes to speak and express.

**For example**, I was supporting a young woman who had lost her baby son through a late term miscarriage. She felt she had grieved the death of him, and had since had another successful pregnancy. However two years later she felt 'stuck' in her grief. I opened up a conversation with her about what she had *imagined and hoped for* in the life of her unborn child, and the connection she had nourished with him while in utero. She was able to speak to the loss of dreams she experienced for her family and her unborn son. She realized she had never talked about the life she had *imagined* for him, which was also lost with his death. We were able to have many healing conversations about her hopes, expectations and deep yearnings associated with her son's death that allowed her to integrate this experience in a more meaningful way and to honour his continued presence as a part of the family.

## Healing Prompt Two: Continuing Connections



**Intention:** to explore ways the griever can continue their connection with the deceased person or events.

**How do you remember your loved one? How do you remember life as it was before? How do you keep these memories alive?**

Exploring activities, practices, and other ways the griever can honour the person or loss event helps them create **continued bonds** with the person or events in ways that are meaningful (i.e. photo albums, memorial plaques, music, planting a tree, an special object, lighting a candle, making a particular food dish, a specified time for mourning, spiritual companionship etc.).

For many, relationships do not necessarily 'end' after the death of a loved one or after a change in circumstances – the relationship just changes and looks differently. We want to explore with the griever how this changed relationship looks, or could look, in the present.

This is often the time when a griever discloses that they dream about their loved one or they still communicate with them. Or the griever may still 'visit' their former circumstances (whether physically or in memory) to draw on symbolic strengths that help them through their new circumstances. Or there may be a specific time each year that the griever does something special to remember their loved one.

The griever does not need to have spiritual or religious beliefs to nurture a continued connection.

And, for some griever, death does mean the relationship has ended. Different cultural, religious and personal understandings of death will lead to different beliefs about continued connections. As a companion, we always meet the griever where they are at and respect their views. We are here to be compassionately curious about their experience and to offer a space for them to share what is important to them.

**For example,** I was supporting a young woman who had lost her brother in a sudden tragic event. She couldn't relate to keeping objects or pictures of him as a way to stay connected – they just didn't have meaning for her like they did to the rest of her family. She started to fear that she would forget him. We explored other ways of remembering and she realized that there was a 'felt-sense' or sensation in her heart whenever she thought of him. We explored how to bring this sensation of his memory into her life more, and she decided to make a special time each week where she would just sit and be with that felt-sense as a way to stay connected to him.

Another example in my own life was a beautiful maple tree from my childhood home that I had a special connection with. I later realized it was cut down and I was stricken with sadness. This tree is now an internal symbol that I regularly draw on for support and connection with nature.

## Healing Prompt Three: Feeling & Beliefs



**Intention:** to explore the griever's unique feelings about their loss, and their beliefs about what grief 'should' look like.

**What do you feel or think as you talk about your loss? What is it like to share this with me? Is it difficult?**

We often have our feelings about an experience, and then our 'feelings about our feelings'. Someone may say that they feel relief, and then they feel anxious and guilty about feeling relief.

Intense emotions can be scary and difficult for a griever to share for fear of being judged or seen as weak, uncaring, selfish, or wrong. Validate any feelings that a griever shares with you as an appropriate response to their experience. Emotions are just energy in motion - they are not good or bad. What a griever decides to *do* with these emotions is what can be the focus of support and healthy strategies.

We also tend to carry unexamined beliefs about what grief should or shouldn't look like.

It is important to explore how a griever's beliefs either help or hinder their expression of grief.

A griever may feel guilty for sharing their experiences because they were taught to 'be strong' and that emotions are a sign of weakness. Others may have grown up in cultural traditions that prescribe a certain role to them as grievers which may be at odds with their actual feelings and experiences, leaving them conflicted with how to express their pain.

*For example*, when I was supporting a father who had lost his son, it came to light fairly quickly that he believed his grief and any expression of emotion were to be kept to himself. We then explored if this was helping or hindering him. He admitted that it gave him a sense of security and control. It became clear to me that for him, this belief was helping him to meet a need for safety through a scary and confusing time. We then worked together to ensure he was still expressing his grief in healthy and affirming ways that felt safe for him. One was him having a special room in his home that he would go to regularly to release his tears. Another was a resource outlining grief symptoms he could use to guide more connective conversations with his wife so they could understand each other's grief experiences.

It could have been easy to jump to the response: "it is healthier to be sharing your emotions with others", however this would have actually added more stress and feelings of loss of control, thereby hindering his grief rather than helping it. I acknowledged his courage to show up for support when his beliefs could have left him feeling isolated. This is an example of meeting someone where they are at, and working with them from that point.

We all have unique grief needs.

## Healing Prompt Four: Coping Strategies



**Intention:** to explore what coping behaviours the griever does when feeling pain.

**What do you do when you are missing your loved one, or when you are thinking about the loss/change? Does this help you?**

The focus here is to discover what the griever's immediate response is when emotional pain surfaces. For example, do they call a friend? Open a bottle of wine? Remain busy with work? Meditate? Read a self-help book? Watch Netflix? Cry?

Conversations about coping strategies are always in the light of "what needs are being met for this griever given their present situation and resources?" For example, when supporting people I usually ask, "What does this coping strategy give you"?

Often times it is something along the lines of a sense of comfort, control, belonging, connection, relaxation, or safety. As humans, we all have fundamental needs and yearnings that we deserve to have met, such as those I just listed.

Rather than judge a coping strategy as good/bad or healthy/unhealthy, we can ask how is this choice helping them and/or hindering them?

I find this a much more affirming, trusting and compassionate place to come from, and leads to a willingness to then explore which responses are helping them towards renewed vitality, and which may be limiting their potential for healing.

*For example*, I was leading a grief support workshop to a group of teenagers who were all in care of the government – with different experiences of foster homes and adoption. One young man admitted that his new group of peers wasn't having a good influence on him – they were all involved with drugs and alcohol. So I asked him what this group was providing him despite their recognized bad influence? We were able to open a conversation about *belonging and connection*. He was feeling a profound sense of loss of belonging and connection because of his early life experiences and not feeling wanted by his biological family – and this group was meeting this profound need in him. This realization then opened an avenue to explore his grief, and to think about other possibilities for nurturing his need for belonging. I asked if he would be open to focusing one night each week to building other places of connection. This was a starting point towards building other helping strategies and options (drop-in programs, counselling, time with his foster family, etc.), without judging his choices or expecting him to just stop seeing this peer group.

## Healing Prompt Five: Support & Strength



**Intention:** to bring focus to the people and things the griever feels supported and strengthened by.

**Who supports you? What gives you hope? What strengths are you drawing from this experience?**

This prompt builds on the exploration of coping strategies in prompt four, however the focus here is more specifically on proactive planning and inner resources that a griever draws on, rather than the in-the-moment responses to being in pain (i.e. people, professionals, pets, beliefs, activities such as journaling, memories, symbolic objects, inner resources, etc.).

I often have people map out supportive resources within each life area: mental, emotional, physical, social and spiritual. Grief symptoms can show up in each life area, and creating strategies and supports within each increases the griever's options and feelings of empowerment to take an active role in their healing. You can refer to the Five Life Areas resources in the next two pages.

It is also important to explore the resiliency that a griever has – to highlight the positive responses, strengths and growth that are happening. Often, when grieving, we don't recognize that we have made any movement in our grief because we are fully absorbed in our internal emotional world.

A supportive companion can be a mirror for a griever, and affirm the positive ways that they are navigating such a confusing and overwhelming time. Baby steps count! It could be as simple as acknowledging the act of opening up and talking about their experiences, or the courage to continue showing up to work despite the fear of having a breakdown.

Love and pain are two sides of the same coin – the more we loved, the more we will feel the pain of grief when that love has ended or changed.

*For example*, I was working with a teenage boy who was constantly feeling overwhelmed with grief in ways that he wasn't able to articulate. I noticed that he kept referring to the sadness he felt when thinking about others' experiences of grief, rather than focusing on his own grief. I affirmed that he had a really empathic and sensitive heart, which seemed to be both a source of strength and rather overwhelming at times. We were able to explore inner resources and images he could imagine that helped him protect his sensitive heart from taking in too much of the pain in the world around him. He could draw on these images as resources at any time to give him resiliency.

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### Five Life Areas

The process of grief has a broad range of responses that are a normal and healthy part of healing through loss and life transition. It can be very helpful for a griever to explore and become aware of how their grief is showing up in their life.

As a companion, you may want to familiarize yourself with this list, so you can reassure a griever that what they are experiencing is normal (they aren't going crazy!), and that there are a vast array of 'grief symptoms' (and, this list is by no means exhaustive!). Please feel free to add to this list.

**PHYSICAL\***- fatigue, hollowness in stomach, tightness in chest and/or throat, oversensitive to noise, breathlessness, sighing, lack of energy, lethargy, weakness in muscles, dry mouth, changes in sleep, changes in appetite, increase in catching colds/flu's, headaches, stomach-aches...

**MENTAL**- disbelief, confusion, stress, pre-occupation, difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, intrusive thoughts, time distortions, ruminating about events surrounding the loss, a sense of the deceased being present, hallucinations, distorted thinking, feeling overwhelmed...

**EMOTIONAL**- anger, guilt, sadness, fear, anxiety, loneliness, fatigue, helplessness, shock, denial, yearning, relief, numbness, feeling of depersonalization (things seem surreal), apathy, vulnerability, shame...

**SOCIAL/BEHAVIOURAL**- absent-minded behaviour, social withdrawal, searching/calling out, restless hyperactivity, feeling disconnected from others, feeling misunderstood, keeping 'busy', inconsistent expectations of friends and family...

**SPIRITUAL**- dreams of deceased, questioning why?, searching for meaning, moving towards or away from a religious community and faith, sense of purposelessness, change in perception of world (i.e. the world is empty and meaningless), break in trust, heightened awareness of mortality, growth and transformation...

\*I encourage you to check in with a doctor if any symptoms, physical or otherwise, are persistent and concern you. The symptoms listed above are associated with the overwhelming stress that comes with grief, and they can be associated with other health factors also.

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## Self-Care & Support Resources

Grieving is a time to be gentle with ourselves and to nurture our body, mind and spirit through self-care practices and supportive resources. And, it can be difficult doing this when we are in pain. As a companion, you can help a griever map out their supports and give them ideas. Don't forget to map out your own also!

What self-care do you practice within each life area (meditation, exercise, journaling, prayer, hot bath, massage, etc.)?

What resources do you have that can support you in each life area (people, books, community organizations, helplines, counsellors etc.)?

Life Area	Self-Care Practices	Support Resources
PHYSICAL		
EMOTIONAL		
MENTAL		
SOCIAL		
SPIRITUAL		

## *Healing Conversations*

### Closing Thoughts

As grief companions, we must remember that grief is a matter of the heart – not the head. Grief responds to love not logic. Just your comforting presence can be enough. A hug. A simple – “I hear you” or “I love you”. And, sometimes, just silence and **being with the grief together**.

One of the most powerful sources of support is simply to **listen**.

*Grief often speaks the language of metaphor.*

As a companion, you may imagine that you have just stepped out on a journey with someone, and they are leading you into the wilderness of their grief. You are there to walk alongside them, and to be curious about the landscape they are sharing with you. You are there to be genuinely curious and open to what you may find. You are there to lovingly explore with them the many jagged terrains. You are there to help discover new paths. You are there to reflect back how you see their grief wilderness changing over time – perhaps more flowers are now in bloom, or there are patches of blue sky, or there are places of beauty that had gone unnoticed before.

You are there to be grateful for the privilege to walk in another’s grief wilderness.

When it comes to supporting others through the pain of grief, I find solace in the words of one of my most cherished teachers, Francis Weller -

*There is no answer, but there is always a response.*

I am a grief companion, teacher, public speaker, writer and musician dedicated to bringing the sacred and the community back into grief healing. Visit me to learn more -

[www.shaunqjanz.com](http://www.shaunqjanz.com)

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