

For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served & Died

TAPPS[®]

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MAGAZINE



*Where I
BELONG*

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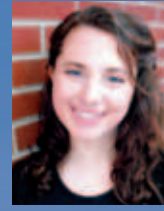
Contributors



Barb Allen is the surviving spouse of Army National Guard 1st Lt. Louis Allen. With strong support from family, friends and patriotic Americans, she's raised her four boys into strong young men. Today she's a veterans advocate, author and co-founder of the inspirational American Snippets, where she's proud to offer others the same support.



Stewart Farrell is the surviving father of Navy Petty Officer Second Class Micah Farrell, who died by suicide in 2014. He and his wife, Keri, have been married 33 years and are Peer Mentors with TAPS. He is the pastor of Fellowship Baptist Church in Goldthwaite, Texas and serves as chaplain for the local sheriff's department.



Angel Pansini is the surviving sister of Marine Corps Sgt. Nicholas Pansini. She currently studies philosophy and linguistics as an undergraduate at the University of Colorado Denver. As a member of the TAPS family she looks forward to continuing to mentor and serve other survivors.



Audri Beugelsdijk TAPS vice president for survivor services, oversees a dedicated team of professionals who provide peer support and conduct outreach to bereaved military families. She came to TAPS as a Navy widow in 1997 after her husband, Seaman Jason Springer, was lost at sea. A Navy veteran herself, she has received advanced training in death, dying and bereavement.



Allison Gilbert, one of the most thought-provoking and influential writers on grief and resilience, is the author of numerous books including the groundbreaking "Passed and Present: Keeping Memories of Loved Ones Alive." Her work exposes the secret and essential factor for harnessing loss to drive happiness and rebound from adversity.



Chris Shank is a surviving brother of Army Cpl. Jeremy Shank, who was killed in Iraq in 2006. In addition to working on the Survivor Care Team at TAPS, he's an avid marathon runner and writer. He currently lives in Texas with his wife, Dana Formon.



Cori Bussolari, Psy.D., is an associate professor in the Department of Counseling Psychology at the University of San Francisco. She is also a licensed practicing psychologist and credentialed school psychologist. Her clinical and research passions are focused on positive coping with bereavement and health-related issues.



Ashlynn Haycock, TAPS manager for education Support Services, serves on the Department of Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee on Education. She is the surviving daughter of Army Sgt. 1st Class Jeffrey Haycock, who died in the line of duty in 2002, and Air Force veteran Nichole Haycock, who died by suicide in 2011.



Sharon Strouse immersed herself in a creative collage process a year after her 17-year-old daughter Kristin ended her own life. It became the foundation for her book, "Artful Grief: A Diary of Healing." She leads national and local art therapy workshops for survivors of loss.



Kenneth Doka, Ph.D., is a professor of gerontology at the College of New Rochelle Graduate School and senior consultant to the Hospice Foundation of America. He has published dozens of books and more than 100 articles and book chapters. He is editor of "Omega: The Journal of Death and Dying and Journeys: A Newsletter to Help in Bereavement."



Erin Jacobson is the surviving fiancée of Army Ranger Cpl. Jason Kessler and a grief professional with over a decade of experience in the nonprofit sector. She has been with TAPS since 2011, leading workshops and retreats with an emphasis on empowerment, peer connection and experiential-based grief work.



Marilyn Weisenburg is the author of "Empty Branch: A Memoir, Finding Hope Through Lament." She is the surviving mother of SSG David J R Weisenburg, KIA in Iraq, 2004. She is married, has three surviving children and five grandchildren. She is a Peer Mentor and lives in Happy Valley, Ore.



Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D., is director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and has written many books that help people mourn, including "Healing Your Grieving Heart After a Military Death" (co-authored with TAPS President Bonnie Carroll). Visit centerforloss.com to learn more about grief and to order books.

On the Cover

Good Grief Camp military mentor Oliver Ford and Jordan Melbert, age 7, attended the Pro Bowl in Orlando, Florida, with teams4TAPS.

from the founder

BUILT ON *Compassion*



To our TAPS family,

Welcome to our magazine, our opportunity to share hopeful messages, insightful articles, heartfelt writing and useful resources. We are grateful to share this quarterly publication with you and hope you are able to feel the hug we are sending along with it through the mail.

TAPS is a family built on compassion. We understand so very personally the overwhelming impact loss has on our lives, we now speak the shared language of grief, and we are forever bonded in our love for someone whose life included selfless service to our nation.

A surviving mom beautifully summed up the magic of TAPS: “The only people I feel who have any clue of what we are going through is the TAPS family. It doesn't matter that you didn't know him or us. I just know you understand.”

You'll see that understanding in the sparkle in the eye of the military mentor on our cover. Like so many of our volunteer mentors at the Good Grief Camp, he's a combat veteran, and he is able to honor all his fallen comrades by giving a moment of joy to a son who grieves his dad.

That's the beauty of TAPS, bringing all of us who have struggled to cope with loss together to find we are not alone. To “have a clue” and truly “understand” that we can turn compassion into action through our TAPS family. We are here for you, always.

With love and hope,

Bonnie Carroll

TAPS

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TAPS is here

24 HOURS A DAY / 7 DAYS A WEEK

- ★ The National Military Survivor Helpline
 - ★ National Peer Support Network
 - ★ Quarterly *TAPS Magazine*
- ★ Connections to Local Grief Support
 - ★ Casework Assistance
 - ★ Education Support Services
 - ★ TAPS Online Community
 - ★ Grief Education Materials
- ★ Survivor Seminars and Retreats
- ★ Good Grief Camps for Children

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Join Your TAPS FAMILY THIS YEAR

MAY

Chicago Surviving Spouses and Surviving Significant Others Retreat

May 2-6, 2018 | Chicago, Illinois

★

National Military Survivor Seminar

May 25-28 | Arlington, Virginia

JUNE

Austin Adult Children Retreat

June 6-10, 2018 | Austin, Texas

★

California Regional Seminar and Good Grief Camp

June 29-July 1 | Los Angeles, California

JULY

California Surviving Spouses and Surviving Significant Others Retreat

July 18-22 | Dana Point, California

★

Ohio Regional Seminar and Good Grief Camp

July 27-29 | Dayton, Ohio

AUGUST

West Virginia All Populations Retreat

Aug. 28 - Sept. 2 | Lansing, West Virginia

SEPTEMBER

Colorado Regional Seminar and Good Grief Camp

Sept. 7-9 | Denver, Colorado

★

Montana Men's Retreat

Sept. 12-16 | West Yellowstone, Montana

★

Hawaii Parents Retreat

Sept. 27 - Oct. 1 | Oahu, Hawaii

OCTOBER

National Military Suicide Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp

Oct. 5-8 | Tampa, Florida

★

Charleston Moms Retreat

Oct. 17-21 | Charleston, South Carolina

NOVEMBER

New Jersey Regional Seminar and Good Grief Camp

Nov. 2-4 | New Brunswick, New Jersey

FOR A COMPLETE LIST OF TAPS EVENTS – including camps, retreats, expeditions, teams4taps experiences, TAPS Togethers, and more – and to register, visit taps.org/events.



Letters to TAPS

Knowing TAPS Is Always There

This is what I just realized about TAPS. It is like praying. You speak and you eagerly await a response. The difference is that God answers in his own time and usually in signs. TAPS responds immediately with kind words and hard-won wisdom. I am truly grateful for your support, your cards, your emails and your fellow feeling. Just knowing you are always there makes this journey bearable. I cannot express to you in words how much that has helped me, but please know that you do comfort; you do make a difference; you do save lives.

Joan Eaves, Pennsylvania
Surviving mother of
Army Sgt. 1st Class Michael Tucker

Connecting Soul to Soul

Our lives are incredibly different by connecting with others through TAPS. There are levels of our souls and beings that we need to share. By connecting with others through TAPS – through talking, listening, doing and just being there – we are provided a unique avenue, allowing that sharing to occur. TAPS permits validating the aching in our souls as few other things do. We are able to connect, aching soul to aching soul. TAPS is there for us and because of us – because of our pain, our hurt, our need to be comforted and heard, and because we all matter.

Jim Laswell, New York
Surviving father of
Coast Guard Seaman Andrew Laswell

Helping Us Through the Toughest Times

TAPS has been a blessing for my children and me. When my husband was killed, I had no idea how I was going to make it.



The helpline and my peer mentor were there to help my family through the toughest, most emotional time of our lives. Then we started attending the TAPS National Military Survivor Seminar each year. We met other survivors, who are now lifetime friends. I am so grateful to TAPS. Thank you so very much.

Michelle Jordan, Maryland
Surviving spouse of
Army Sgt. Jevon Jordan

Touching a Piece of Hope

I've known about the "Stone of Heaven" (Lapis Lazuli) rare / semi precious stone mined in Badakhshan province of Afghanistan, and I've wished for a piece of jewelry from there for so long. I hesitated to purchase anywhere for fear of authenticity. When I learned TAPS initiated a program between Afghan women and American women who share in the tragic losses of this war, I ordered immediately. My package arrived, and I had to leave it until the next day. Through the

tears, I realized I now have a physical connection I can touch from the far away land where my son gave his life. I love it.

Cheryl Patrick, Wisconsin
Surviving mother of
Army Staff Sgt. Patrick Lybert

Joining the TAPS Family

Thank you for organizing the TAPS day at Georgia Aquarium. I haven't been able to join any other TAPS meetings or events yet, but I do appreciate the magazine and ongoing support your organization provides. It was a very special treat to get to take two of my children to the aquarium and we really enjoyed ourselves. They loved building the bird houses and seeing the new exhibits. We deeply appreciate everyone's efforts who made that day possible.

Sara Gartland, Georgia
Surviving sister of
Army Capt. Dennis Pintor

The Healing Continues Long After the Race

I was wearing my red hoodie from the Ragnar Relay Race recently and wanted to thank you again for all you did to make Ragnar happen and to make it amazing. Every time I wear it, it brings back the greatest memories of an experience that I would so go back and relive if I could.

I know you put so much work into that and all your programs — it is evident that your heart is into it and how much you love the TAPS family.

You created an environment where not only were we able to push ourselves and heal, but the red carpet treatment and attention to detail polished it off with that “you are so important” element.

I've faced a couple challenges where I felt pretty hopeless, and during those times got a random text from one team member, or had a conversation with another, and the healing from Ragnar continues.

Thank you TAPS and the Inner Warrior Program again for all you've done and what you do to make people feel loved. You are a blessing in so many lives, including mine.

Alicia Johnson, Utah
Surviving daughter of
Navy Lt. j.g. Burr N Johnson, III

Experiencing Joy Again

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for the opportunity to enjoy the TAPS family day for Gold Star moms and families at the Georgia Aquarium. It's a day I will remember for a long time. I actually experienced joy for the first time in a very long time. It's been more than eight years now since my losses. I appreciate you and the service you do for us.

Sheila Sterk, Georgia
Surviving mother of
Army Pvt. 1st Class Rebecca Sterk
Surviving wife of
Army Veteran Charles Sterk



Please email your Letter to TAPS to editor@taps.org

Guardian Angel Award Goes to *Gary Sinise*

TAPS was proud to present the inaugural TAPS Honor Guard Gala Guardian Angel Award to Gary Sinise — actor, humanitarian and founder of the Gary Sinise Foundation.

The award was presented at the 2018 TAPS Honor Guard Gala on March 6 in Washington, D.C. The award honors Sinise's support and personal engagement with the surviving families of America's fallen military heroes.



“TAPS is grateful for the extraordinary contributions Gary has made to the military community and his dedication to remembering those who have given their lives defending our freedoms,” said Bonnie Carroll, TAPS president and founder. “We are fortunate to have such a strong advocate who has steadfastly honored the lives of those who have served and died by caring for the families they loved and left behind.”





Photos courtesy of Stars4TAPS

Giving back to those who sacrifice for our nation and encouraging others to do the same has become Sinise's personal quest and what he hopes will endure as a legacy of service to others.

"We can never do enough to show our gratitude to our nation's defenders," he said.

In addition to his very public roles in TV and movies, Sinise founded the Gary Sinise

Foundation in 2011 to ensure the sacrifices of America's military and their families are never forgotten. The Foundation honors veterans, first responders, their families and those in need through unique programs designed to entertain, educate, inspire, strengthen, and build communities.

Whether honoring our Gold Star families, building specially adapted smart homes for wounded heroes, lifting spirits at home

and abroad with live concerts, or bringing WWII veterans to the museum built in their honor, the Gary Sinise Foundation serves America's heroes and their loved ones 365 days a year.

TAPS is honored to call him partner, supporter and friend. ★

**TAPS National
Military Survivor
Helpline**
800.959.TAPS
Available
24 hours a day



*Caring for the Families of
America's Fallen Heroes*

Your TAPS family is here for you.

What's Your Number?

By Stewart Farrell

Surviving father of MM3 Micah Farrell

They know they should say something. They know they should ask. They want you to know they care, and yet, they can't quite find the right words. And so they ask the same old, tired question, "how are you?"

You want to answer. You want to tell them how you feel. You want to share with someone the pain you are experiencing deep within. But you're not quite sure if they're

ready to hear how you really feel. And so you hold back. You answer with the same old response, "I'm fine. I'm OK. I'm making it." Or maybe if you trust them somewhat, you share a little bit. "I'm struggling. I'm having a rough day." Or some other attempt at sharing some of your deeper feelings.

In October 2014, our family experienced the tragedy of losing our middle son,

Micah Farrell, to suicide. At the time of his death Micah was a petty officer in the Navy. As anyone who has been through any kind of loss can attest, the trauma is unbearable at times. The first few days are still a blur to me. We stumbled and fumbled through all that we had to do to tell other family members, make plans for a funeral and work with Navy officers to get through all the paperwork. As I was serving as the pastor of a local church, there was a tremendous show of support from our church family. We had more food delivered to our house than you can imagine; people just struggling to show some kind of compassion to us.

And of course, when you deliver food or anything to a grieving family, there is that awkward moment when you have to talk and you have to say something. Most people say, "I'm so sorry" or "Is there anything I can do?" or "What do you need?" Others simply say, "I don't know what to say." And then there's that question — "how are you?"

How do you answer that question? You want to answer, but you don't want to scare them away by yelling something like, "Well, how do you think I feel!?" And so instead, you say, "I'm OK."

What if there were a way to ask without seeming so trite in the asking? What if there were a way to show a person you really want to know how they're doing? What if there was a way to ask that would allow that person to answer with just enough information to give you a clue to probe deeper? And what if there were a way to



1

2

3

4

5

answer without having to unload all your feelings on an unsuspecting friend? What if you could answer in such a way to let a friend know “I’m not doing OK, but I don’t know how to express what I’m feeling?”

My wife, Keri, and I found a way to do just that — at least with each other. And it comes in the form of a simple question, “What’s your number?” By asking this question, we are asking, “Where are you on a scale of one to 10 right now?” One being the worst possible feeling in the world, 10 being the best I’ve ever felt in my life.

Most of life is somewhere in between. Most of us probably hover around six to eight. Life is good, and things seem to be happening the way they should. Some days aren’t so good; we have a bad day at work, horrible traffic or some other small event that just irritates us. We drop to a five. But some days take you to extremes.

Some days take you to a high — a wedding day or the day your child was born. Those are definitely “10 Days.” But other days take you all the way to the bottom. October 12, 2014, the day we lost our son, was one of those extremes for our family. That day was definitely a 1. Everyone knew that. But what about the days that follow? Where are you two weeks after the loss? Two months later? Even two years later? Honestly, some days are still difficult. Some days catch me off guard and I need extra support and encouragement.

It’s certainly not a foolproof method of communication, but it has been a tremendous help in our family. So maybe the next time instead of saying, “How are you?” just ask, “What’s your number?”



So how does it work? What does it look like when we use this question?

Instead of asking my wife, “How are you?” I ask, “What’s your number?” Whatever number she gives tells me exactly how she’s doing that day. If she says “7” I know that’s a pretty good day and she’s probably right where she needs to be. If she says “9,” I know something really good must have happened and I follow up with a question about what made it so great.

But if she says anything 5 or below, I know something has happened or something is going on emotionally or internally that I need to be aware of. By telling me that number, Keri gives me the opportunity to probe deeper and ask more questions to help me understand and find ways to help her.

It also gives her the opportunity to tell me where she is without having to unload and explain everything that has happened. She may want to talk further, but she may not. She may just want me to be aware and sensitive to her needs at that moment.

Some days, we aren’t that sensitive to the needs of others around us. So it helps when we openly share, “It’s been a 4 kind of day,” before the other even asks. That gives us the clue that we need to pay attention.

It’s certainly not a foolproof method of communication, but it has been a tremendous help in our family. So maybe the next time instead of saying, “How are you?” just ask, “What’s your number?” *

6 7 8 9 10

The Love Languages of Grief

Identifying and Asking for the Most Effective Grief Support for You

When it comes to mourning and how others can best help us, there's no one right way. Every person and every loss is unique. The people we grieve the loss of — as well as the circumstances of the loss — are also one-of-a-kind. After a significant loss, what we think and feel inside, in what ways we're able to express those thoughts and feelings and how we feel supported by others vary from person to person and loss to loss.

Yet in his landmark 1995 book, "The Five Love Languages," author Dr. Gary Chapman introduced us to the idea that human beings feel cared for by others in five primary ways:

- 1. Receiving gifts**
- 2. Spending quality time together**
- 3. Hearing words of affirmation**
- 4. Being the beneficiary of acts of service**
- 5. Experiencing physical touch**

According to Dr. Chapman, each of us "speaks" one of the five love languages. In other words, we feel most loved when we experience the language best suited to our unique personalities and ways of being in the world. We might also respond to a second or third love language, but we always prefer our primary love language.

In reviewing Dr. Chapman's love languages recently, I realized that grouping the various helping techniques in this way could help mourners understand and recognize which forms of support and communication might be most effective for them.

I invite you to consider the following five ways of being supported in your grief. Which love language helps you the most?

1. Receiving gifts

In Dr. Chapman's body of work, gifts of love are actual gifts — tangible, visible objects that we give to someone we care about as a means of expressing our affection and devotion. People whose primary love language is receiving gifts see presents as physical symbols of others' love and thoughtfulness.

Do you enjoy getting presents? Are you someone who displays gift items in your home and feels a burst of love and support

| Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

each time you see them? If so, receiving gifts might be your love language.

If you are someone who values the love language of gifts, consider letting your friends and family know that you really feel supported by tokens of empathy. You might appreciate flowers, for example. You might welcome gifts of food, inspirational books, photo frames, music, candles and ornaments.

With this love language, it can be tricky to ask for what you need. “Please give me gifts!” would be considered impolite by many. Still, consider sharing what you’ve learned about your love language with a good friend or empathetic family member who is also an excellent communicator. Perhaps she can take on the role of explaining to others the lasting meaning and ongoing support you find in physical objects.

And when you do receive a gift, be sure to write a heartfelt note of thanks or make a thank-you phone call.

2. Spending quality time together

For many people, there is no present more precious than the gift of presence.

Do you love spending time with the people who care about you? Do you enjoy their company, even when you’re not doing anything special together? Do you prefer company to solitude? If so, quality time might be your love language.

Let friends and family know the best way they can help you during your time of grief is simply to be there for you — literally. You crave and need their physical presence. Maybe you don’t want to be alone. Maybe you like lots of people around. If so, tell them.

Think about how you like to spend time with others. Playing cards? Watching TV? Going out and about? Hanging out in the same house but doing separate activities? Whatever you prefer, let friends and family know, because they may feel unsure about what to do.

Consider, too, if you feel supported when you have the opportunity to talk to others about your grief. In general, sharing your story of love and loss is a good idea. It helps you work through your thoughts and

feelings. Bottling those thoughts and feelings up inside can seem safer, but it’s actually more dangerous because it puts you at risk of becoming stuck in your grief journey.

Of course, your friends and family members aren’t the only ones who can help you with this love language. Be proactive about getting involved in your community. Volunteering, participating in activities at a place of worship or community group, socializing with neighbors — these are all effective ways to build in more quality time with other people.

And don’t forget that grief never completely ends. If this is your love language, you will need the healing presence of friends and family not just in the first month or two after the death but far into the future. Reaching out to plan ongoing get-togethers will help you receive the support you need.

3. Hearing words of affirmation

This griever feels most supported by words that are kind and encouraging. “Words of affirmation” might be your love language if you have a deep appreciation for hearing others tell you:

- *I love you.*
- *I care about you.*
- *I’m here for you.*
- *You are so loved/strong/genuine because _____.*
- *I have seen how you _____.*
- *You make a difference in the world by _____.*
- *Many people _____ you.*

If this describes you, let your friends and family know how meaningful you find it when they share these kinds of verbal messages with you. Tell them that their words of encouragement and support lift you up and help you through the darkest times.

Written words may be affirming to you as well. While they’re no replacement for in-person or phone conversations, handwritten notes, emails,

and even texts may also be helpful and encouraging to you. If you’re a verbal griever, be sure to encourage all forms of spoken and written communications.

4. Being the beneficiary of acts of service

For some grievers, actions speak more loudly than words or mere presence. Do you appreciate help with tasks? Do you feel cared for when others go out of their way to help you with things that need doing? If so, this might be your love language.

Since the death of your loved one, have others said to you, “Let me know if I can do anything”? It’s a natural impulse for friends and family members to want to do something to show their support. Usually what happens, though, is that grievers don’t ask for assistance, so no assistance takes place.

So please, ask for assistance! People often do genuinely want to help, but they don’t know how. Suggest tasks and to-dos that suit their strengths. Ask your gardener friends to help with yard work, for example. Ask your bookkeeper family member to help with home accounting, bill paying, or tax preparation.

If one of your friends or family members is a good administrator, you might sit down with this person and go over all of the tasks that you need help with right now. This person can then assign the tasks out to others in your circle of support.

Finally, if this is your love language and you’ve asked your inner circle for help with tasks but aren’t receiving it, don’t be reticent to reach out beyond your inner circle. Others are waiting in the wings. Places of worship, volunteer organizations, neighborhood committees — these and other service-oriented groups often have programs and maintain lists of volunteers to assist with needs such as yours. It is likely that helping veterans’ families is something they would be glad to do. All you have to do is ask.

Let friends and family know the best way they can help you during your time of grief.

5. Experiencing physical touch

The griever who thrives on physical touch needs closeness. Are you someone who enjoys hugging, sitting close to others, maintaining eye contact, holding hands, and/or walking arm-in-arm? If so, this might be your love language.

If you're someone who's always valued physical touch, your friends and family members will know to expect it from you. Don't stop now! You may, however, want to emphasize to them how extra-necessary you find their hugs and physical closeness during your time of grief.

If this is your love language, you might also be more prone to physical symptoms of grief. It's common for people in mourning to experience stomach aches, heart palpitations, headaches, lack of sleep, and other physical symptoms. If bodily problems are making it hard for you to function and focus on healing, it's a good idea to schedule a physical exam. Your primary caregiver may be able to help you with insomnia or other symptoms and put fears of illness to rest as well.

Those who crave touch will be soothed by regular contact. In addition to physical closeness with family and friends, physical activity may help you right now. Or consider inviting someone to take a walk with you each day. Physical proximity combined with exercise and supportive conversation may be just what you need to feel loved and supported right now.

I believe Dr. Chapman's love languages offer a helpful framework for recognizing and understanding your own primary love language so that you know how to ask for and receive the most effective support in your grief. If you are interested in learning more about the love languages, you may want to read one of Dr. Chapman's books on the topic. He has written versions focused on partners, parenting children, men and other types of relationships. The original and flagship title in the series was reissued in 2015 by Northfield Publishing under the title "The Five Love Languages: The Secret to Love That Lasts." *

Those who crave touch will be soothed by regular contact. In addition to physical closeness with family and friends, physical activity may help you right now.



Who do *you* cheer for?

We'd love to hear your sports stories!



teams4taps is gearing up for a busy spring and summer! As we begin our outreach to sports teams and leagues, we want to hear from you so we can create memorable experiences for all of our survivors. We are especially looking for stories related to baseball, hockey, soccer, NASCAR and other motorsports.

Families have had amazing experiences through teams4taps. These opportunities help families to create new memories, honor their loved one and celebrate their life and service.

If you have not previously shared a story about a special connection your family has to sports, we encourage you to share it with us! These stories can be about your fallen hero's connection to or love of a team or sport, a special experience that your family has had with a team or why a particular team or sport means so much to you.

**To share your story and any related photos you may have,
email teams4taps@taps.org.**





Where I Belong

By Marilyn Weisenburg

Surviving mother of Staff SGT David Weisenburg

Your heart has broken into a million little pieces and you feel like you can't take another breath. Stunned beyond your capacity to think through what you need to do next, your entire world has become utterly undone. The ability to fit the pieces back together is insurmountable.

You are broken, numb, lost. The thought of ever moving forward from that moment you were told of the death of your loved one seems out of reach. Many of us find ourselves in prone positions in expressions of lament, crying out for mercy in the midst of deepest sorrow.

With a gaping hole now marking the place your loved one held in your family, you find the dynamics of your family are thrown completely off kilter. Where you once belonged, with other whole families, now you feel "other" and as if you don't fit in anywhere.

We must belong somewhere, right? It's a basic human need, to be seen, to belong.

We become well acquainted with grief. The waves of grief became a familiar story in our new journey. I was aware early on, after my son was killed in Iraq in 2004, that I needed to meet my grief head on. I was willing to be vulnerable with my feelings and allowed my heart to open to the pain and lament the death of my son.

The work of facing my grief was very hard, exhausting and terrifying. What would be on the other side? Would I ever laugh again? Is joy attainable or would it be categorized as "that was before"?

Last year, I traveled from Oregon to attend the TAPS Austin Regional Seminar to be trained as a peer mentor and to attend the seminar. I knew a handful of the TAPS leaders from other events who would be

attending; I would need to connect with others. I quickly met several people in the peer mentor training, and we became fast friends.

That night, we sat outside in the warm Texas evening air, talking for hours. A growing sense of belonging ensued as we made space for one another and told our stories. Being seen and heard gave me the hope for a growing, beautiful friendship with each of these broken mamas, aunts and sisters. I have lovingly come to refer to these new friends as my Texas Posse. In our brief time together over the weekend, loving friendships were established, and we shared a keen sense of belonging.

Sitting together at the seminar's final evening meal, my new friends and I enjoyed one another's company and that of some of their family members who attended. Music from the live band filled the air as we enjoyed our

dinner and conversation. As dinner finished, the band played on. We noticed the empty dance floor. Our eyebrows raised across the table from one to another.

One friend was reluctant, admitting she'd never been on the dance floor... ever. After some gentle prodding, she shrugged her shoulders and agreed to join us. The five of us got the party started.

In a room full of hundreds of people, all touched by death, joy emerged out on that dance floor. Others joined in. Some of the children from the Good Grief Camp stood on the sidelines smiling, shy, but eager to dance as well. We saw them and asked if they'd like to join us; they

jumped right in. Each of us paired off with a child and our dance party swelled.

Along with dancing, enormous smiles emerged on the faces of everyone dancing. It was pure joy to connect with both adults and children alike.

My friend who'd originally shown reluctance to dance later shared something she'd heard before: "We will not be robbed of our joy!"

As I watched her dance with her husband of more than 25 years for the first time, my eyes filled with tears. I was filled with hope and deepened joy. They have such love in their hearts for each other.

We connected over our deepest sorrows, and we experience joy because of our connection. It's a gift of grace to see the places where joy can break through the fog of our grief and lament. We can easily get stuck in our grief; I know I did.

My hope is that my heart will be attuned to the mercy-gift of taking one step at a time and look for the places where joy shows up, waiting to be recognized and embraced. Look for it in the faces of those sharing their stories with you, when you feel that deep connection with another surviving military family member.

Even in sharing the deepest sorrow, we can find the joy of being seen and finding a place where we belong with one another. *



Being seen and heard gave me the hope for a growing, beautiful friendship with each of these broken mamas, aunts and sisters.

My senses were in overdrive. My ears filled with the sounds of my feet plodding on dirt and the swish of my arms against my back-pack. Birds singing and the wind moving through the trees, accompanied in a soft cacophony of rhythm. My nostrils filled with the sharp scent of pine trees. The sun toasted my skin. All around me I could see the breathtaking beauty of Eastern Montana, but the sensation of burning muscles consumed me.

I had moved to Montana after Jason's death. I didn't know what to do, but knew I needed to change my life in some way because I felt completely lost without the man I loved. I had spent almost a decade building a life with Jason and I didn't know what to build

alone. The bedrock I had based my life on shattered, and I was left standing in the darkness and ruins. Not only had I lost Jason, but I also lost myself. Who was I in this world without him?

I knew that I needed to get away from the life we shared together, and moving to another state to be with our friends seemed like a good idea. So there I was, trying to reach the top of a mountain.

My internal monologue said, "One more step Erin. Just think about one step at a time. One more step and then the next step."

My thighs and calves screamed from climbing. My back ached from my large

pack and a recent horsefly bite left a sharp pain. My friends, Jess and Peder, disappeared ahead of me, so they could set up camp before darkness settled in. They were avid mountaineers and had climbed extensively for years. Peder even carried his 3-year-old son up the mountain with us, and easily bypassed me. Although I grew up hiking, this was my first time climbing anything to this scale. It was hard.

Over my heaving, I heard the rhythm of jogging feet above me. "Do you want me to carry your pack for you, Erin?" Peder asked. I smiled tiredly up at him, "Thank you so much, but no. I want to finish what I started."

He smiled back at me, gave me some words of encouragement and headed back up to camp. In the distance, I could see a ridge with newly raised tents. I was almost there.

It was a struggle, but I completed the last push up the mountain. When I arrived at camp, I paused. Aside from my friends, not a soul was in sight. I began to notice small things: the green of some moss growing on a fallen log, tiny insects crawling on a nearby leaf, and the vast, blue sky — so deep and unending. It was a strange dichotomy of feeling tiny and yet completely at peace. The surrounding nature was wild, but I felt safer than I had in a long time.

How *Nature* Can Help Us *Heal*

By Erin Jacobsen
Surviving fiancée of CPL Jason Kessler



My internal monologue said, "One more step Erin. Just think about one step at a time. One more step and then the next step."

In the 10 years since Jason died, the memory of that day has revisited me time and again. That climb and what I witnessed there has been my teacher. During that incredibly dark period of my life, when I didn't know what to trust or believe in anymore, I could look to nature to help me make sense of it all.

Although my friends couldn't make the climb for me, they could walk with me. Similarly on the grief journey, even though I have to carry my own burden of loss, others offering to hold it for a while gives me the strength to keep going. Knowing I don't have to go through it alone strengthens me.

On the trail, when I focused on the bright spots of the flowers and the sweet song of the birds, I climbed faster. When I spent time in conversation with my friends, while climbing the mountain,

we laughed and connected with one another. When my focus was on the pain and discomfort, when I was walking alone or silently next to my friends, the climb was so much harder.

On the trail, the discomfort of the horsefly bite and scratches from branches weren't large, but on top of exhaustion and the pain of my muscles, they bothered me more than expected. But in that moment, I realized I have a choice in what I devote my energy to.

Over the years, I have experienced moments of needling pain, like going to dinner parties and being the only one without a partner. Or "oohing," and "aahing" over a friend's new baby or vacation with their spouse, while fighting the ugly emotion of jealousy.

So often in grief, the lives we find ourselves in have little to do with our choice. We didn't choose for them to die. We didn't

choose to suddenly be a childless parent or a single mother or a sister without a brother. We question, "How can this be my life? I didn't choose this!" But what I have found is that we do have a choice in these situations. We can choose what we give our energy, our time and our thoughts to.

When the grief waves hit, I now know going outside is not a miracle cure, but it is something that will bring me back to my center. It helps me make some sense of what I cannot understand. In nature there is order, even in times of chaos; there is sifting through and making sense. Just to walk and see a bird's nest or bit of grass growing through a crack in some concrete, teaches me a lesson about my own resilience and the power of life. Even during my darkest moments, in nature I always find affirmations of hope. *

hope

Through the Hurt, to *Healing*

I had just hit my stride as a wife and mother of four little boys when my husband was killed in Iraq. Our children were just 6, 5, 3 and 1 years old. The pain was immense. The anger was consuming.

Every part of me wished for the power to will my husband back to life, so I understood completely when my three-year-old son rolled over in bed one night, pointed to the

sky and told me everything would be OK because he had just wished on a star.

“I wished for dad to be alive again, and if I wish every night, it will happen,” he assured me.

My body and my mind — already in debilitating pain — staggered with this new, cruel blow. Every maternal instinct rushed

forward, urging me to find a way to make my son feel better and grant him the power to make his wish come true.

But I had yet to convince myself that I was strong enough to endure this burden thrust upon me. Doubt, fear, pain, anger and hopelessness had the upper hand at this stage of my life, and my own will felt completely inadequate. For a split second I almost gave in.



By Barb Allen | Surviving spouse of 1st Lt. Louis Allen



I almost broke under the pressure. I almost succumbed to the pain as the word “maybe” formed in my throat, pushing its way to my lips. But something in me awoke. Some inner force arose, until I could almost hear it screaming in my head. I realized that to protect my son from one pain, I would have to hurt him with another. I knew I had to make it absolutely clear in my son’s mind that Lou was gone forever.

“Sweetie,” I barely choked out. My heart was exploding and my vision swimming through tears I refused to release. “I wish that were true too. But Daddy’s body is dead. He can never live in it again, so he will not live here with us again. He’s not coming back.”

I watched my son’s little smile disappear into darkness. His big eyes winced in pain and his hand squeezed mine, as I rushed in to offer what words I could of how he is still with us in other ways, and how we are here for each other, and how I will spend the rest of my life loving him twice as hard, blah, blah... blah.

My words seemed powerless against my son’s pain, but I knew I had to at least try to help him understand because allowing him to hope Lou would come home would be heartless.

It was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do, but I am stronger for doing it, and so is my son. By confronting our reality, no matter how painful or terrifying it may be, we can look past it and into the rest of our lives.

This conversation happened every night for weeks. Every night my son would somewhat defiantly insist I was wrong, and that if we just wished hard enough, Daddy would come back. Every night I told him that was

impossible. Every night I told him Daddy is dead. Every night he asked me how I knew, and every night I told him until he finally stopped wishing.

I didn’t want to destroy my son’s hope but I knew I couldn’t let him believe Daddy could come home. I knew it was my job as his mother to help him accept the truth, so he was free to move forward.

It was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do, but I am stronger for doing it, and so is my son. By confronting our reality, no matter how painful or terrifying it may be, we can look past it and into the rest of our lives.

Today, my children and I are once again fully engaged in life. We still feel the sting of our loss, but are also blessed with abundant beauty, and grateful for each day.

To heal, we had to hurt first. It was not an easy path, but we walked it together and are stronger for it. ★

Throw Out the Script

When It Comes to Grief

Grief differs from person to person and cannot be condensed into one script of “how to grieve.” The script of grief supposes that there is a time to cry, to be upset, to feel euphoria, and to move on — that these emotions are inappropriate outside of their temporal designation.

I am both a Good Grief Camp mentor and survivor, and through each of these lenses, I have seen some of the ways in which we grieve. There are too many variables and people are too different to assume that grief must look a certain way.

The relationship we have with our loved one, as well as the age we are when we lose them, affects how we grieve. To find healing, it may be helpful to share your journey of grief with peers who have experienced a similar loss, whether in adulthood or childhood.

I find similarity in my stories of grief when I share with peers. It helps me to come to TAPS events and realize the similarity of my journey to that of someone else my age who has also lost a brother to suicide. But as much as the journey of grief can be shared, my emotions and experiences

are unique to me. I never felt angry or betrayed by my brother for his death by suicide, although some of my peers have experienced these emotions.

Seven years since my brother’s death and becoming involved with TAPS in different capacities, I questioned if I was able to serve as a mentor in the Good Grief Camp. I attended several TAPS seminars as a child in the Good Grief Camp and throughout the years I noticed a difference in how I participated. During group discussions I mentioned my brother with stability and sensitivity.

By Angel Pansini | Surviving sister of SGT Nicholas Pansini





I received feedback from camp mentors and other surviving children and was encouraged to continue to return to the seminars because my vulnerability contributed to the group's process. Despite these positive messages, I was still unsure about mentoring others because of my own grief, since there is no complete healing from loss.

"How am I doing? Am I healed? Can I make someone else's grief a priority?" I asked myself. I should be done grieving after all, it had been seven years, right?

My dad told me about a confrontation he had with someone he knew. They asked him if he felt OK, because they noticed he was struggling and wanted to know what was wrong. My dad revealed that he missed his son, Marine Corps Sgt. Nicholas Pansini. They replied, "Hasn't it been like a year already? You're still struggling?"

Perhaps this person has not lost someone close to them, or perhaps they no longer felt the heaviness of grief after a year of mourning someone close. They may have assumed "the script of grief" and that a year was more than enough time to mourn. What we know too well is that during the grief process, our relationship with a loved one and our own personalities and resilience capabilities affect how we respond to tragedy. We also know that there is no timeline when it comes to grief.

In 2014, my dad trained as a Peer Mentor at a TAPS seminar in Florida. Although he trained as a Peer Mentor, he did not want to take on someone to mentor three years later because he needed time for himself. If we assume that grief is linear and that certain emotions are felt at certain times, and that there is an end to a grieving period, his need to step back would be questionable.

I find similarity in my stories of grief when I share with peers. It helps me to come to TAPS events and realize the similarity of my journey to that of someone else my age who has also lost a brother to suicide. But as much as the journey of grief can be shared, my emotions and experiences are unique to me.

As someone who has had a mentor and been a mentor, I have noticed how laughter and playing games serve to heal some child survivors. Playing games when in grief serves to relax a survivor from the trauma of the loss and also to preserve memories

of something they may have done with their loved one. When I served as a Good Grief Camp mentor in Arizona, I witnessed a mentee who had lost her father a month before the seminar. She was smiling and playing with a "Bop It." I also witnessed a mentee who had lost her father four years ago sitting down with a box of tissues talking with her mentor. During my first event with TAPS, I wanted only to feel my brother's spine-cracking hugs, but instead felt the embrace of my mentor Alexandra. Alexandra's embrace softened the sting of loss. There is no correct way to express pain, and our loved ones are not forgotten if we choose to be silent or if we chose to laugh while at TAPS events or in everyday experiences.

Families new to TAPS events learn that grief is a journey. The most warming accompaniment on this journey is to listen to each other and to dismiss time, because when someone is ready to feel an emotion about their loved one, they will. When the script is thrown out, grief becomes more acceptable. We can focus on the humanity in loss. There is strength in not entirely understanding, but accepting that the anger, the tears, the happiness and the sadness, if they come, when they come, are all OK. ✧

Setting *Boundaries* While Grieving

Setting boundaries is hard. When it's our job to take care of others or attend to business, we place a lot of pressure on ourselves to get it right, to not drop balls. After all, we take our responsibilities seriously and don't want to let anyone down. Even on our best days when we are not grieving, this set of expectations can be incredibly difficult to live up to, if not downright impossible. Our lives cry out for balance and we struggle with finding that right balance between what we need and the needs of others. It is common to become overwhelmed or stretched thin by all of the competing needs. Tending to

ourselves feels an awful lot like selfishness rather than self-preservation, so we push our limits, over-commit ourselves, or heap guilt on our own heads for our imperfect ability to do and be all things to all people, even as we are grieving.

Many of us don't stop to think of what boundaries are or what it means to set them. Boundaries are the guidelines you set for yourself and your relationships so that you and another person know what is acceptable within that relationship. It stems first from you knowing yourself and what limits you

feel are appropriate for you. This is an internal conversation, as no one else can tell you where your comfort level is.

The most common boundaries we struggle with are emotional, material or physical. Given that death creates an emotional roller-coaster and can be disorienting, what does it look like to set healthy emotional boundaries? This has multiple components, the first of which is giving yourself permission to feel your emotions without allowing others to guide or judge you. It is also not sacrificing your own emotional needs for

| By Audri Beugelsdijk



“We struggle with finding that right balance between what we need and the needs of others.”

others. It is not blaming others for your problems or letting them blame you for theirs, but giving yourself and others the space to simply feel and heal.

Material boundaries are important as well. Along with a death comes responsibilities for financial and real property. Others may feel a right to ask you for financial support or tangible items which belonged to your loved one. For some these may be easy questions to answer. For others this can be damaging to relationships as we feel taken advantage of or the memory of our loved one dishonored. Knowing where you draw the line on these things can help prepare you in the event that these questions arise.

Personal space is also important when we are grieving. Sometimes people may push our limits by touching us in uncomfortable ways or may violate our personal space. This may involve a person coming into

our home and rearranging our belongings or removing items they think may be hurtful for us to see. Setting physical boundaries in cases like this can help us reclaim a peaceful space to grieve and give us a sense of control over our space which is helpful when we feel we are losing control.

How do we know our boundaries have been crossed? When we feel offended, resentment, fear, guilt, discomfort, stress, or anxiety — these can be indicators that we may need to consider whether or not our boundaries have been crossed. If we determine that an interaction we have had has violated what is acceptable for us, we can be our best advocate by establishing a more appropriate set of limits for that relationship.

Given that we have lost a powerful relationship in our lives and our address book has often been rewritten in the aftermath of the death, it becomes important to us to preserve what relationships we have left, even those

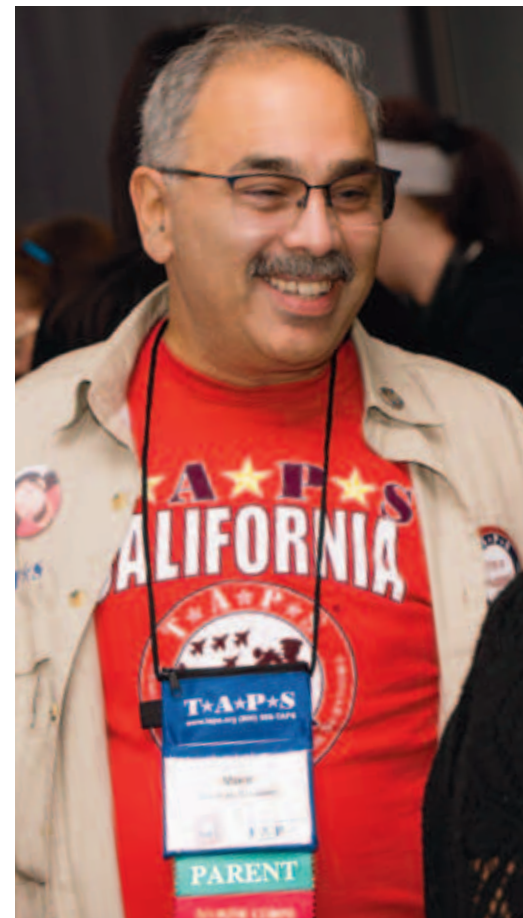
which may not be healthy. When we fail to set a boundary with someone, it may be out of fear that we will unintentionally or irreparably damage that remaining relationship. This is why it is advisable to seek counsel of objective others who may be able to assist us in navigating these waters.

If you find there is an individual in your life who crosses the lines you have set, you may want to seek counsel with a trusted person with whom you can share your needs or concerns. You can talk through a plan for how to interact with a particular person or limit interaction in ways that are healthy for you. Setting these boundaries can build your self-esteem, while also establishing respect for yourself with others. Brene Brown is a research professor who has studied courage, vulnerability, empathy and shame. Perhaps she said it best: “Daring to set boundaries is about having the courage to love ourselves even when we risk disappointing others.” *

In the midst of our grief, how can we ensure we are taking care of ourselves by laying healthy boundaries, even when doing so can elicit feelings of guilt or fear? Some considerations for you as you think through setting your own boundaries:

1. Be aware of your own needs.
2. Recognize which people or situations drain your energy or trigger negative emotions.
3. It's OK to say no, and without apology, if it is in your best interest.
4. Let or ask others to help, without guilt.
5. Be protective of your time and try not to overcommit yourself.
6. Remember that you are not responsible for other people's problems.
7. Advocate for yourself if you feel your boundaries have been crossed.
8. Know that boundaries are for your protection, not to punish others or push them away.
9. Be direct when expressing your needs, without confrontation.
10. Approach boundary setting with love and respect for yourself.

If you find you need additional support as you advocate for yourself in your grief, know TAPS is here for you. You can reach out to a member of our Survivor Care Team by calling our 24/7 National Military Survivor Helpline at 202-588-8277.



When Grief is *Complicated*

By Kenneth J. Doka, Ph.D.

Our responses to a loss—the ways we grieve, can be very different. Some of us may experience grief in all sorts of ways. We may find we are hurting—physically. Here we may experience actual physical pain. We may ache or feel unwell. We may cope with a variety of emotions—sadness, anger, guilt, yearning, or loneliness to name but a few. Grief may affect how we think and how we behave. It may even create spiritual concerns. Others may be more resilient – perhaps even troubled their grief reactions are not more intense. We may feel we are on a roller coaster—sometimes experiencing bad days while other days seem less troubling. All these are part of what might be called typical or normal grief.

Yet sometimes our reactions can be more problematic—more complicated.

Sometimes grief can seriously affect our health. While physical manifestations of grief may very well be related to our grief, any persistent physical complaints ought to be evaluated by a physician. We are more vulnerable to illness when we are grieving. Grieving, after all, is a form of stress and stress both can lower our ability to fight off infections and be a factor in certain illnesses. In addition, we may have changed some of our own behaviors. We may not be eating as well, exercising, or sleeping as soundly after a loss. We may neglect our own health – perhaps skipping needed medications. It is important that our physician be aware that we experienced a significant loss.

Grief can also affect our mental health. This can be especially true if we have a prior history of anxiety or depression. If we have

suffered from these conditions in the past, it would be wise to assess with a professional the risk of a relapse. For Charles, the death of his wife caused him to relapse into a depression—a depression he had not experienced for nearly two decades.

When a loss is traumatic, we may even experience Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. PTSD used to be called “shell shock” or “battle fatigue.” While it is not uncommon among veterans or others who have witnessed violent and sudden deaths, it can occur in the families of victims who died suddenly and violently as they have vivid images of how the death may have occurred. While many survivors may experience a sense of nervousness, helplessness, fear and anxiety, in PTSD these feelings are both intense and long-lasting. In PTSD, it is not unusual to see symptoms where



WHEN TO SEEK ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

individuals avoid places that remind them of the trauma or relive or imagine the experience of the death in nightmares or flashbacks. In some cases we have intense arousal—reacting to loud noises, finding it difficult to sleep, or extreme anger and irritability. Like other grief reactions, it can include physical symptoms such as increased blood pressure or other stress-related reactions. Shawna, for example, constantly had intrusive images of her husband's death from a land mine. Even though she was thousands of miles from the incident, it did not stop these fantasies. Here it is wise to consult a specialist with specific training and expertise in PTSD. TAPS' Community Based Care may be helpful in locating such specialists.

We should also seek help if grief is interfering with key roles in work, in school, or at home – especially if we cannot seem to minimally function in those roles and see little improvement in our abilities to function over time. For George, it was difficult to focus on work—months after his daughter's death in a military accident.

We should also be sensitive to any destructive behaviors. While anger is a natural part of grief, intense anger or thoughts of hurting others should be a sign to seek help. So should self-destructive behaviors such as thoughts of suicide, excessive drinking, disproportionate use of, or dependence upon, prescription medications or illegal drugs. Again these are signs to seek immediate help.

Basically we should follow our own instincts as well. If we feel we need or should speak to a counselor, it is probably wise to do so.

- Frequent or serious symptoms of illness –consult a physician
- Constantly depressed or anxious – or prior history of such reactions
- Constantly obsessing about the death, continually focusing or having persistent images of how the death occurred
- Unable to function in key roles weeks, or even months after the loss
- Self-destructive behaviors – increased drinking, over-use of prescription or non-prescription medications
- Thoughts of suicide or other destructive acts

HELP IS AVAILABLE

Call TAPS Helpline at **800-959-8277** for further information or local referrals.

Similarly if friends and family are consistently urging such actions, it may be prudent to act on such advice. We will likely feel better even if we are simply validated – told that our grief is a natural response to the loss we have experienced.

If you need to find a counselor, there are a number of options. Often hospices and funeral homes may have information about support

groups or counseling. In addition, the Association for Death Education and Counseling, a national organization for grief counselors, can refer you to a trained counselor. The important thing is to choose a counselor that has specific expertise in grief. TAPS can assist you in finding appropriate help within your own community. *



Practice Compassion at *Every Step*

The death of a loved one can be the most difficult event we ever experience. Grief, or the deep sorrow and heartbreak we feel as a result of this loss, can overwhelm us so much that all assumptions about how the universe works completely shatter.

Grief is messy, confusing, enormously painful, and never seems to follow a linear path. This is the time where we need to deeply take care of ourselves, and yet, why is it that this is also when we beat ourselves up the most?

As a practicing psychologist, I often hear my grieving clients say, “I feel so sad I hate myself” or “I should have gotten over this already. What is wrong with me?”

We are good at being compassionate toward others when they are grieving — something especially evident in social media. The outpouring of love, support, and acknowledgment of the loss is substantial and

immediate, giving us the opportunity to virtually show up for every single bereaved friend we have ever come into contact with. On the other hand, we are quite unpracticed at giving ourselves that same kind of loving sustenance or self-compassion.

According to pioneer researcher Kristin Neff, at its heart, self-compassion is “treating yourself with the same type of kind, caring support and understanding that you would show to anyone you cared about.” In essence, you honor and accept your humanness by recognizing that you will encounter personal failings and that life is hard at times for everyone, even yourself. Cultivating self-compassion means that you accept that you are part of the human condition and that you are not perfect.

For whatever reason, people still seem to adhere to a notion that there is a correct way to grieve — contributing to the irrational belief that there is something wrong with them.

One recently bereaved client commented, “I thought I was doing so much better because I spent a few evenings with friends and actually had a really good time. Then on Sunday all I did was stay inside, watch movies, and cry. I’m still so sad.” She equated “better” with only feeling positive emotions. Another bereaved client once told me that she got mad at herself whenever she experienced any light-hearted moments.

The Dual Process Model accurately captures the grief process. This model proposes that adaptive coping is an ongoing, oscillating pattern of facing the painful loss and avoiding those feelings. In essence, sometimes you directly deal with the realities of the loss and sometimes you take a break from all of that heartache.

I tell my clients, “Grief takes a lot of energy out of you.” In addition to all of the grieving you have been doing, you also need to try to engage in activities that feel replenishing,



| By Cori Bussolari, Psy.D.



There is no such thing as perfection. Things will not work out the way you want them to all the time and you may not respond in the way you had envisioned. So what if you mess up? Everyone around you has done it before and will do it again, so you are in good company.



like recharging a battery. This way you have the energy to continue to grieve. It is perfectly fine if you want to stay home from work one day or decline an invitation. It would also be great if you actually go out and have fun. Give yourself permission to experience the good and the bad. I believe that this normalizes the experience and contributes to increased self-compassion.

HOW CAN WE PRACTICE SELF-COMPASSION WHEN WE ARE GRIEVING?

We can take moments to actively bear witness to our own suffering and fully accept it.

- › Notice your pain, acknowledge how it feels and that the world, as you have known it, has changed. Even if you can't provide self-compassion, try to at least recognize that you need some support and care at this time.

We give ourselves permission to be imperfect.

- › There is no such thing as perfection. Things will not work out the way you want them to all the time and you may not respond in the way you had envisioned. So what if you mess up? Everyone around you has done it before and will do it again, so you are in good company.

We think about what we would say to a friend who has gone through a

similar issue, and we say those same things to our-selves, even if we don't quite believe it just yet.

- › Write down exactly what you would say to someone who came to you with your problems — and then read it out loud to yourself over and over until it starts to feel familiar.

We think about ourselves.

- › Putting ourselves first is by no means selfish. It is okay to decline an invitation or take a sick day at work when you are feeling down. It is also okay to practice self-care. This might include limiting self-judgment when we experience positive feelings such as joy. Sometimes people also say things to us that feel distressing, even when we know it comes from a place of compassion. Take care of yourself by letting them know how you feel and what you might need from them instead.

We realize that there is no "correct" way to grieve.

- › Everyone grieves differently. Sometimes we feel like talking, sometimes we don't want to talk about our loss at all. Sometimes we think about it every day and other times, we can go minutes, hours, or days without thinking about it. Sometimes we just want to go out and have fun with our friends or family. This is part of the Dual Process Model and is completely appropriate. Grief is complicated — just know that you are doing the best you can.

We notice when we are being overly harsh or critical with ourselves.

- › We sometimes feel that we need a critical voice to get motivated, that by beating ourselves up we will "do better" in some way. We also might beat ourselves up and focus upon feelings like guilt because it feels easier than attending to our pain. Self-compassion is about being okay with who you are and how things are unfolding. Just notice when this is happening, and try to soften your response.

We take breaks from social media.

- › It might feel too much for us at times, especially during anniversaries or birthdays, and we may need to unfollow our loved ones on social media until we feel emotionally ready to go back to it.

We seek professional help when we need it.

- › Therapy is not a sign of weakness or that something is wrong with you. Sometimes, we just need a little extra support.

We cultivate hope.

- › A major tenet of self-compassion is recognizing that our suffering is part of the human condition. No matter how hard things are right now, you are not alone and will get through this.

*We forgive ourselves for not doing any of the above. **



| By Sharon Strouse, MA, ATR-BC, LCPAT

On an exceptionally warm winter day earlier this year, I was on my way to New York. Nearly 16 years earlier, I had taken a similar train to New York's West Side to identify my 17-year-old daughter Kristin's body. She took her own life on October 11, 2001. That moment created a before and after and permanently altered my experience of the past, present and future.

Integrating both Kristin's life and death into my new inner landscape became my healing journey. It included years of meditation and self exploration through a creative collage practice.

Now, on the train once again, I was eager to experience dreamscaping with its developer, Nancy Gershman. I'd received an invitation late last year to write a few chapters in an upcoming book, "Dreamscaping in Grief Therapy: Consolation through Prescriptive Memories." I learned from authors Gershman and Thompson, "the dreamscaping process and product are intended to facilitate the development of internal resources and self-capacities in adults experiencing grief. Dreamscaping focuses on the sourcing of positive memories and the imagination to cultivate new ways of being with grief and loss, and commences with the creation of a dreamscape collage." As an art therapist and surviving mother, I was intrigued by this new and innovative healing technique.

I began my dreamscaping journey, aware of how important it is for clinicians to keep healing themselves. In the months that followed, my personal experience became the foundation for my dreamscape work with bereaved clients. I found its "laser like" healing quality of great benefit and was glad to add it to my grief toolbox.

As the Artful Grief Studio cleared out for lunch during the TAPS National Military Survivor Seminar in May, two women remained, huddled together at a large round table in tears and talking. I sat with the newly bereaved widows: Holly just six months out, and Claire two years down the road. They came from different parts of the country, were different ages and yet shared something profound that made them instant friends. The women talked about the holidays, specifically Thanksgiving, sharing positive memories and contrasting those with how hard it was and would be without their husbands.

Holly focused on the fear of her first Thanksgiving, celebrating in a beautiful rural yet unfamiliar location, with in-laws she was not sure could be supportive. Claire shared how stressful and awkward her first Thanksgiving was, with older relatives who were kind but reserved. "It was like an elephant

was in the room. No one mentioned my husband's name," she said.

This was the perfect opportunity for dreamscaping; Holly and Claire could take apart these Thanksgiving scenes, literally and figuratively, and compose a new composite image and related story that was more generative. I supported and guided them as they explored some of their best Thanksgiving memories, ones that brought both laughter and tears. They each focused on the holiday and used their imagination to create an action-packed yet emotionally truthful picture of a new possibility Gershman calls "the prescriptive memory."

Holly began by imagining herself on the patio of her in-laws' farm. She addressed her fear of the elephant in the room, representing her husband as an actual elephant, and thus creating a playful scenario. She reminisced about the turkey they burned on their first Thanksgiving together and the Chinese carry-out that saved the day. She inserted her two beloved dogs into the scene for support, and realized how important they were to her. As a result of the brainstorming, she decided she would drive to her in-laws instead of flying, just so the three of them could be together longer.

Claire worked with the stressful memory of her first Thanksgiving without her husband Sam and envisioned the elephant in the room as a herd of elephants making their way across the dining room table in a way no one could ignore. Further brainstorming enlivened that scene with a huge brown bear, symbolic of her husband's love of hunting. Claire gleefully replaced the turkey with a fish; remembering the Thanksgiving they fished the morning away before joining family. She wasn't sure how to represent herself and decided she would trust the creative process to guide her.

Holly and Claire searched through magazines as they started their collages. I reminded them to let go into their creative process and embrace the spirit rather than the letter of the prescriptive memory. "Let yourself move with the images as if you are in a dream. The idea is to awaken the emotional brain and let it speak in the language it knows best:

the language of symbol, metaphor and the senses."

Within an hour, each had completed individual dreamscape collages. They sat quietly with their creation before sharing. Holly said, "I found a beautiful but empty patio scene and filled it with images that make me smile.

The dreamscapes would serve as tangible reminders of the shifts in thinking and feelings over the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday. Holly created a better tomorrow and Claire created a better yesterday.

I put an elephant, symbolic of my husband, right on the table, front and center. He is not forgotten. At first I put myself in a chair but re-positioned myself. I am lifted up and supported by the elephant, and that feels really good. My burnt turkey sits next to two containers of Chinese carry-out." Holly paused to wipe away tears and said, "I just noticed the writing on the carry-out boxes - 'Enjoy and thank you.' I feel like Jeff is thanking me for the time we shared and giving me permission to enjoy myself."

Claire found a Norman Rockwell print of Thanksgiving to incorporate into her dreamscape. "It feels perfect. The herd of elephants and fish came from National Geographic. When I positioned those images in the center of the table, I noticed everyone at the table was paying attention after all. As I looked at the grandparents in the picture, my heart softened in forgiveness. They came from another generation and handled loss in a

very different way. I felt powerful and in control when I glued the large fish over the turkey, feeling my husband's presence as I brought him to the holiday table. I found images of bears, each with a different feel, and settled on the bear catching the fish. I imagine Sam providing our Thanksgiving dinner. I may just bring a fish dish to Thanksgiving this year in his honor. I am not quite sure about the scuba diver, as she is clearly out of place, but she really spoke to me. We loved the water and I was reminded of that with this image. As I look at my collage, I am swimming and flowing. I feel more relaxed right now and think I will be okay after all."

When I look at the scuba diver, I see Claire diving in and going below the surface. She has goggles to see clearly.

Holly and Claire each decided to take their dreamscapes home and put them on a shelf in their kitchens. The dreamscapes would serve as tangible reminders of the shifts in thinking and feelings over the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday. Holly created a better tomorrow and Claire created a better yesterday. *



Living with *Less* After Loss

As a kid my brother would always give me a hard time because I choked on food easily. I wouldn't be in danger or anything, but he thought it was hilarious. He'd glare at me from across the table, smile and ask, "You choking?"

Years later, after his death, I looked around my messy, crammed apartment and imagined him asking me that question again. Yes, I was choking. Not on food this time, but on stuff. I was choking and feeling smothered and overwhelmed by all my possessions.

After he was killed, my family and Jeremy's friends came to the house and we each took Jeremy's things that were most meaningful to each of us. I ended up inheriting a lot of my brother's belongings. All of these things

filled my house, but his death still left me with a deep sense of emptiness. I wanted to find a way to both manage and express my grief. I did what I thought would make me feel whole again: I bought things and busied myself with a personal project to tell the world about Jeremy.

I wanted to make a film about Jeremy's life, so I bought all new film equipment. I upgraded my lifestyle by replacing my old furniture and filling my closet with new clothes. Retail therapy was my coping mechanism. In addition to the material things I bought, I acquired a new group of friends and set myself up with a very active social life. By all outward appearances, I was getting over my loss and living a great life.

Years later, after graduating and getting engaged, I took a hard look at my financial situation and made the tough decision to sell my outdated film equipment to pay off debt I had accumulated. I didn't even have a film to speak of. The fair-weather friends I acquired were long gone.

Then my mom died. I was a different person and grieved her loss differently. I saw then how much time I had wasted after Jeremy's death focusing on superficial things to make me feel better but that did not actually make me better. When I tried to dress up my grief, I just kept adding to it. I did not face the real issues underlying my desire to acquire so many things.

By Chris Shank | Surviving brother of CPL Jeremy Shank

So how do you become a better person after such tragedy? When you have so much in your life, your life can weigh you down. It's hard to move, much less move on.

I reaffirmed my commitment to making my movie. I sold or donated a lot of the big ticket items I'd purchased over the years. I was about to get married and when my fiancée and I moved in together, we packed all our things into our two cars. By the time we moved again a few months later, we filled both cars and a large rented truck with our things. Every time we moved, we had so much more stuff. When you don't have what you need emotionally, you reach (or buy) things that are convenient and easy to grasp.

It was obvious that something had to change. I was happy with my marriage but not with anything else. Then one day I came across a movie about minimalism. I learned about a community of people who seemed a lot happier with less.

The movement to live with less really struck a chord with me. I started getting rid of the stuff I didn't find joy or use in. Saving an item "just in case" didn't have a place in my life. After all of that stuff went away, I still had Jeremy's things. I had grown out of a lot of his clothes, but I still had a bunch of his stuff.

I learned from that movie that memories don't exist in things. They exist in your mind. If I get rid of my brother's shirt, I won't forget him. As long as I still exist, and as long as I keep remembering him, he is remembered.

Since I embraced a simpler, less materialistic life, the noise in my head went away. I became a better husband, a better son and a more focused person. A less cluttered life means a less cluttered mind, and a happier one. And

that's what our loved ones would want for us. It may sound like a very difficult, if not impossible, task to get rid of the personal belongings of a loved one. But I promise there's value in not attaching yourself to things or the physical manifestations of your memories of that loved one. We've accumulated memories and experiences with our loved ones that live with us in our hearts and memories; donating his jacket or shoes is not going to take any of that away. *

5 TIPS TO START DOWNSIZING:

- › Pretend you're moving. Pack up everything and unpack it as you need it. If after 60 days it's still packed, let it go.
- › Needed but not valuable? Keep it. Valuable but not needed? Sell it. Neither valuable nor needed? Donate it.
- › Look at and hold every item. Does it provide you with joy or add value to your life? Keep it. Otherwise, let it go.
- › Is it made of paper? You can probably scan it or take a photo and toss the hard copy.
- › Do you have more than one? Donate the duplicates.



help

Changes to Education Benefits

Military Survivors Benefit from New Legislation

For surviving families and veterans, 2017 was a landmark year in education benefits. In our continuing efforts to be a voice for military survivors, TAPS joined with six other organizations to offer input into what would become the Forever GI Bill. Along with Student Veterans of America, The American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Got Your 6 Foundation, Vietnam Veterans of America and the Military Order of the Purple Heart, TAPS was at the forefront of conversations, providing insight into the experience of and sharing the input from surviving families.

The 2017 Forever GI Bill is a \$3.4 billion package, furthering education opportunities. More than \$1 billion was earmarked for surviving families. Four requests advocated by TAPS were included in the final bill. These requests had been shared with us by survivors and we were honored to have carried the voice of survivors to the halls of Congress.

Here are changes included in the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017 set to begin rolling out next year:

Yellow Ribbon Program for Fry Scholarship recipients

Surviving children and spouses receiving the Fry Scholarship and attending a private university will now be able to tap into additional assistance to help offset the difference in tuition through the Yellow Ribbon Program. This provision goes into effect Aug. 1, 2018.

› This impacts survivors like **IRELAND TWIGGS**, who is attending Manhattan College in New York City. Her tuition is

| By Ashlynn Haycock





almost \$40,000 annually, but her Fry Scholarship only covers \$22,800. When the new act goes into effect, all of her tuition will be covered by her VA benefits, allowing her to graduate from college debt free.



Consolidation and Increase of Dependents Educational Assistance (DEA)

— Survivors using DEA will see an increase of \$200 per month, bringing the rates to \$1,241 per month. New survivors, with losses after Jan. 1, 2018, will only be eligible for 36 months of benefits, equivalent to all other educational programs provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs. This will go into effect Oct. 1, 2018.

› This impacts survivors like **SHANA PELLEGRIN**, who is not Fry eligible because her mother died before 9/11. While the increase of \$200 per month is not enough to cover all of her costs at Virginia Tech, it's a huge step towards bringing DEA into alignment with all of the VA's other educational benefits, and TAPS will continue to fight for further increases.



Changes to transferability — If the veteran transferred the Post 9/11 GI Bill before passing, the beneficiaries already listed will be able to adjust the allocation

of months among themselves. No new transferees may be added, and transfer must have already been completed before the death of the service member. Families will be allowed to make these changes beginning on Aug. 1, 2018.

› This impacts families like the **MCCRACKENS**, where the service member transferred 35 months to one child and only one to the second child, thinking they could readjust further down the line. Connor, who has the 35 months will be using an ROTC scholarship, so he would like to give a portion to his sister. Now that will be possible.



Removal of the 15-year delimiting date

— All surviving spouses who are Fry eligible will no longer be held to the 15-year “use it or lose it” timeline for the 36 months of benefits. This provision is retroactive to Sept. 11, 2001. Spouses will remain eligible for Fry for life, unless they remarry. Children whose parent died before Jan. 1, 2013, will still have until age 33 to use the Fry Scholarship, while children whose parent died after that date will be able to access it for life. This change goes into effect immediately.

› This impacts surviving spouses like **MICHELLE FITZ HENRY**, whose husband died in 2004. With a family to take care of and the Fry Scholarship not in effect at that time, school just wasn't an option at the time of her loss. Under the previous

conditions stated by the regulation, Michelle's benefits would have expired before she was able to utilize them. This will give Michelle the opportunity to utilize all of her benefits and not have to rush through school to finish before the window would have closed.



Guaranteed in-state tuition

— All survivors who are recipients of the Fry Scholarship will be guaranteed in-state tuition. This was not part of the Colmery GI Bill but was included in a piece of legislation that passed earlier this year. This provision went into effect July 1, 2017.

› This impacts survivors like **WESTON HAYCOCK** who is attending Montana State University, but is a resident of Washington. He had previously been charged the out-of-state rate, \$15,000 more per year that was not covered by his benefits. Thanks to this provision, Weston is now guaranteed in-state tuition for his final two years of college.



The Forever GI Bill is a great step forward, giving surviving families more options. TAPS Education Services offer careful and knowledgeable guidance to better guide you in post-secondary education options and navigate the available financial aid. Contact us at education@taps.org and let us help you ensure you have access to all eligible benefits and meet scholarship deadlines. We are here to help you. ★

Finding *Your* Option B

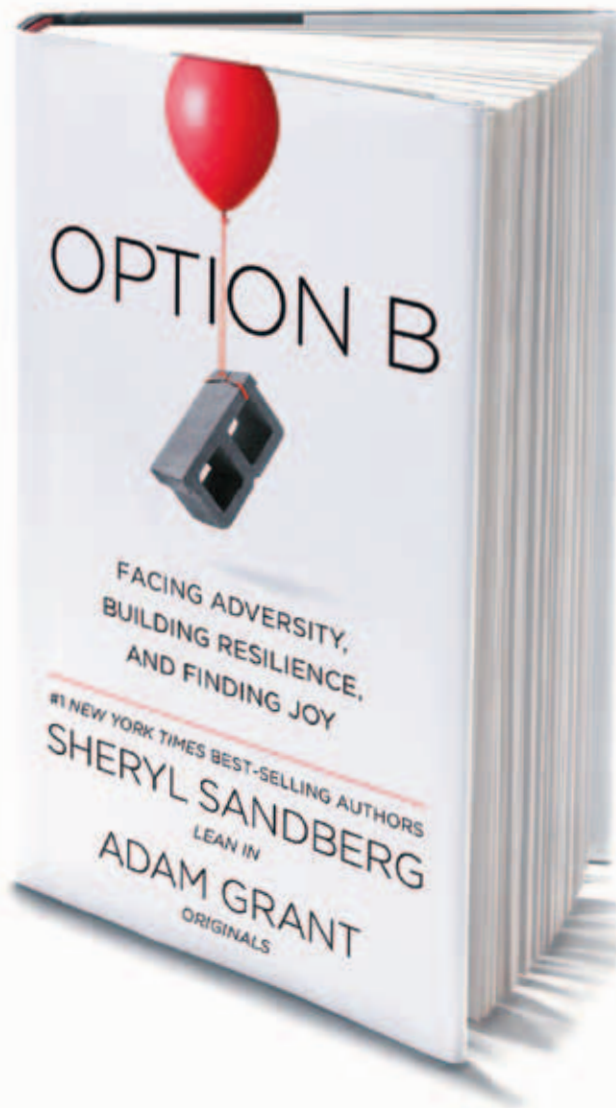
By Allison Gilbert | Review of “Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy” By Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant

Sheryl Sandberg was married to Dave Goldberg for 11 years when she found him lying by an elliptical machine. They were on vacation in Mexico celebrating a friend’s 50th birthday when Dave went to the resort’s gym to work out. His heart failed.

In the hospital, someone asked Sheryl if she wanted to see her husband again to say goodbye. “I did – and I did not want to leave,” she writes in her revealing and empowering book, “Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy.” “I thought that if I just stayed in that room and held him, if I refused to let go, I would wake up from this nightmare.” One of her closest friends helped her physically part ways: She put her arms around Sandberg’s waist, preventing her from “running back into that room.”

And so begins Sheryl’s heart-wrenching nosedive into widowhood and her indefatigable quest to help her two young children heal, and ultimately thrive, in the face of this family-altering loss. What she learns about rebounding from adversity (unimaginable setbacks of all kinds, not just the death of a loved one) becomes the uplifting backbone of this book. One of the most essential takeaways is the healing power of community.

Two weeks after Dave died, Sheryl and her two children went to Kara, a grief support organization in Palo Alto. Meeting other people who were further



along in their grief journey helped them see they “wouldn’t be stuck in the void of acute grief forever.” Sheryl’s kids also went to Experience Camps. These week-long programs are free, offered in California, Maine, Georgia and New York, and designed for children who have lost a sibling, parent or primary caregiver. Carefully planned activities helped her kids recognize

“their emotions were normal and other kids felt them too.”

Community, Sandberg and her co-author Adam Grant argue, gives us the strength we sometimes can’t find by ourselves. This is true, and why I relish hosting Memory Bashes for hospitals, hospices, funeral homes and religious groups across the country. A Memory Bash is an excuse to get together as a group — eating, drinking, having a good time — while celebrating loved ones who have passed away in the company of others drawn to do the same. It’s a joyful concept I write about in “Passed and Present: Keeping Memories of Loved Ones Alive.” Participants learn new ways to preserve a loved one’s handwriting. They share stories. They create Memory Magnets, a quick no-mess project that enables the easy display of cherished photographs when they get home. And every Memory Bash ends with a commemorative toast — a group of new friends forming a circle, raising their glasses high, with each person taking a turn to say their loved one’s name out loud.

Sheryl writes it’s not been easy to replace her outsize grief with feelings of joy and gratitude. It’s been a gradual and ragged journey, and she’d trade every lesson learned to have Dave back. But Option A is not available. The best she can do (and the best we can all do) is crush Option B. Giving yourself opportunities to receive support from your family, friends and community helps. ★

You're Not Alone

| *Andy & Julianne Weiss* |

For three and a half years, the Chicagoland community has had Andy and Julianne Weiss holding the tender hands of those in grief. Together, they facilitate the Chicagoland TAPS Care Group, a monthly support group for those who know the loss of someone who has served in the military.

The couple are Peer Mentors and have trained in ASIST, Applied Suicide Intervention Skills. They lost their son, Daniel, a first lieutenant in the Army, in 2012. They actively advocate for military surviving loved ones in their community when they are not running their home-based import business.

Question: How did you come to lead the Care Group?

Andy: When we were struggling to find our equilibrium after Danny's death, Kim (Ruocco) and Bonnie (Carroll) saved our lives. We saw them running around at a seminar and they told us about the Peer Mentor program. We couldn't do the training at the time because we were only six months out. Exactly 18 months and 20 seconds out from our loss, we took the peer mentor training. It was part of our grieving process...I dragged Julianne into the Care Group.

Julianne: And I am glad to help! We've been fortunate that we're different and are able to help each other in our grief differently. And in that way, we show others that there are different ways to grieve.

Andy: My wife shows up with her yin, I am the yang.

Question: What do you like about facilitating a support group?

Andy: I have selfish reasons. Through service, we're loving on Danny. Leading a support group is just a real lovely way to remember my son. I am honored by people sharing their stories, honored to be with people who have been profoundly damaged and are still hopeful to embrace life. That's a treasure.

Julianne: I love hearing everyone's stories about their loved ones, and learning about their lives and what they did and their service. I really appreciate that — getting to know everyone. They can talk about anything, any part of their lives when they come to group. It's very special.

Question: What do you say to those who are hesitant to come to a TAPS Care Group?

Andy: Often times, especially early on in the loss, people are afraid of everything. The last thing you want to do is see other people. I tell them to come as your strengths and needs and schedule allows. It is constantly shifting. Overcoming fear is a personal battle; we're ready when they are.

Julianne: Sometimes our own families don't understand what we're going through and yet, you can come to Care Group and everyone understands your feelings. They can open up with the group, and not necessarily with their families, because there's that grief and military connection. I also



say: If you want to come and just listen, that's fine. You don't have to speak or share. Just come. You don't have to be alone. *

Chicagoland Care Group

Meets the third Saturday of every month, 10-11:30 a.m. CT

DUPAGE UNIVERSAL UNITARIAN CHURCH
1828 Old Naperville Road, Naperville, Ill., 60563

CONTACT: Andy Weiss at 630-235-7260 or andy@blueplanetfoods.com

» Find more TAPS Care Groups at taps.org/caregroups.

TAPS welcomes new volunteers.

Visit us at taps.org or email volunteer@taps.org.

hope



You're Invited

TAPS National Military Survivor Seminar

MAY 25-28, 2018

Each Memorial Day, our country remembers those who have served and died. As our country reflects on the costs of freedom, we come together to tell the stories of our fallen heroes. We name our loved ones, celebrate their lives and decide to live bigger and better on their behalf.

TAPS will host the 24th Annual National Military Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp over Memorial Day weekend, May 25-28. It is a sacred time when we gather as family to share the journey. We connect with old friends and make new ones. We reflect on the lives of our loved ones and the legacy we carry on in their honor. We open our hearts to the strength we thought we could never muster and the common language only those who have walked this path can share.

Surrounded by the monuments and memorials of our nation's capital, we are reminded that a grateful nation never

forgets. Through the support and loving care of our TAPS family, we are reminded that we are part of that story.

If you are grieving the death of a loved one in the military, whether a family member, friend or fellow service member, you are invited and encouraged to attend the National Military Survivor Seminar. No matter where you are in your grief journey, support and connection await you.

During the days we're together, you'll have the opportunity to participate in activities, workshops led by experts in grief and loss, and small-group sharing sessions where you can meet others walking a similar path as you. Over family-style meals and while participating in special events throughout



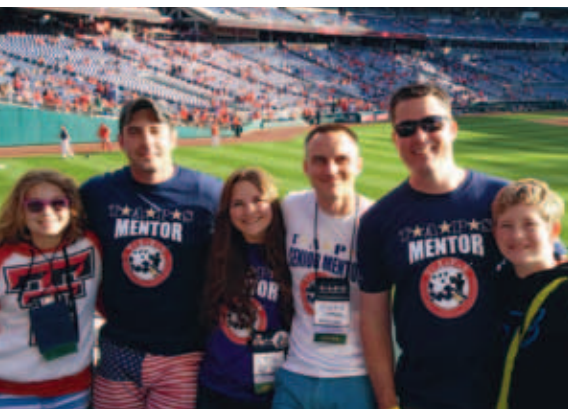
Washington, D.C., you'll meet and connect with other survivors.

TAPS invites you to find inspiration within yourself and from each other. Take time to engage with those around you to learn from them and grow in ways we once wondered if possible. There will be trips to Arlington National Cemetery and the opportunity to participate in the Memorial Day Parade in Washington, DC.

Good Grief Camp

TAPS Good Grief Camp for young survivors ages 4 through 18 has been a model for children's grief and healing for more than two decades. Each child is paired with a military mentor, spending the weekend together in a fun and engaging way that corresponds to each age group's development.

Children and teens will find comfort in knowing there are others their age who understand their loss, develop coping skills they can use once they leave Good Grief Camp and learn how America honors our fallen service members. We also provide care for our youngest survivors, infants and toddlers. *



Go online to taps.org/national for more information and to register for the 24th Annual National Military Survivor Seminar May 25-28, 2018 in Arlington, VA. You can also call the Helpline at 800-959-8277.



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HONOR AMERICA'S FALLEN HEROES ON MEMORIAL DAY

*24th Annual TAPS National
Military Survivor Seminar and Good Grief Camp*

MAY 25 – MAY 28, 2018



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