

For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died

# T★A★P★S<sup>®</sup>

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

WINTER 2024



On those days  
when you miss someone the most...  
remember how they loved you.

Remember how they loved you  
and do that  
for yourself.

In their name  
in their honor.  
Love yourself  
as they loved you...

On those days  
when you miss someone the most  
love yourself harder.

Donna Ashworth,  
Excerpted from  
*"On Those Days"*





3033 Wilson Blvd., Third Floor  
Arlington, VA 22201

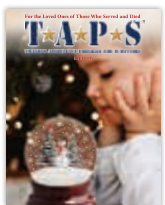
**Founder and President:** Bonnie Carroll  
**Editor:** Kristi Stolzenberg  
**Art Director:** Jennifer Bonney

**CONNECT WITH US**  
**24 HOURS A DAY, 7 DAYS A WEEK**  
**800-959-TAPS (8277)**  
**[taps.org](https://taps.org) / [info@taps.org](mailto:info@taps.org)**

**SHARE YOUR STORY**  
**BRING HOPE TO**  
**FELLOW SURVIVORS**  
**[editor@taps.org](mailto:editor@taps.org)**  
**[taps.org/shareyourstory](https://taps.org/shareyourstory)**

### TAPS PROGRAMS & SERVICES

- 24/7 National Military Survivor Helpline
  - Survivor Care Team
  - Peer-Based Support Network
  - Community-Based Care
  - Casework Assistance
  - Education Support
  - Suicide Loss & Illness Loss Support
  - Care Groups
  - Online Community
  - TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing®
  - Survivor Seminars & Good Grief Camps
  - TAPS Together
  - Women's Empowerment
  - Men's Program
  - Young Adults Program
  - Youth Programs
  - Sports & Entertainment Events
- \* For full descriptions, see pages 18-19.



**ON THE COVER:** Though the holidays may look different through grief, this season and always, TAPS honors the heroes we've lost and the love we still carry. We wish you a season of comfort and a bright

2025 surrounded by the support of your TAPS Family.  
COVER PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/ROBYNMAC/SEAN\_REID/  
KIPGODI/EXPERIENCEINTERIORS

## About TAPS

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

TAPS is the national nonprofit organization providing compassionate care and comprehensive resources to all those grieving a death in the military and veteran community. TAPS provides support to survivors 24/7, regardless of the manner of death, the duty status at the time of death, the survivor's relationship to the deceased, or the survivor's phase in their grief journey.

At TAPS, we open our hearts and resources to the world with our award-winning programs and services to support all military bereaved. TAPS works with leading experts in the fields of grief, bereavement, trauma, and peer support to integrate decades of research on military grief into action to help heal hearts.

### *At TAPS, we:*

**Honor and Remember** the lives of our military loved ones and celebrate military survivors as the living legacies of their service and sacrifice.

**Empower** survivors with healthy coping skills, resources, and opportunities to connect in the comfort of their home, their community, their region, and the nation to grow with their grief.

**Connect** all those grieving a military death to a nationwide network of peer-based, emotional survivor support and critical casework assistance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

**Educate** using research-informed best practices in bereavement and trauma care for survivors, and we advocate on behalf of survivors with policy and legislative priorities.

**Create Community** with survivors to provide comprehensive comfort, care, and resources where they live, when they need it, and in a manner comfortable for them.

### TAPS MAGAZINE VOLUME 30, ISSUE 4

TAPS Magazine is published quarterly by the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), 3033 Wilson Blvd., Third Floor, Arlington, VA 22201. Copyright © 2024 by TAPS, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part is prohibited without authorization. All articles appearing in TAPS Magazine, unless copyrighted by others, remain copyrighted materials of TAPS.

### TAPS IS A TOP-RATED NONPROFIT CHARITY

TAPS exceeds industry standards for financial accountability and outperforms most charities. We are proud to have received many of the top nonprofit charity ratings available today. Our donors should be confident they are supporting an organization that is financially healthy, accountable, and transparent.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## 7 DEAR TAPS

Words of hope and healing from fellow survivors

## 8 EMBRACING YOUR VULNERABILITY DURING THE HOLIDAYS

Inviting your authentic feelings to stay for the holidays

## 10 LEAVING THE GRIEF BOX OPEN

The growth that comes when we keep the lid off of our grief

## 12 FROM PEER TO PEER

Seeing grief from another angle, as a Peer Mentor supporting someone in grief

## 14 GROWING UP TAPS: LEANING INTO YOUR INFLUENCE AS A PARENT

Our expert tips for parenting through grief in the age of screens and influencers

## 16 DAVE WILSON'S PERFECTED PANCAKES

Fluffy pancakes and sweet memories

## 18 TAPS PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

All the ways TAPS supports you



## **20 WINTERING WITH AWE**

Finding moments of wonder in our current season

## **24 WINTER BEGINNINGS**

A heartwarming love that blossomed from shared grief and peer support

## **26 THE EMPTY CHAIR**

Paying tribute to the special people missing from our holidays

## **28 2025 EVENT UPDATES**

Key dates and important updates for 2025 events

## **30 YOU'RE NOT CRAZY — YOU'RE GRIEVING, PART 6**

Learning to eventually weave our grief into a full life after loss

## **34 CONNECTIONS AND COMMUNITY**

The TAPS Family wraps you in support this winter and always

## **35 IN THE SILENCE OF GRIEF**

Quiet moments make space for reflection and gratitude



SURVIVORS SHARE A REFLECTIVE MOMENT AT THE 2023 WESTERN REGIONAL SURVIVOR SEMINAR AND GOOD GRIEF CAMP IN LONG BEACH, CA. FIND UPDATES ON OUR 2025 SEMINAR SCHEDULE ON PAGE 28.

# To Our TAPS Family,



With wishes for comfort and warmth this season, welcome to the winter 2024 issue of *TAPS Magazine*. The end of the year — and the cold, quiet, and shorter days it brings — has a subtle way of turning our focus inward, toward home, family, and our own hearts. We crave comfort food and seek the embrace of cozy blankets and warm fires. It's when we are nudged inward, though, that we can't help but run into reminders of the precious people we miss and the grief we've carried since we lost them.

In this issue, we invite you to embrace the annual slowdown that gives us all the time and space to rest, honor the love we still carry for our fallen loved ones, and grow with grief. Your TAPS Family understands that the traditions, events, and nostalgia of the holidays can make this time of year especially difficult. We know that grief doesn't take time off for the holidays, so neither does our support. Our compassionate staff and family of peers in grief continue to walk with you this season, just as we've done each season before and each season to come.

Whatever is on your heart this winter, we understand, we are with you, and we have programming in place to support you throughout the season. Our recurring Online Groups bring connection and community to the comfort of your home. If you haven't yet joined a group, this is the perfect time to start. You can also attend a TAPS Care Group in your local area this winter and carry this connection into the new year. And, if you'd like to use this season to learn something new about yourself or your grief, our TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing is always in session with live and archived webinars. You can learn more about each of these programs on page 34 of this magazine and at [taps.org](http://taps.org).

I encourage you to explore this issue one page at a time. Consider how the words impact your grief journey. Let them be your comfort and counsel this season. Our contributors share support (and one delicious pancake recipe), and they open up about our vulnerability as grievers, especially during the holidays. They shine light on ways to honor our heroes and our own grief this season. They remind us that we have the strength to carry grief and gratitude together into the new year. And they share their own healing TAPS peer-support experiences that are sure to wrap you up in hope.

I hope you'll join me this season in turning inward, making space to grieve and grow in preparation for the year ahead, and leaning into the support of your TAPS Family.

Sending you love and comfort this season and always,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bonnie Carroll".

Bonnie Carroll, *TAPS President and Founder*



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; CATHY HART PHOTOGRAPHY

# Dear TAPS

## Seeds of Hope

“In the midst of grief, missing our loved ones at random moments, and navigating our new life, your steadfast support of survivors like us is a glimmer of sunshine. The seeds of hope you instill in us are priceless.”

**Archana Asrani** ★ Surviving Spouse of CW04 Zachary Dickinson, U.S. Army National Guard

## Connection

“I really appreciate the connection. Thanks for getting in touch; it means a great deal to me. Grief changes a lot — sometimes big, sometimes small, one thing, then another. Sometimes better, sometimes worse, but always there. The absence is always present. I call it “Not Richard.” I talk to it, and it always hurts — sometimes like a hangnail, sometimes like a decaying tooth root, but always there...Richard is not there, but Not Richard is always there.”

**Jayna Williams** ★ Surviving Spouse of CPT Richard Leslie, U.S. Army Veteran

## Tears of Gratitude

“At this point, 'thank you' doesn't seem big enough to express my gratitude and appreciation for what you have added to our lives and how much you have assisted us since Tyson's father passed away. As I sit here writing this, I am tearing up, but they are not tears of sadness. Rather, they are tears of gratitude for what you do for our family and the many other families you support. Your impact is beyond words.”

**Meredith Fain** ★ Ex-Significant Other, SFC Walter Moore, U.S. Army Reserve

## Hope and Help

“TAPS basically saved my sanity and my life after my husband passed from a long illness. Two years and I am still struggling with sadness and anger, but getting better. TAPS helped me with the financial stuff that Ray always took care of and with emotional ups and downs. TAPS helped where my family couldn't or wouldn't. Thank you so much.”

**Cathie Mars** ★ Surviving Spouse of SGT Raymond Mars, U.S. Army Veteran

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; PEXELS.COM/ZAKSHEUSKAYA



Has TAPS impacted your life after loss? Your experience may just be what fellow survivors need to hear to connect with our support this season. Write to Dear TAPS and share your story for the chance to be featured in an upcoming issue of *TAPS Magazine*.

[taps.org/deartaps](https://taps.org/deartaps)

# Embracing Your Vulnerability During the Holidays

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D. ★ TAPS Advisory Board



**G**rief, the holidays, and vulnerability naturally go together because when someone in our lives dies, the holidays — and all the nostalgia they bring — can heighten our feelings of vulnerability.

Being vulnerable is the opposite of protecting ourselves because when we protect ourselves, we create barriers and shields that safeguard us from harm. Common emotional shields are things like denial, secrecy, disengagement, and mutual pretense — where I know something, and you know something, but we don't acknowledge it. When we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, though, we consciously lower those shields.

Further, when we mourn — or express our grief outside of ourselves — we're turning ourselves inside out, exposing our soft inner selves to the outside world. We're sharing our deepest, most tender feelings — our truths. Of course, invitations to both grieve and mourn are naturally going to occur during the holidays. While some people will probably encourage us to be strong this time of the year, it's actually a time to surrender to vulnerability. That's because vulnerability is fundamentally about honesty and connection — it's about being authentic. If mourning in any way is going to be integrated into our lives, we have to be authentic and truthful about how losses impact us.

Let's explore eight principles that invite vulnerability in for the holidays.

## 1. Let Your Thoughts and Feelings Guide You

If something is concerning you, weighing on you, or just making you feel stuck, it's teaching you that it needs and deserves your attention and expression. The thoughts and feelings of grief have a purpose: to help you make the essential transition from life before the loss to life after the loss. Your most vulnerable, difficult thoughts and feelings are probably the most important ones to encounter, embrace, befriend, and familiarize yourself with. They're often the most meaningful to you, so watch for them, welcome them, and give them a voice as they naturally arise during the holidays.

## 2. Consider Putting Feelings Into Written Words

If you like to put pen to paper, think about writing down the many thoughts and feelings that arise during the holidays. If it's a good match for you, writing things down can help you clarify whatever you're experiencing. With the help of your pen, you're taking your grief and allowing it to become authentic mourning.

## 3. Tell One Thing to One Other Person

Try talking to your most empathetic, caring, nonjudgmental friend about some of your grief-related feelings during the holidays. Allow yourself to tell them one thing you may even be afraid to express out loud, then see how they respond. After you express this one thing and even spend a few minutes exploring it with

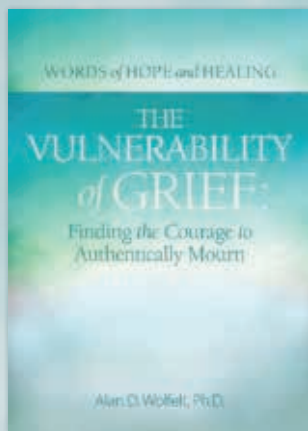
your friend, take inventory of how you feel. Do you feel lighter — more relaxed? One small sharing experience often leads to more sharing. Vulnerability creates connection and invites self-compassion.

## 4. Respond Authentically to the Question: "How Are You?"

During the holidays, someone is bound to ask you this question. If you're not careful, you respond by saying, "I'm OK. How are you?" It invites a clichéd interaction — they lie, you lie, we lie when we need to be authentic.

Consider a more honest, vulnerable response. If you're struggling with low energy or inability to focus during the holidays — having brain fog, perhaps, which commonly occurs this time of year — go ahead and say that. Whatever is on your mind and heart, share at least a little bit of it.





“Practicing vulnerability in grief and in life is, in essence, the practice of sowing love...”

The more honest you are with yourself and those around you, the more movement can occur with your grief because you're letting yourself authentically mourn.

### 5. Wear Your Heart on Your Sleeve

Just as the Victorians wore black armbands when they were in mourning, wearing a symbol of some kind invites people to acknowledge the significance of your loss and support you in grief. An outward sign or symbol of your loss signals that you are ready and willing to discuss something deeply important to you. That's life-changing. It will also show you who can be a source of support and who cannot.

### 6. Actively Remember

Contrary to popular belief, you must go backward before you can go forward in grief. You're working to shift the relationship from one of presence to one of memory. During the holidays, we naturally think more about the history of the relationships we had with those who have gone before us and often review the circumstances surrounding the death. Set aside time during the holidays to go through photos, watch videos, and take

a look at memorabilia that associates you with your loss. Sharing memories with a good listener can be a lovely way to listen to the music of the past so you can sing in the present and dance into the future.

### 7. Carry Out Grief Rituals

When words are inadequate, have a ceremony. Grief rituals or ceremonies are among the most powerful mourning actions you can take, and the holidays are a great time to carry them out. While funerals are an example of a more formal grief ritual, you can create informal ways to make grief rituals part of your holidays by simply playing a certain song, reciting a prayer, or holding a linking object that connects you to the person who died. You could also walk a particular path or light a candle in remembrance.

During the ritual, you're dedicating your time and attention to the loss. You're acknowledging, thinking, feeling, remembering, honoring, and authentically mourning. This creates a sweet spot of vulnerability in the structure of the ritual.

### 8. Ask for and Accept Support From Others

It is challenging to ask for help, particularly in grief and especially during the holidays. Sadly, many people tend to see asking for and accepting help as revealing weakness or burdening others, yet we have to be vulnerable if we're going to seek and be able to accept support. It means admitting that we aren't fully self-sufficient.

Remember, mourning is literally a shared response to loss, so allow yourself to be vulnerable and accept the support you need and deserve during this naturally difficult time of the year. If you aren't getting the support you need, it's OK to ask for help. Give it a try and see what happens.

Practicing vulnerability in grief and in life is, in essence, the practice of sowing love — love for the people and things we've lost, love for ourselves, our friends, our family, and the world we live in.



About the Author

One of North America's leading death educators and grief counselors, Dr. Alan Wolfelt is the founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and a TAPS Advisory Board Member. Visit [centerforloss.com](http://centerforloss.com) or email Dr. Wolfelt at [drwolfelt@centerforloss.com](mailto:drwolfelt@centerforloss.com) to further explore the vulnerability of grief and view his wide range of publications for caregivers and grievers, including *The Vulnerability of Grief: Finding the Courage to Authentically Mourn*, from which this article is adapted.



#### THIS SEASON AND ALWAYS

Your TAPS Family is your trusted source of support in every season of grief. Let our compassionate staff connect you with local resources, grief counselors, and TAPS Care Groups so you have the local support you need this holiday season and always. Scan the QR code to get started.

>> [taps.org/griefcounseling](http://taps.org/griefcounseling)

# LEAVING THE GRIEF

Chris Beck ★ Surviving Father of PO1 Jarrod Ray Beck, U.S. Navy

Over the past 18 months, I have struggled to get to my feet and find the path forward in my life since the loss of my son, Jarrod. I know I am on a healing path, but the steps have been small and the growth slow, but steady.

Men by nature, and to some extent by nurture, hide emotions and push them down — many of us were taught that emotions are a sign of weakness. When given the opportunity to attend a TAPS Men's Retreat at Camp Operation BBQ Relief (OBR), I wasn't sure how it would play out. I feared ego and pride would get in the way of growth — either for myself or other attendees. Out of the 20 men there, 18 of us had lost sons, and two young men had lost their fathers. Some men were several years out from their loss, while others were only a few months into their grief journeys, but this event changed lives — including mine. It impacted every single one of us in ways that cannot be described — only witnessed, but I'll do my best.

## THE GRIEF BOX

In the Men's Program Online Group, we spend an hour and a half every other week in open forum discussions. Most times the topics grow organically, and we spend time sharing stories, feelings, and support. We open the "grief box" for a very short time — taking out some items, sharing them, then putting them back in the box and closing the lid for another two weeks. The retreat was different.

From the time we arrived, the grief box was open. In fact, at some point in the first 24 hours, nearly all of us did what we referred to as a "grief dump." We took the box, turned it upside down, and shared everything inside with one or more men in attendance. The loss, the sadness, the relationships, the anger, the confusion — we put it all on the table.

Men who started out not saying a word were completely open and sharing without reservation by the end of our time together. No topic was off-limits. It was raw, open, honest, and enlightening; we all felt heard, and each session left us wanting more. Leaving the grief box open for five days invited connection, healing, honest frustration with things outside our control, and the reassurance that we weren't grieving alone.

We spent one sunny morning at camp restoring a memorial gazebo. The next evening, we each received a dog tag with our lost one's name on it. We rang a bell, said our lost one's name, and then affixed it to the gazebo. While this sounds simple in writing, it was not simple in execution. Because our grief boxes had been opened for several days — contents all out in the open — this event called on each of us to reach deep inside that box and pull out the deepest emotions, the hurt, and the impacts of our loss. The strength it took, the vulnerability of each man, the intense emotions, the outpouring of support from each other, and the extreme grief and hurt — it all came out. The impact, emotion, and healing of this moment cannot be overstated. The emotions I faced in the gazebo were some of the most intense since Jarrod's memorial service.

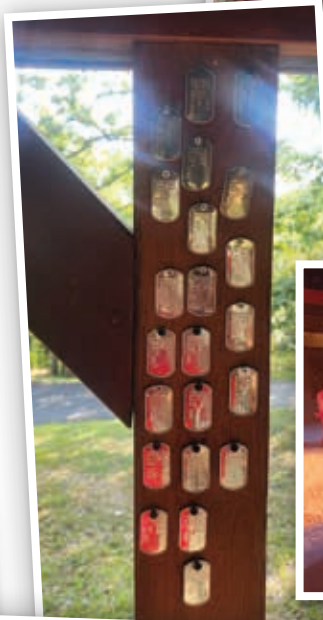
We, as men, are typically not vulnerable when our wives and children are present — whether at home, a memorial service, or even a seminar. We keep our emotions in check; we're strong for everyone else. It takes time, trust, and the right setting for men to open up — to fully open our grief boxes and leave them open. We need that time to grieve, mourn, and release everything we hold inside.

Five days at Camp OBR was the equivalent of 18 months of other healing for me. Maybe it was

# BOX OPEN

the place or the right group of peers, or maybe it was just what I needed when I needed it, but that retreat changed my life. It opened my eyes to what was blocking my healing. It allowed me to let go of things that were only hurting me. It took me several days to put my grief back in the box after the retreat, but I didn't rush it. I wanted to just sit with my grief for a while, so I did.

As I reflect now on my time there, I'm thankful for the support and the chance to open my grief box without feeling like I needed to quickly close it again, set it aside, and carry on with strength. What you've given me is a debt I can never repay, only pay forward.



## SPECIALIZED TAPS PROGRAMS

TAPS provides specialized programming for both surviving men, through our Men's Program, and surviving women, through Women's Empowerment. Both programs offer online and in-person meeting opportunities that cater to the unique needs each population faces in grief. Use the QR codes below to explore the programs and upcoming events, like this Camp OBR Retreat.



>> [taps.org/men](https://taps.org/men)



>> [taps.org/empowerment](https://taps.org/empowerment)

# FROM PEER

Heather Gray Blalock ★ Surviving Spouse of U.S. Air Force Maj Walter David Gray ★ TAPS Peer Mentor

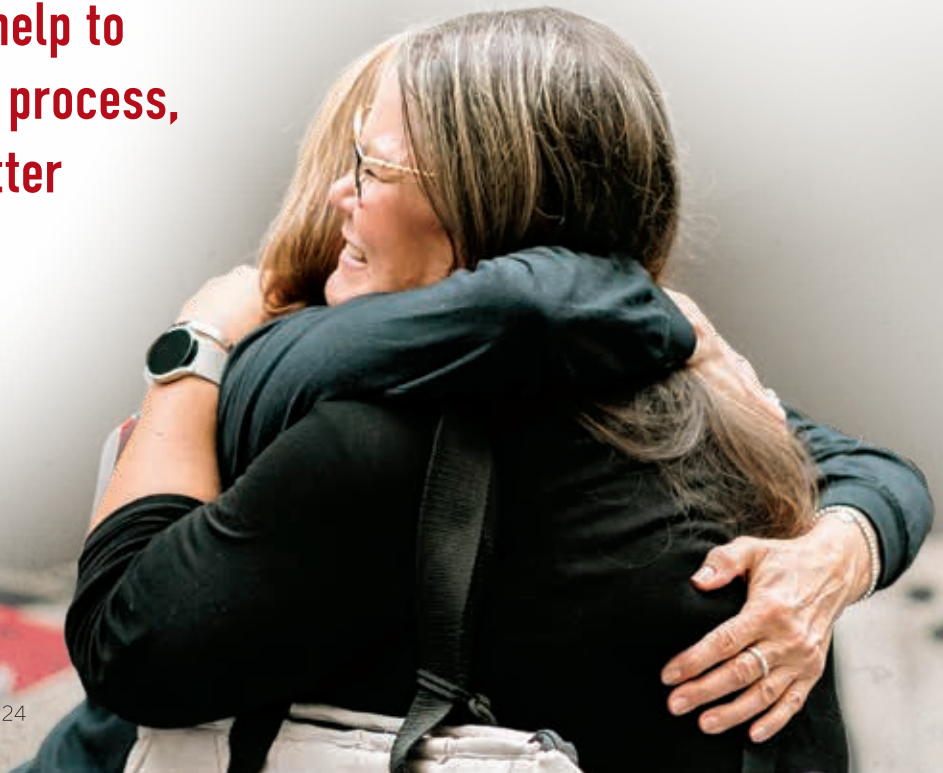
**A**s a surviving spouse, I thought I understood grief. I felt I would be prepared to handle a grieving widow or family member who lost a loved one. So, it took me by surprise when I wasn't. Five years after my husband was killed in Afghanistan, a pilot friend of ours was killed in a training exercise. I was at his wife's house moments after the notification team left, and I felt completely bewildered. My heart broke for her and their children. I found myself wandering in circles wondering how to help propel them through the difficult days and seemingly impossible tasks that loomed. My only true experience with fresh grief had been on the inside looking out. I had no clue how to be on the outside looking in. Her grief became my grief all over again, and all I could do was mourn as she mourned.

I eventually realized if I wanted to truly be of help to others through their grief process, I was going to need to better understand grief itself, with something beyond experiential knowledge. I went back to college and earned a master's degree, focusing my studies on counseling and theology. When I felt ready for true "field experience," nearly a decade after my husband died, I decided to become a TAPS Peer Mentor and received specific training on how to "companion" another facing the loss of their own beloved service member. Yet even with all that preparation, the first time I reached out to my mentee in the wake of her loss, the weight of grief was a heavy burden to bear. I initially feared I might flounder, but what an incredible blessing it is to bear one another's heaviest burdens together. To companion another in their grief is an honor, and I hope to encourage and equip others to do just that.

Often, people reach out to survivors for advice on how to come alongside someone who has suffered loss — thinking because we have experienced grief for ourselves, we are subject matter experts. Survivors have been the recipients of support, but that does not necessarily equip us to automatically know how to best extend support to others. Every grief is different. There is no training manual for grief or how to love and serve well those who find themselves in its wake. While not an exhaustive list or exact proven equation, I've learned a few things that may help anyone coming alongside the grieving.

First and foremost, recognize that regardless of how long ago your loss occurred, caring for the bereaved may trigger a personal grief response. Think of your grief as a pack of puppies corralled in a fenced yard. Even if only intending to open the gate for one, all the others may come charging out. Similarly, emotions reside together; tapping into one can stir up others.

**I eventually realized  
if I wanted to truly be of help to  
others through their grief process,  
I was going to need to better  
understand grief itself,  
with something beyond  
experiential knowledge.**



PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; PEXELS.COM/GEORGE\_DOLGIKH

# TO PEER

## A TAPS Peer Mentor's Guidance for Supporting Others in Grief

The time immediately after loss is survival mode. If possible, just make sure the bereaved are surrounded by people who will ensure basic needs are being met — that they're eating, bathing, and getting where they need to be. They will likely need you most when the dust settles — so to speak, and life is forced to take on a "new normal." That's when the silence becomes deafening and support is critical. Many times, those hoping to console the grieving fear they may inadvertently make the situation worse or add to their pain. Let me assure you, their pain is so raw that barring you saying that their loved one died in vain, there really is not much you could do to add to it. Trust that your presence, prayers, and supportive actions are meaningful and appreciated.

At the same time, know there really isn't anything you can say or do to truly assuage

grief. The goal is not to make them "feel better" or "get back to normal," but to be available to them as they mourn. The one thing the bereaved want and need (their lost loved one) cannot be provided. So, just remember that your intention of support is still impactful even if it feels futile.

Death and grief are intimidating, but do not be afraid to offer whatever support you can. That support may be physical, emotional, or spiritual. One type of support does not outweigh the others in importance. Maybe the most you can do is promise to pray for them — then faithfully do that. If you are in close proximity to the bereaved, your support may look like emotional companionship or completion of tasks for them. I recommend not asking the bereaved the common question, "What can I do for you?" Most often they don't know

what they need and the process of trying to figure it out may be overwhelming. Instead, offer suggestions like:

- "I'd like to come over; is that OK with you?"
- "May I take you out for coffee and a change of scenery?"
- "I'm heading to the grocery store, what can I pick up for you?"
- "I'd like to [bring dinner or drop off some gift cards to your favorite restaurants, pack the kids' suitcases for the unexpected travel, be available or present when you go through his personal effects], would that be helpful?"

Choose one specific thing you feel may be beneficial and give them the choice to accept or not. Providing specificity when everything in their head may seem foggy can be quite effective. Do not be offended if your specific offer is refused. Take their response in stride and try again later.

I personally believe the best thing survivors can do with their grief is use it to help others when the time is right. Don't be afraid to just do what you can when you can. Know that bearing one another's burdens can be hard but appreciated, even if the bereaved may not have the bandwidth to respond to it. Don't give up on your community. Reach out when you need help, and help others do the same. We are all in this together.



### TAPS Peer Mentors

Peer support, just like the "companioning" Heather describes in her article, is at the heart of the TAPS mission. Whether you would like to be paired with a Peer Mentor; are now 18 months beyond your own loss and feel ready to become a Peer Mentor; or you are a trained Peer Mentor ready to deepen your involvement with the program, our website can help you take the next healing step.

[»» taps.org/peermentors](https://taps.org/peermentors)

# Leaning Into

# YOUR INFLUENCE AS A PARENT

Andy McNiel, M.A. ★ Senior Advisor, TAPS Youth Programs

It is not easy to be a parent today. We compete with so many other things that demand our children’s attention and fill their minds with messages that shape how they see themselves, others, and the world around them. I have had many parents express their frustrations about this current situation and wonder if they even have any sway in their child’s life. Sometimes it feels like these other influences have garnered more attention and make a larger impact than we do as their parents and guardians.

Though this may seem like the case, the reality is that the greatest influences in children’s lives are the adults who are routinely present. We have the power to teach, shape, encourage, lift, support, and impact their lives like no one else by boosting their healthy thoughts, behaviors, and beliefs. Let’s explore how to tap into that power.

### EMOTIONAL REGULATION & MEASURED REACTIONS TO CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

Life can be frustrating. We have all been in situations we did not handle very well. When you add grief into the equation — when emotions may already be high — even the smallest challenge can seem overwhelming. These situations, however, can be teachable moments for our children

and teenagers even when they do not see it that way. They need the adults in their lives to demonstrate how to bounce back, live through, hold on to hope, and thrive even when life seems to be against them.

We do this by modeling healthy responses to life’s challenges and by teaching children how to slow down, regulate themselves, and make choices, rather than just reacting in the moment. Modeling happens when we are in the “heat of the moment” and maintain our balance and calm. Our children are watching and learning. Teaching happens when the moment has come and gone and we take the time to sit with our children, recall the situation, and talk about how we reacted, what we might learn from that, and how we might approach things differently in the future. You may not think they are listening, but they are.

### PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The first step toward personal accountability is having the freedom to make choices and decisions for ourselves. With your children, determine which values are most important to you and your family. Agree together on the behaviors that best reflect your beliefs, and create the best environment for your family to thrive — individually and as a unit.

Teach children that their choices matter and have consequences. Hold yourself and your children accountable for behaviors that do not support these values, and establish

positive reinforcements or rewards when these shared values are lived out within the family. Life sometimes gets busy, and we may have times when we are more consistent than others. Yet, making the effort to establish expectations and working toward accountability together helps everyone navigate the additional challenges of grief.

### ROUTINES & PREDICTABILITY

The death of someone in the family can disrupt many aspects of our lives, including our routines and pace of life. It can take time to find our footing again and to regain our rhythm. This is to be expected. In some ways, the disruption of routines and predictability is one of the most impactful parts of grief for children, teenagers, and families. This is why — though it may be challenging — creating and reestablishing routines and some sense of predictability in your daily life and your children’s daily lives is very important.

We know that there are many factors that we — and they — cannot control or predict, but children fare better when they have some idea of what to expect from their day. Establishing rituals — daily, weekly, monthly, and annual — helps children feel safe and secure. Rituals provide something to look forward to and depend on. Draw inspiration from our list of routines and rituals on the next page to share as a family, and start the new year with a few intentional ways to encourage healthy outcomes in your children’s lives after a loss.

**We do this by modeling healthy responses to life’s challenges AND BY TEACHING CHILDREN HOW TO SLOW DOWN, REGULATE THEMSELVES, AND MAKE CHOICES, RATHER THAN JUST REACTING IN THE MOMENT.**



## ***Family Routines and Rituals***

- Honor the service of your military loved one through service acts, memorials, or special days.
- Establish dinnertime together each evening or create theme nights for certain meals, like Taco Tuesday.
- Plan special weekly meals, like a standing Saturday morning breakfast or Sunday brunch.
- Block out special weekly activities — a Saturday afternoon hike or Sunday night bonfire.
- Celebrate the birthday of the person who died.
- Light a candle for your person on special occasions or holidays.
- Create theme nights for family activities, like movie night, game night, or karaoke night.
- Set an age-appropriate bedtime and bedtime routine for each child — reading a story, singing songs, bathing, brushing teeth, etc.
- Create structured time for video games and other electronics.
- Establish “outside” time for going to a park, playing in the yard, or sitting on the porch together.
- Schedule time for each family member to have alone time, including you — whether after bedtime or at a set time once or twice each week.
- Create rituals around holidays and be consistent from year to year. Children often carry this over to their families when they grow into adulthood.
- Participate in after-school activities, sports, band, or other extracurricular events.
- Establish a special place where you watch the sunrise or sunset once a month.

Though it may seem as though all of the other influences in our children’s lives have their undivided attention, the reality is that we, as their parents and caregivers, still hold sway. Being consistent, teaching and modeling healthy behaviors and personal accountability, and establishing routines and predictability can make all the difference in their world.



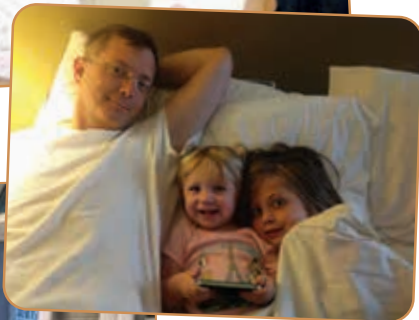
### **About the Author**

*Andy is dedicated to supporting children, teenagers, and families through grief, bereavement, and the general challenges of parenting and growing up. His commitment to healthy children and families is articulated through his work overseeing, developing, and facilitating TAPS Youth Programs, which support young military survivors and their caregivers.*

# DAVE WILSON'S PERFECTED PANCAKES

Adapted from Alton Brown, *Good Eats*

Sara Wilson ✨ Surviving Spouse of CAPT David Selkirk Wilson, U.S. Navy Retired



Nobody could beat Dave Wilson's pancakes. Hot and crispy on the outside edges, fluffy and flavorful on the inside — they could rouse even the most sleep-deprived wife or child out of bed on a lazy weekend morning.

Dave was a polymath who loved music, science, and engineering. He majored in metallurgy as an undergrad before commissioning in the Navy. He played the oboe and cello (not at the same time). Whether it was an experiment in the lab, a dirge on the cello, or brunch on a Sunday, Dave loved to measure ingredients (or play notes) with discipline and delight his audience with his creations.

He wasn't much into television, but he loved Alton Brown, his books, and especially his show, *Good Eats*. We always joked that if Dave ever left me, it would be for Alton Brown and his recipes, not another woman.

His favorite pancake recipe came from the third episode of the third season of *Good Eats*, "Flap Jack Do It Again." He loved the chemistry of it all. If you make this recipe, follow it exactly. And then count the number of people in your household who awake from their slumber when you fire up that griddle.

Nobody could beat Dave Wilson's  
pancakes. **HOT AND CRISPY**  
on the outside edges, fluffy and  
flavorful on the inside...



## Comfort Food

Is there a recipe that can, in one bite, remind you of your loved one and a special memory you shared with them? Whether it is an annual holiday dish or a weeknight favorite, TAPS would love to hear about a recipe that brings you comfort. Send the recipe and a story that explains why it is such a special reminder of the person you lost to [editor@taps.org](mailto:editor@taps.org) or scan the QR code to submit it via the TAPS website.

>> [taps.org/shareyourstory](https://taps.org/shareyourstory)



You'll start by making the "Instant" Pancake Mix — have a lidded container on hand that can hold about 10-12 cups. You'll use your prepared mix to make the actual pancakes.

## "INSTANT" PANCAKE MIX

- 6 cups all-purpose flour (I like to pour a bunch of flour into a large bowl, whisk it around to aerate it, then measure it using the scoop-and-level method.)**
- 1.5 tsp baking soda (Check the expiration date first.)**
- 3 TBSP double-acting baking powder (Check the expiration date first.)**
- 1 TBSP kosher salt**
- 2 TBSP sugar**

Combine all of the ingredients in a lidded container. Shake to mix. Use within three months.

---

## THE PANCAKES

- 2 eggs, separated into yolks and whites**
- 2 cups buttermilk**
- 4 TBSP unsalted butter, melted**
- 2 cups prepared "Instant" Pancake Mix**
- 1 stick butter (Use to grease the griddle or pan.)**
- 2 cups fresh fruit, such as blueberries, if desired**

Heat an electric griddle or frying pan to 350 degrees F. Heat the oven to 200 degrees F. Add the two cups of "Instant" Pancake Mix to a large mixing bowl and set aside.

Whisk together the egg whites and the buttermilk in a shallow bowl. In another bowl, whisk the egg yolks with the melted butter.

Combine the buttermilk mixture with the egg yolk mixture in a large mixing bowl and — using your largest whisk — whisk together until thoroughly combined.

Pour the combined liquid ingredients on top of the pancake mix. Using your large whisk, mix the batter for only about 10 seconds — just enough to bring it together. Don't try to work all the lumps out.

Check to see if the griddle is hot by placing a few drops of water on it. It's ready if the water dances across the surface.

Lightly butter the griddle, then carefully wipe it off thoroughly with a paper towel. No butter should be visible.

Gently ladle the pancake batter onto the griddle and sprinkle on fruit if desired.

When bubbles begin to set around the edges of the pancakes and the griddle sides of the cakes are golden, gently flip the pancakes. Continue to cook for two to three minutes, or until the pancakes are set.

Serve immediately or remove to a paper towel-lined baking sheet and cover with a towel. Extra pancakes can be kept warm in the preheated oven for 20 to 30 minutes.



TAPS.ORG/PROGRAMS-SERVICES

For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served and Died

# TAPS®

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES



## TAPS NATIONAL MILITARY SURVIVOR HELPLINE • 800-959-TAPS (8277)

A caring network of peer professionals is standing by to provide emotional support, connection to resources and programs, a listening ear, and open access to all that TAPS provides. Survivors can call any time, day or night. We always answer, we always have time, and we always care.



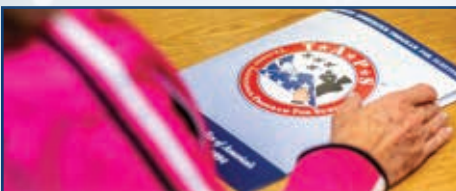
## PEER-BASED EMOTIONAL SUPPORT • TAPS.ORG/PEERMENTORS

At TAPS, survivors help survivors heal. Survivors at least 18 months out from their loss can receive training and join our national network of Peer Mentors. Newly bereaved survivors are closely matched with a Peer Mentor based on manner of loss and relationship to their loved one to help them navigate their unique needs in the aftermath of loss.



## COMMUNITY-BASED GRIEF SUPPORT • TAPS.ORG/GRIEFCOUNSELING

The right mental health or grief professional can guide military survivors to discover their strengths, develop coping skills, navigate relationships, and explore secondary losses. TAPS carefully connects survivors to the right mental health professional, trauma resources, and support groups, all within their local community.



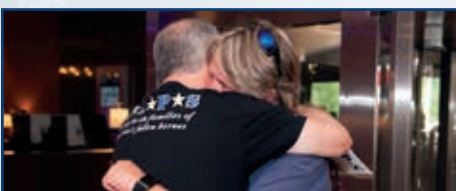
## CASEWORK ASSISTANCE • TAPS.ORG/CASEWORK

Our casework team provides compassionate, customized support to surviving families in alignment with TAPS partners and third-party resources. Caseworkers can connect survivors to pro-bono legal assistance, emergency financial resources, state and federal benefit information, and private social-services support to guide families toward long-term stability and self-sufficiency.



## EDUCATION SUPPORT SERVICES • TAPS.ORG/EDU

TAPS Education Support Services empowers survivors in pursuit of postsecondary education by connecting them to benefits, resources, and scholarship information that meet their financial needs and educational goals.



## SURVIVOR CARE TEAM • TAPS.ORG/SURVIVORCARETEAM

Survivor Care Team members are surviving military family members with extensive professional training in peer-based support, traumatic death, suicide prevention and postvention, and grief support. These skilled listeners assess the needs of the newly bereaved, create safe spaces for sharing, and empower the pursuit of the healthy coping skills and long-term support systems TAPS can provide.



## SUICIDE-LOSS SUPPORT • TAPS.ORG/SUICIDE

Death by suicide can leave behind a wake of powerful, complicated emotions and questions that shape a unique grief journey. TAPS provides compassionate support and hope for all suicide-loss survivors and safe spaces to honor and grieve. Survivors are gently guided toward a path of healthy grieving, healing, and growth.

## ILLNESS-LOSS SUPPORT • [TAPS.ORG/CAREGIVER](https://taps.org/caregiver)

TAPS ensures families whose loved one died from illness are recognized, cared for, and aware of pertinent benefits. We advocate for improvements in caregiver support and raise critical awareness about the unique needs and situations of military caregiving families, including the effects of toxic exposure. TAPS also provides healing peer connections and programs that support healthy next steps for caregiving survivors.



## ONLINE COMMUNITY • [TAPS.ORG/ONLINECOMMUNITY](https://taps.org/onlinecommunity)

Our online community brings the meaningful connections of TAPS directly to survivors, wherever they are. Online groups are peer-led, facilitated sessions where there's never pressure to share, but always an opportunity. TAPS workshops and online series build supportive communities that learn and process new information together and create space to share perspectives in an effort to find inspiration, clarity, and connection.



## WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT • [TAPS.ORG/EMPOWERMENT](https://taps.org/empowerment)

TAPS Women's Empowerment programming provides surviving women with the tools and confidence to shape their identity, spirituality, and goal setting in their lives after loss. A combination of in-person and online events foster a vibrant, compassionate community where participants treasure opportunities to be each other's teachers, confidants, cheerleaders, and friends.



## MEN'S PROGRAM • [TAPS.ORG/MEN](https://taps.org/men)

The TAPS Men's Program was designed by men, for men. It paves the way for men to grieve their way, at their own pace. Surviving men lean on each other, share perspectives, grow stronger by elevating one another, and honor the legacy of their military and veteran loved ones.



## YOUTH PROGRAMS • [TAPS.ORG/YOUTHPROGRAMS](https://taps.org/youthprograms)

Though their lives are impacted by grief, young TAPS survivors know their lives will also be marked by camaraderie, mentorship, emotional maturity, adventure, and fun. TAPS Youth Programs — led by experts in child development, children's grief and loss, mental health, and education — provide safe spaces for surviving military children (ages 5-18) to explore grief and embrace healing at Good Grief Camps and Family Camps. Online programming is also available for parents and guardians of grieving children.



## YOUNG ADULTS PROGRAM • [TAPS.ORG/YOUNGADULTS](https://taps.org/youngadults)

Five pillars of growth — Personal Development, Financial Stability, Communication, Career Development, and Service to Others — guide military survivors, ages 18-30, as they grow with their grief. Through in-person, multi-day experiences, and online group discussions, young adult survivors connect and engage with others to create a well-rounded life full of hope, healing, and growth.



## TAPS INSTITUTE FOR HOPE AND HEALING® • [TAPS.ORG/INSTITUTE](https://taps.org/institute)

The TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing® is a leader in training and education for grief professionals and bereaved individuals and families. The institute provides no-cost grief and bereavement programming through webinars, webcasts, and other events on a variety of topics, such as understanding and responding to suicide; children's grief; coping with loss; wellness workshops; and preserving memories of lost loved ones. Professionals can access academic programs and a wide range of continuing education credits.



## SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT • [TAPS.ORG/ENTERTAINMENT](https://taps.org/entertainment)

Stars4TAPS and teams4taps collaborate with the entertainment industry and sports organizations across the country and in the U.K. to bring joy, healing, and incredible memories to surviving military families as they honor their fallen heroes.



# WINTERING

Rachel Hunsell ✨ Manager, TAPS Outdoor Programs ✨ Surviving Sister of LCpl J. Kyle Price, U.S. Marine Corps

As romantic as it sounds to feel an early autumn breeze blow through an open window — breathing in the signs of change it carries, today I merely opened the window to rid my kitchen of the burnt-toast smoke plumes. I'll prepare you a delectable four-course meal, but it's risky to ask me to monitor the broiler.

Once that cool breeze grazed my forehead, though, I felt compelled to open another window. Once our home began to swirl with autumn air, I sat down at our dining table for breakfast with my toddler, forever admiring her curiosity and content state.

Through a mix of babbles and clear-as-day phrases, she pointed out our large bay window facing the south, beams of sunlight pouring in, and noticed the birds, our dogs, and the caravan of tractors, trailers, and combines driving by preparing to harvest. We giggled at the dog playing, explored the variety of ways you can eat eggs, and found every opportunity to share in the miracle of being alive, together.

This brief moment of daily routine relaxed my shoulders, brought warmth to my chest, and welled my eyes; I was in awe.

This sensation of everyday wonder, awe, is defined by Dacher Keltner, professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, co-director of UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center, and renowned expert in the science of human emotion, as “the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your current understanding of the world.”

Enamored by my 20-month-old, I sipped my coffee and allowed myself this moment of surrender. I gazed out the window, over my somewhat neglected, but still alive and thriving, houseplants, and took in the view.

I felt a necessity to open my heart and my mind to awe — not just for inspiration, **but to heal.**



# WITH AWE

All of my senses came online, and I began to notice our Tibetan mastiff's tail fluff dancing across the yard, the neighbor's trees turning yellow and fuchsia at the edges, a lawn in need of mowing, yellow butterflies seeking a gentle place to land, the warm smell and taste of my dark coffee, the signs of things to do piled on my table, the plants that need repotting and tending, the tiny, sticky hands patting me, and the musical sound of "Mama." My home, my world; how could it be so beautifully chaotic? So pure and so messy? So tender, so jarring and, yet, so blissful too?

These moments used to come so naturally, abundantly in the *before* — before a long season of grief, of loss, of change, of wintering. In the *what follows*, I've wondered, where did my awe go? What happened to my light? Did the undeniable effervescence of my existence waltz out with my life's summer breeze?

This season, not just the turning of summer into fall into winter, but this season of life is calling me to listen and to look with curiosity, with wonder. The great change of this season is like a reckoning — not just a call but a necessity to open my heart and my mind to awe — not just for inspiration, but to heal.

In his book, *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How it Can Transform Your Life*, Keltner and his research colleagues synthesized awe into eight categories in what they call the "Eight Wonders of Life": the moral beauty of

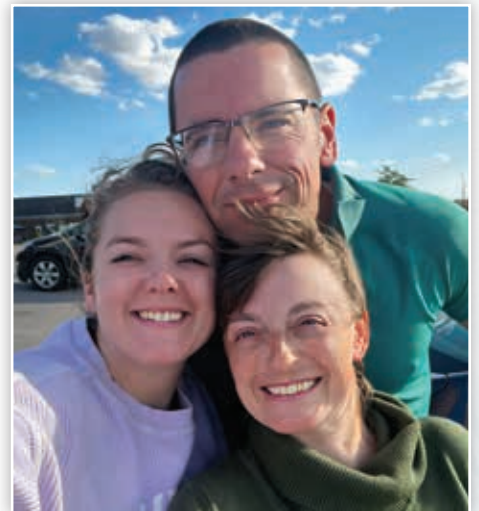
others, collective movement, nature, visual design, music, spirituality, big ideas, and encountering the beginning and end of life.

Each one of these magical wonders of life can be found in the everyday moments we breeze through, detach from, and reject in our state of grief. I know, because it's where I've been.

The middle of the pandemic, what felt like an oddly blissful time for me, soon would become the beginning of my long winter. Shortly after our group of TAPS survivors summited Mt. Kilimanjaro at the end of February 2020, the world went on pause, and I moved in with my, now, fiancé, over 800 miles from everything I knew. Life was a true paradise — a budding relationship, happy dogs, bright Texas sunshine, the hopeful journey toward parenthood, and endless possibilities.

I didn't see winter coming, and I didn't recognize the signs of change that I knew so well. In June of 2020, I began to notice abdominal pain that seemed irregular. After eight weeks of monitoring, I was sent to a specialist — the kind that works at cancer centers. After nearly 11 months and countless tests since that initial appointment, I underwent a diagnostic surgery that removed a tennis ball-sized tumor, one of my ovaries, and a fallopian tube. Within two months of that surgery, we'd completed two rounds of IVF, and I made my way back to the hospital for invasive ovarian cancer treatment surgery that removed my entire reproductive system.

I've wondered, where did my awe go? What happened to **my light**?



# As this wintering has come and will soon go, I'm becoming more and more attuned to **awe in my life.**

In the middle of our IVF cycles, we lost my dear mother-in-law to COVID, and my partner crisscrossed the country almost a dozen times to say his goodbyes and move his sisters to Illinois from Arizona. My health and the pandemic left me stranded in my bedroom, like many others across the globe.

In search of connection and growth, I began a master's program in recreational therapy. There I was, in surgical menopause at the age of 30, deeply grieving and forcing myself to remain grateful that I was still alive. But, I was a mess. I'd slipped into a different state of being.

There are "gaps in the mesh of the everyday world," says Katherine May in *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times*, "and sometimes they open up and you fall through them into somewhere else. Somewhere else runs at a different pace to the here and now, where everyone else carries on. Somewhere else is where ghosts live, concealed from view and only glimpsed by people in the real world. Somewhere else exists at a delay, so that you can't quite keep pace. I fell through, as simply and as discreetly as dust shifts through the

floorboards. I was surprised to find that I felt at home there. Winter had begun."

I didn't know it at the time, but my long winter had arrived. Awe, an emotion that was at the core of my life values, began to decline in my life. I sunk into the dark parts of winter — the cold corners of grief that seem to feel easy for me.

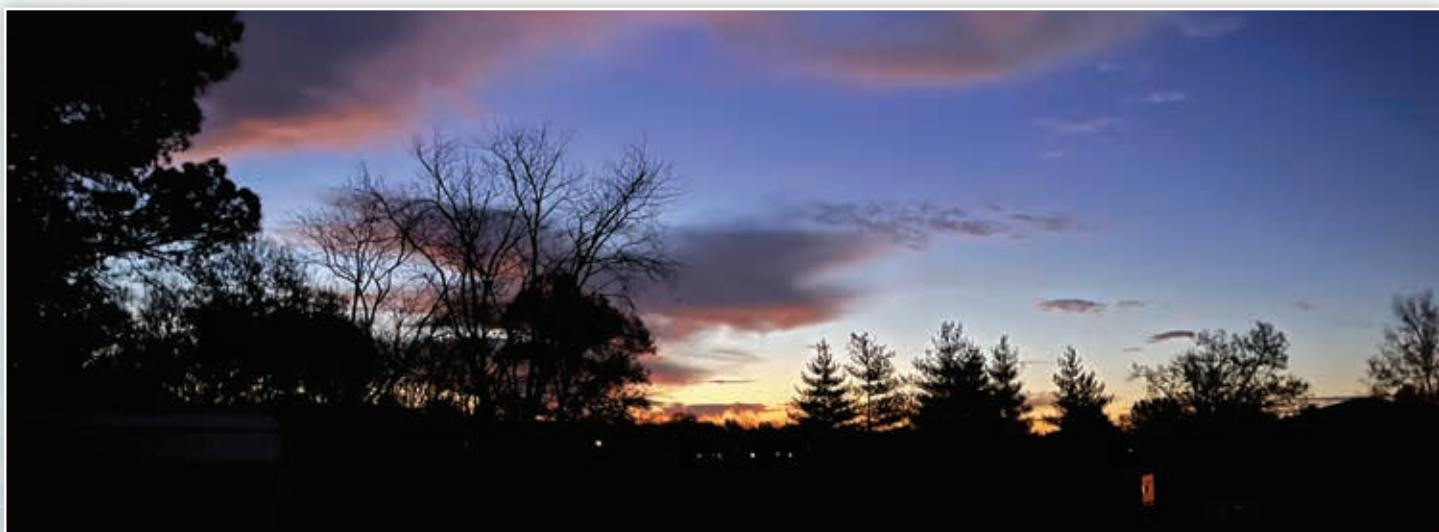
Death, grief, pain — these are all normalities in the life of a survivor. Secondary losses, like the loss of friendships, parts of ourselves, dreams, and so on, can jolt us, then make us question the real emotions that come with them. I thought countless times how silly it was of me to feel so depressed when I'm still alive and I've only lost my health, my time, my sanity, my [insert your loss here].

But, this place that I both loathed and knew so comfortably well, was dimming the light of the world in ways I also knew intimately well. Winter, you see, is but a season. Our world, both within and beyond us, exists in cycles. And, it wasn't until very recently that I opened my heart to the lessons of this winter in my life and the truly healing power of awe.

Cold days of the heart were nearly always warmed by regular check-ins from my colleagues at TAPS. The work of healing is true in the halls of our workplace, for each of you and for each other. "Survivors helping survivors heal" is not simply a turn of phrase, it's a way of life I've come to hold deep gratitude for.

In the midst of the chaos of diagnoses and moves and grief, the strongest survivor I know, my older sister, whispered the offering of life to my partner and me. Laying in the hospital room in recovery, my kind and gentle big sister held my hand and said, "If they tell you you can't on your own, I want to carry a child for you." There it was again, awe.

With this awe again came countless visits to the doctor, but they now included heartbeats, ultrasounds of new life, and anxious anticipation of our miracle. Every moment I spent with my partner, my sister, and my growing child, I felt such awe in the moral beauty of my sister's selflessness, in the magnificence of science and IVF, in the bond that was growing between all four of us — even the brief moments huddled together in the





women’s health center parking lot, winter wind whipping. Awe swirled around us.

On a snowy January morning, our Rae of light was born into the world, and I was enraptured in the essence of being alive. This moment would not be the end of my winter, but the glimmer of sunshine to guide me to a new spring.

Just over a year after the birth of our daughter, our family of three journeyed west on a three-week road trip to the California coast where we encountered countless vistas from our camper and car; visited my partner’s hometown and his mother, uncle, and grandparents’ graves; and made our way through the scenery of his youth. Overlooking Los Padres National Forest on a breathtaking February morning on Frazier Mountain, I turned to find him down on one knee with a world of possibilities between us. There it was again, awe.

Healing is an active choice, a lesson this wintering has taught me, yet again. And, awe has become my greatest medicine.

Awe, this emotion that transcends our understanding of the world, puts life into perspective. Activating the vagus nerve, awe brings on a sense of calm and quiets the Default Mode Network, or the stream of self-focused thoughts, allowing us to expand our sense of wonder and meaning. In turn, awe reduces inflammation and activates the release of oxytocin. These healing properties target some of the greatest challenges for grievers like us.

While I’ve found awe in these profound moments, like our engagement and the birth of our daughter, awe lives in the everyday moments at the dining table with my family, tending to my garden, shopping at the grocery store, in the morning shuffle of my Spotify playlists, and sharing an evening of jokes with my fiancé on our back porch after our toddler’s night-night routine.

As this wintering has come and will soon go, I’m becoming more and more attuned to awe in my life. I’m scheduling it into my daily routine, getting outside at least three times a day, listening to my favorite music

with my daughter, exploring life’s greatest curiosities with my fiancé, and being intentional about the seeds of joy and gratitude I’m sowing, both literally and figuratively, for soon spring will arrive.



**About the Author**

*Rachel is the TAPS Outdoor Programs manager, overseeing the development, implementation, and support of outdoor programming across the organization. As the surviving sibling of Marine LCpl J. Kyle Price, she knows the valleys and peaks of the grief journey, and she is passionate about connecting survivors to the healing power of nature as part of their grief process.*



**Finding Awe in Nature**

Awe awaits you in some of our nation’s most beautiful landscapes. Experience moments of connection and wonder alongside fellow military and veteran survivors through events hosted by TAPS Outdoor Programs. Check our website often; new opportunities are added throughout the year. We look forward to sharing incredible moments with you.

[» taps.org/events](https://taps.org/events)



# WINTER BEGINNINGS

Michele Nelson ★ Surviving Spouse of SMSgt Jeremy Nelson, U.S. Air Force

Kristi Stolzenberg ★ TAPS Magazine Editor

Out of all four seasons, winter is an obvious metaphor for grief — the dark, the cold, the quiet, and the ending it represents. But, what is often overlooked in this metaphor is that winter is just as much a beginning as it is an ending. The same winter that makes itself at home in December, accompanies us nearly three full months into the new year. Though it's easy to assume otherwise because we cannot always see it with our own eyes, life endures through the winter. It may demand a heartiness that other seasons don't, but all winter long — all around us and within us — life is quietly preparing to bloom when spring arrives.

When the winter of 2012 officially arrived, the Nelson family was eight months into their own winter of grief. Michele's husband and Abigail, Katelyn, and Kyler's dad, U.S. Air Force SMSgt Jeremy Nelson, passed away on April 25 of that year, forever changing the course of the family's future in ways that were both impossible to ignore in the early days of grief and impossible to predict.

The latter part of 2012 was a familiar winter haze at the Nelson house — one anyone familiar with grief would recognize. There were matters to attend to — life, school, and society all encouraging a return to normal while their hearts and minds wrestled with

the hows and whys of a completely new normal. They learned to navigate survivor benefits and the network of support around them from friends, family, TAPS, and TAPS' partner organizations. By that same winter, the Nelson family found themselves at Snowball Express, the annual winter experience for surviving families hosted by TAPS Honorary Board Member Gary Sinise and his foundation by the same name. This magical winter setting is where Kyler and Mikayla's story begins.

## The Comfort of Peer Support in the Cold of Winter

Surviving children not only have to manage very grown-up emotions after losing someone close to them, but they have to do it while also juggling all the stress, awkwardness, and confusion of growing up. And, it's easy to see how it might be difficult to relate to peers when their family looks different and their biggest problem is being grounded all weekend. This is what makes TAPS Good Grief Camps, Family Camps — the TAPS Family in general, and special survivor experiences, like Snowball Express, fundamental to growing up with grief. In these settings, surviving children begin to feel like they

**Their grief is acknowledged and validated, allowing the healing to begin, and they find trust in the peers around them in these safe spaces who become their allies in grief.**





## Though it was loss that caused their paths to cross, it is healing that seeded the ground where something beautiful has **only just begun to grow.**

aren't alone — they fit, they belong, and there are kids just like them viewing the world through a bittersweet lens that makes it impossible to ignore the preciousness of life and the special people in it. Their grief is acknowledged and validated, allowing the healing to begin, and they find trust in the peers around them in these safe spaces who become their allies in grief.

At that first 2012 Snowball Express, Kyler Nelson — then a young teen boy suddenly without his father — clicked with a group of peers that quickly became a big part of his life. These friends kept in touch throughout the year and reconnected each December when they all reunited at Snowball Express. They flourished together — truly grew up together — and always looked forward to the time spent together. One of the friends in this group was a girl named Mikayla from Long Island, New York. Mikayla, like Kyler, had lost her dad, HM2 Jeffrey Wiener. He was killed in action in 2005 in Iraq.

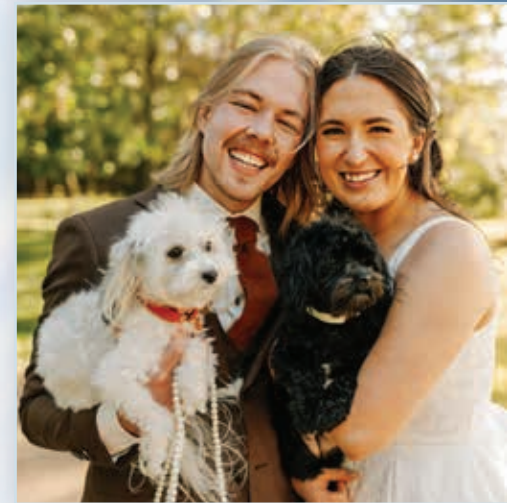
Fast forward to the Snowball Express of Kyler's junior year of high school — several years into the friendship. Michele started to notice Kyler and Mikayla sitting a little closer together than they had the year before. She wondered if there was a spark there. Sure enough, there was. The two started dating long-distance, growing closer despite the miles between where Mikayla was in New York and Kyler's home in Kentucky. They even traveled to be each other's dates to senior prom.

After high school graduation, Mikayla moved to Kentucky to attend the University of Kentucky with Kyler. Four years later, with undergraduate degrees in hand, they were engaged. They married the following October in a beautiful ceremony that honored both of their fallen fathers — the men who, despite not being there that day, were a huge part of bringing Kyler and Mikayla together and giving them a partner to journey with through grief and life. From two tragic endings impacting two different families at different times and places, one new beautiful beginning began to grow the winter Kyler and Mikayla met.

### The Warmth of Spring

Today, Kyler is working on his Ph.D. in pharmaceutical sciences at the University of Kentucky Pharmacy School, and Mikayla works as a special education teacher. In the fall of this year, they welcomed a baby girl — a bright light in their lives and the lives of their family members.

Kyler and Mikayla's bond is an incredibly powerful representation of the healing that can be found in peer support. Since they first met in the winter of 2012, they've supported each other, helped each other grow, and been each other's refuge. Though it was loss that caused their paths to cross, it is healing that seeded the ground where something beautiful has only just begun to grow.



# THE EMPTY Chair

Darcie D. Sims, Ph.D. , CHT, CT, GMS

There's an empty chair in our house, and I am not sure what to do with it. It's been empty a long time and although we've moved more than a few times since it became empty, we still haul it around with us. It's not a particularly classic chair or even a very pretty one, and it is empty...all the time. No one moves it; no one suggests putting it away. No one sits in it. It's just an empty chair.

As a military family, we are used to having members of the family in faraway places for long periods of time. My father would be gone for up to a year or even two. His chair was often empty at the table. My husband's military career took him away for many months at a time, and his chair was often empty. And then, when our daughter was commissioned in the military, we knew her chair would also

be empty at times. So empty chairs at our house are not an uncommon thing, but this chair — this chair — should never have been empty.

As the holidays approach, I am always faced with the task of deciding what to do with our empty chair. Should we put it away for the season? Should we decorate it? Or should we just ignore it? One holiday season, we did decide to put it away. Even though it was an empty chair, it left an even bigger empty space.

We've tried to ignore it, but its emptiness is very loud and it is hard to miss an empty chair in a room filled with people sitting in all the other chairs. An empty chair is not invisible. One year we decided to include it in our holiday decorating scheme. That led to some interesting discussions.

Should we put a special holiday pillow in it? What about tossing a colorful quilt or afghan over the back? Should we put something in the chair? But nothing we tried could fill the emptiness of that chair. It just sat silent like a sentinel, waiting for something...or someone.

It took us many years of living day in and day out with that empty chair to finally figure out what to do with it. Our empty chair is pulled up to the table and a single rose is placed on the plate, a symbol of everlasting love. The empty chair represents all of those who are not with us for this occasion but who live within our hearts forever. For us, it is not a sad sight because we know that empty chair represents a love we have known and shared. And with that gift, our family is forever blessed.

The empty chair REPRESENTS ALL OF THOSE WHO ARE NOT WITH US FOR THIS OCCASION BUT WHO LIVE WITHIN OUR HEARTS FOREVER.



## Every Survivor Has a Story, Let TAPS Help You Tell Yours

Since 1994, *TAPS Magazine* has been the keeper of powerful stories of real-life heroes, the grief that took hold when we lost them, and uplifting accounts from the path toward healing. These pages are peer support in print — bringing comfort to those who read them and those who wrote them. You have a special story to tell, and TAPS is here to support you when you're ready to tell it.

[» taps.org/shareyourstory](https://taps.org/shareyourstory)

SO, IF YOUR HOLIDAY TABLE WILL HAVE AN EMPTY CHAIR THIS YEAR, REMEMBER THAT IT IS NOT TRULY AN EMPTY SPACE. THAT PLACE IS STILL occupied by the love and joy OF THE ONE WHO SAT IN IT.

We join hands in thanksgiving, completing the circle with the empty chair within our family circle, for even though death may have come, love never goes away.

So, if your holiday table will have an empty chair this year, remember that it is not truly an empty space. That place is still occupied by the love and joy of the one who sat in it. Don't hide that chair away. You may not wish to bring it to the table as we do, but take time this holiday season to remember the laughter, the joy, the love, and the light of those who are no longer within hug's reach but whose love still fills us with gratitude.

Join hands around your table, however small, and say a prayer of thanksgiving — for the love you have known and still hold deep within your heart. You are rich beyond measure for having had a chair filled. Don't let death rob you of the heart space that love keeps.

We are a family circle, some chairs filled and others not, broken by death, but mended by love.

*This article was originally published in a 2014 special edition of TAPS Magazine.*



**About the Author**

*Dr. Darcie Sims was a bereaved parent and child, nationally certified thanatologist, certified pastoral bereavement specialist, and licensed psychotherapist and hypnotherapist. She was the cofounder and longtime president of Grief, Inc., a grief consulting business. She was also an internationally recognized speaker and writer, having authored seven books and numerous articles, including many for TAPS, during her time on the staff.*

---



# 2025 EVENT UPDATES

We're excited to share some updates about our Survivor Seminars for 2025, which we believe will enhance our mission to support, honor, and heal. Our national seminars will return to a format that allows for more personalized and intimate gatherings. This also allows us to better meet the unique needs of those grieving a loss by suicide while providing the broader TAPS community with time and space for all to come together in Arlington, VA, for Memorial Day weekend activities and TAPS programs.

## 2025 TAPS NATIONAL SEMINARS

**NATIONAL MILITARY  
SURVIVOR SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP  
MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND 2025**  
Arlington, VA – Open to All Survivors

**NATIONAL MILITARY SUICIDE LOSS  
SURVIVOR SEMINAR & GOOD GRIEF CAMP**  
JULY 25-27, 2025  
Phoenix, AZ – Open to Suicide-Loss Survivors

**ACCOMMODATIONS:** Hotel rooms for both national events will be offered at a discounted group rate. Information about reserving your hotel rooms will be available on our website.

**LIMITED ATTENDANCE:** Given the record attendance for our 30th Anniversary National Military Survivor Seminar in 2024, we understand the importance of creating a close-knit, supportive setting. To provide a more intimate experience, we will cap attendance at the 2025 National Military Survivor Seminar, with preference given to first-time attendees. This focus on creating a meaningful experience for all participants will extend to the National Military Suicide Loss Survivor Seminar in Phoenix, where we will also set a cap on attendance.

**FLIGHTS:** Through the generosity of the Fisher House Foundation, TAPS will offer a limited number of free Hero Miles flights on a first-come, first-served basis for those who have not previously used Hero Miles.

As always, TAPS provides a variety of other programs throughout the year to help you connect, find healing, and build community. This includes TAPS Togethers, Care Groups, Women's and Men's Retreats, Young Adult Programs, the Online Community, Outdoor Programs, and the TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing. We also invite you to share your favorite professional sports teams with us to be part of the Sports and Entertainment program at TAPS! Scan the QR code to view available events, including those listed here.

## 2025 TAPS REGIONAL SEMINARS

**WESTERN REGIONAL  
MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR**  
AUG. 22-24  
Phoenix, AZ

**SOUTHERN REGIONAL  
MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR**  
SEPT. 26-28  
San Antonio, TX

**NORTHEAST REGIONAL  
MILITARY SURVIVOR SEMINAR**  
NOV. 14-16  
Buffalo, NY

**NEW FOR 2025:** Hotel rooms for all regional events will be hosted by TAPS for those who are: (1) first-time attendees to a TAPS Military Survivor Seminar; or (2) attending the TAPS Peer Mentor training offered at the seminar. All other attendees will be offered a discounted group rate at our host hotel. Information about reserving your hotel rooms will be available on our website.



We'll share more details on upcoming events soon, and we're here for any questions along the way. Thank you for being a part of the TAPS Family; we are always here to support you.

**ALASKA IDITAROD  
SURVIVOR EXPERIENCE**  
FEB. 26 - MARCH 2  
Apply by Dec. 20

**SELF-FUNDED  
7-NIGHT MEXICAN RIVIERA CRUISE**  
OCT. 10-17

>> [taps.org/events](https://taps.org/events)

# PAY IT FORWARD

As 2024 draws to a close, we reflect on not only the moments that filled our 30th anniversary year, but 30 years of shared moments. Each one of you — your life, love, and loss — has shaped the story of TAPS and forged paths for survivors walking alongside you and following behind you. Your legacy is why the TAPS mission endures.

TAPS has always been about survivors supporting survivors — reaching out a hand to a fellow survivor when you feel ready to do so. This peer support empowers survivors like you to rebuild their lives and find hope after loss. It was here for you when you first came to TAPS, and with your help, it will always be here for any survivor from the military and veteran community.

We invite you to join fellow members of the TAPS Family in paying support forward, passing on the compassion, care, and resources we received — and continue to receive — from TAPS to the next generation of military and veteran survivors. Here are just a few ways you can help:

**MAKE A ONE-TIME OR RECURRING DONATION TO TAPS** by scanning the QR code or visiting [taps.org/donate](https://taps.org/donate). Your donation will directly impact critical TAPS programs.

**SHARE YOUR TAPS STORY** on social media and with friends, neighbors, colleagues, family members, and even total strangers who may inquire about your TAPS hat or shirt. Your story is a powerful testament to our mission, and it can encourage others to honor fallen heroes and their survivors through a donation to TAPS.

**PARTICIPATE IN TAPS FUNDRAISING EVENTS.** Whether a TAPS-wide fundraiser, like this year's September 30-Mile Challenge, or a fundraiser you host on your own to mark a significant date, like a birthday or anniversary, fundraising for TAPS lets you share your hero's story while supporting fellow survivors.

A donation to TAPS is the continuation of a legacy. You honor the hero you lost by supporting other survivors in the military and veteran community, and you pay forward the compassion, programming, and resources TAPS provided for you when you needed it most.

We are grateful for your support and the many ways you contribute to the TAPS Family. Your legacy, and your hero's legacy, are important parts of ours, and they are hope for the survivors who will follow in your footsteps.



>> [taps.org/donate](https://taps.org/donate)

# You're not crazy —

## PART 6

## Living and Grieving Together

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D. ★ TAPS Advisory Board

*This is the final article in a six-part series. Parts one through five were published in the summer and fall 2023 issues and the spring, summer, and fall 2024 issues of TAPS Magazine.*

In the early days after the death of someone you love dearly, it's normal for this step to seem like a ridiculous impossibility. You feel so raw and torn apart — you can't imagine surviving, let alone returning to any semblance of "normal life."

But then the first couple of weeks pass, the funeral has been held, and there it is — normal life, staring you in the face. How can it be? You're still torn apart. You're still immersed in shock and numbness. You're still shattered — completely crazed by grief. But nonetheless, you have to keep getting out of bed, walking the dog, paying the bills, and trying to eat. It's crazy making.

As unbelievable as it seems, life, as they say, goes on. Your inner world may have stopped, but the outer world has not. And even your own life — with all its daily needs and responsibilities — hasn't stopped either. So here you are, living while grieving.

If you're still in early survival mode, you may not be ready to reflect on the content of this article right now. That is, not just surviving but engaging with each day in life-affirming ways even as you continue to grieve and mourn. If so, it is perfectly OK to come back to it at a later time.

As with all things in grief, you and only you get to decide if and when you're in a place to consider the ideas outlined here. But, if you feel ready to begin thinking about the longer term, let's keep going.

### Grief Is Forever

People often ask me how long grief lasts. The hard truth is that grief is forever. As long as you love the person who died, you will continue to grieve them. Because grief is love, grief doesn't discretely end.

But thank goodness, grief does change over time. It softens. The intense early pain grows duller, then eventually settles into the background — especially if you've been actively mourning along the way. Like a serious, but healed wound on the body, it's always there, but it no longer demands your constant attention. Nor, does it hurt so much.

Love doesn't end. It learns to live with the absence. I promise you, you will feel better. Your life will feel normal again, even though it will be a new normal.

### Grief and Truly Living Can Coexist

You've already learned that you have no choice but to keep living after a significant loss. You live even as you grieve.

True, in the beginning, that living is merely surviving one day at a time, one second at a time. But as you begin to integrate the absence of the person who died, over time and through active mourning, your survival mode can start to move toward a truly living mode.

Here are a few quality-of-life indicators — signs of truly living:

- Stepping away from judgment, control, worry, and conflict
- Listening to your intuition
- Experiencing renewal in solitude
- Acknowledging the sacredness and privilege of being alive
- Being your best self
- Enjoying a sense of well-being
- Feeling at peace
- Giving and receiving love
- Feeling gratitude and appreciation
- Smiling and laughing
- Experiencing playfulness and levity
- Feeling a sense of meaning and purpose
- Feeling connected with the natural world

**Your inner world may have stopped,  
but the outer world has not.**

# You're grieving

When you feel gratitude and appreciation, for example, you're truly living. When you give and receive love, you're truly living. When you enjoy a sense of well-being and feel meaning and purpose, you're truly living.

Truly living means being present in your life in ways that acknowledge the good and the beautiful. It means bringing your awareness to the opportunities for pleasure and joy available to you each day. It's an intentional way of embracing the moments — be they hours, days, months, or years — ahead of you.

## Everything Belongs

Of course, truly living also means being present and fully engaging with the difficult experiences in life, including death and grief. Love and attachment are indeed wonderful, but the circumstances of life are impermanent. No matter how devotedly we love and try to safeguard our attachments, things change.

People get sick. People age. People die — pets too. People betray us. We betray ourselves. Passions ebb and flow. Fortunes rise and fall. And no matter what

happens, the world just keeps turning. Change is actually more of a constant than any stability we may experience.

Even though I do, in fact, think we're born to live and love, we can also get better at acknowledging that loss is also a big and unavoidable part of human life. Loss isn't really crazy. It's normal, too. Pretending that life is all roses isn't truly living — it's denial.

When bad things happen, there are three paths. One is denial. Another is permanent, all-pervasive grief and pessimism. And the third is experiencing and mourning life's losses even as you continue to truly live.

The human experience includes joys, hard work, challenges, and heartbreaks in a crazy mixture. The third path is the one that acknowledges that everything belongs. Truly living means being open to and acknowledging all of it while, at the same time, maintaining the belief that it's a privilege to be on this earth for a short while and to continue to live and love every precious day.

Some people come to grief and think their lives are over. They are so torn apart and in so much pain that they cannot imagine life will ever be good again.

The grief and darkness take over, and for a time there is little more than pain and sorrow.

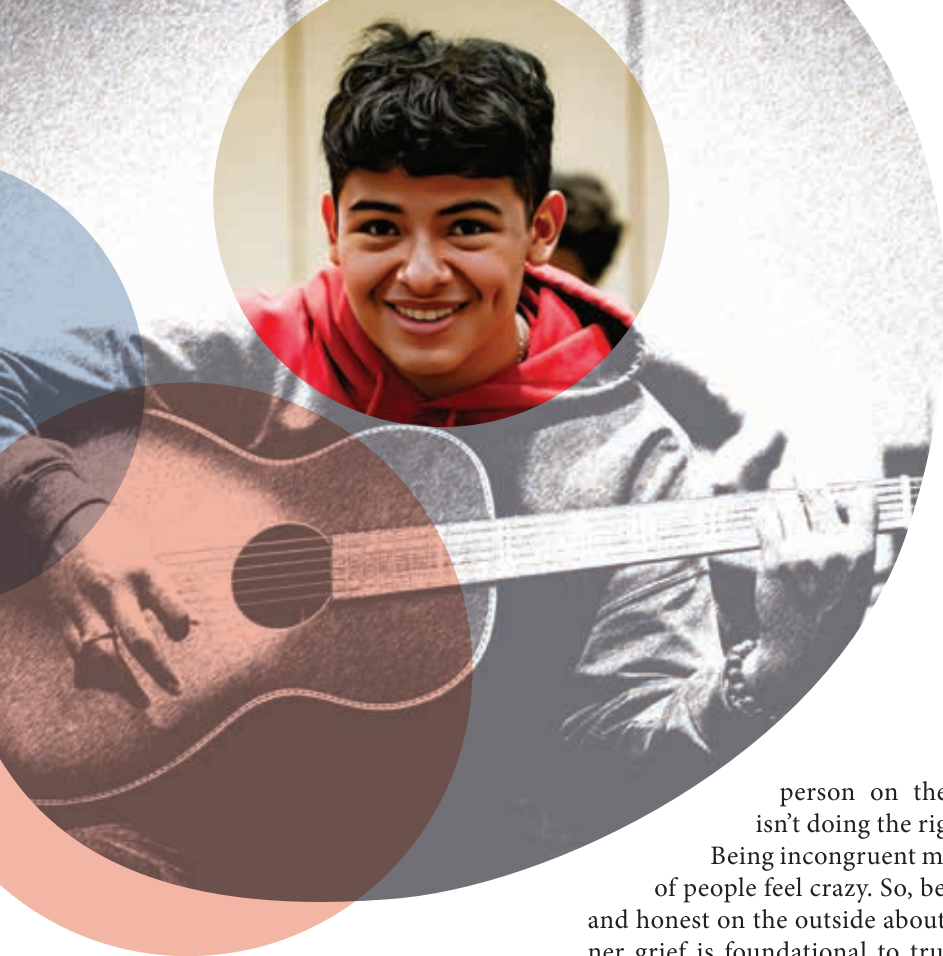
The ideas in the previous articles in this series help you through this period. They help you survive your time of darkness. But eventually, your grief work becomes developing the understanding that grieving and truly living are not mutually exclusive. You can do both at the same time.

## Authentic Mourning Is Truly Living

Grief is love, and love is life. I'm sure you agree that love is essential to truly living. Well, the corollary is also true — truly grieving through active, open mourning is also essential to truly living.

In psychology, there's this concept called congruency. It means acting on the outside in alignment with how you feel on the inside.





Nurturing love can be accomplished with little things like:

- Meeting a friend for coffee
- Sending a handwritten card to someone special to you
- Saying yes when someone invites you out for dinner
- Surprising someone with a gift
- Giving a genuine compliment

More broadly, connection with others grows with the building blocks of proximity — being in the same room together, repetition — spending time together frequently, and quality time — doing things together that allow you to have fun and share things that matter. Don't forget that talking about your loss with your loved ones is also part of nurturing love.

Adding more meaning to life is as simple as asking yourself, "What are some ways of spending time that feel meaningful to me?" Here are some self-care activities that can feel meaningful:

- Taking a walk outdoors
- Gardening
- Cooking
- Making art
- Taking a class
- Learning a new skill
- Volunteering
- Helping a neighbor or family member

person on the outside isn't doing the right thing. Being incongruent makes a lot of people feel crazy. So, being open and honest on the outside about your inner grief is foundational to truly living. In other words, for you, active, authentic mourning is now an inextricable part of truly living.

It means speaking and behaving in accordance with your true feelings and values.

Congruency is a really good thing to pay attention to because it helps you feel right with yourself. When you're congruent, you're living your truth. You're being honest with yourself and others. You're in harmony inside and out.

The opposite of congruency is disconnection and disharmony. When you feel one way and act another, it feels wrong. It is like you are two separate people, and the

### Seeking More Love, Meaning, Awe, and Joy Is Truly Living

While in early grief, it's normal and necessary to focus on the foundational-level needs of survival. In the longer run it's not at all crazy for you to think that — even as you're grieving — you can also work on the higher-level experiences of love, meaning, awe, and joy.

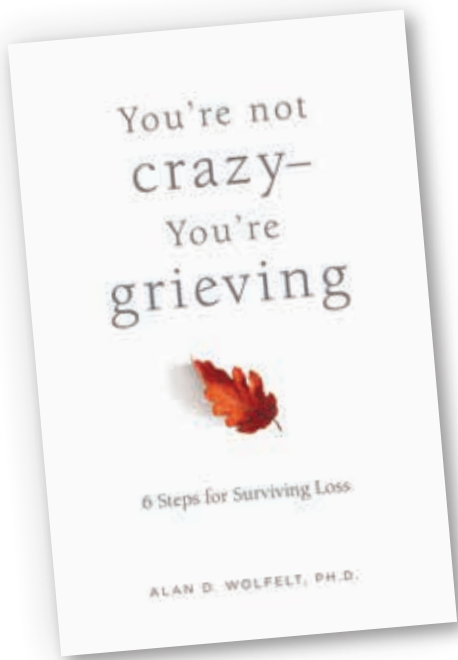


#### TAPS Together

TAPS Together are the perfect way to connect with fellow survivors in your local area when you feel ready to weave your grief into a full, authentic life after loss. These one-day events can be anything from a coffee meetup to an adventurous day in nature, and they set the scene for a shared experience with peers who know, without explanation, the emotions you carry through your life after loss. Scan the QR code to learn more, find an upcoming TAPS Together event near you, or express your interest in hosting an event.

[taps.org/tapstogether](https://taps.org/tapstogether)





Studies show that awe-filled moments boost your mood, improve your physical health, help you think more critically, foster generosity, and help you feel more connected to others and humanity. So thinking about what makes you feel awe and adding some awe to your daily routine — even through something as simple as spending time outdoors or watching YouTube nature videos — is a lovely way to improve your quality of life.

Finally, you need and deserve joy. It's not uncommon for grieving people to experience some of what I refer to as the "joy-guilt" syndrome. This is where you have a moment of joy, but then feel a twinge of guilt. "How can I be happy when they're not here?" you might think. However, the real work at hand is allowing yourself to continue to mourn while knowing that experiencing all emotions — including joy — is central to being human and finding continued meaning in life and living.

### Closing Thoughts

After the death of someone loved, you aren't crazy — you're grieving. And you're understandably shattered — which is crazy in the truest sense of the word. It's OK to feel crazy in grief. In fact, it can be empowering to own your crazy. Yes, it is painful to love and to lose. But at the same time, it's also the greatest privilege I know of.

While wrapping up this article series, I realized that — in English — we also use the word "crazy" to mean love. "I'm crazy about you," we say. Or, "I love [someone or something] like crazy."

In this sense, the people and things we go crazy for are our passions. They are what give our lives meaning and purpose. When you are feeling crazy about something, it means you care about it deeply. This kind of crazy is how you know you are alive. As you step toward truly living even as you grieve, I urge you to remember to honor and follow your crazy.

Grieve like crazy. Mourn like crazy. Love like crazy. Live like crazy. I hope we meet one day.



#### About the Author

*Dr. Alan Wolfelt is recognized as one of North America's leading death educators and grief counselors. His books on grief for both caregivers and grieving people — including You're Not Crazy — You're Grieving, from which this article series is adapted — have sold more than a million copies worldwide and are translated into many languages. He is the founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and a TAPS Advisory Board Member. Visit [centerforloss.com](http://centerforloss.com) or email Dr. Wolfelt at [drwolfelt@centerforloss.com](mailto:drwolfelt@centerforloss.com) to learn more.*

PHOTOS: TAPS ARCHIVES; DR. ALAN D. WOLFELT

If you find meaning in certain loss-focused activities — such as volunteering for a cause related to the death or reaching out to someone else grieving the same loss — that counts, too.

Building the feeling of awe into your routines takes a little more thought, but it's more than worth it. Awe is that expansive feeling you get standing near the edge of the Grand Canyon, looking at the starry night sky, holding a newborn baby, or listening to an incredible musician. It's almost unbelievable that the world contains such amazing things.



# Community &

# CONNECTIONS

This season and always, TAPS understands the needs of a grieving heart are not universal. We offer a variety of online and in-person opportunities to make sure you have the supportive community you need to heal and grow.

## Upcoming **EVENTS**

TAPS events offer opportunities for healing and personal growth. Whether a weekend-long seminar, peer-group retreat, family event, or transformative experience in the beauty of nature, there is something for every survivor.

Be sure to check [TAPS.org/events](https://TAPS.org/events) often; events are added throughout the year.



[TAPS.org/events](https://TAPS.org/events)

## More ways to **CONNECT**

### ▶ **TAPS CARE GROUPS**

TAPS Care Groups bring the comfort of TAPS to your local community with meetings happening all throughout the year. These recurring meetings provide time to talk, opportunities to listen, and a comforting reminder that we are not alone in grief. Scan the QR code to find a peer-led group near you.



[TAPS.org/caregroups](https://TAPS.org/caregroups)

### ▶ **TAPS TOGETHERS**

Looking for a way to connect with survivors in your local community outside of Care Groups? TAPS Togethers are one-day, organized social events led by TAPS staff members or a survivor like you to share experiences and expand the local community of support. Scan the QR code to share an idea for an event near you.



[TAPS.org/tapstogethers](https://TAPS.org/tapstogethers)

### ▶ **TAPS ONLINE GROUPS**

No matter where you are in the world, you can access TAPS through Online Groups. Groups are organized by relationship to the fallen, cause of death, and peer group and occur at a variety of convenient times, giving you the option to attend one or multiple groups that meet your needs and your schedule.



[TAPS.org/onlinegroups](https://TAPS.org/onlinegroups)

### ▶ **IN-PERSON & ONLINE WORKSHOPS**

TAPS offers in-person and online opportunities for personal growth that help you heal, build resilience, find meaning and gratitude after loss, and nurture relationships. From Peer Mentor training to Theatre Lab and a diverse selection of webinars and workshop series through the TAPS Institute for Hope and Healing®, we have courses to support your growth through grief.



[TAPS.org/workshops](https://TAPS.org/workshops)



# In the Silence of Grief

## *The Tapestry of Love and Loss*

In the quiet corners of my heart, where the echoes of cherished voices reside, I find solace in the tapestry of memories woven by those I've lost. Their absence, though profoundly felt, becomes a canvas upon which I paint the colors of their laughter, their wisdom, and the love that forever lingers.

I allow myself the grace to grieve, understanding that each tear is a tribute to the depth of my connection. In the silent conversations with my soul, I navigate the realms of sorrow and joy, honoring the fullness of the lives they led. Their stories become my sanctuary, a place where I find strength amidst the quiet moments of reflection.

I remember and celebrate, weaving tales of their existence into the fabric of my being. Through the shared smiles, the walks in the garden, and the turn of well-worn pages, their essence dances around

me, reminding me that love transcends the boundaries of life and death.

In the embrace of kindred spirits, I discover the power of shared grief. We speak a language born of loss, finding comfort in the understanding gaze and the unspoken words. Together, we create a sanctuary where vulnerability is met with compassion, and where the weight of sorrow becomes a little lighter.

I nurture my body and soul, recognizing the importance of self-care. Each step I take, every nourishing meal, and every moment of rest becomes a testament to my resilience. As I care for myself, I honor the love that once emanated from those I've lost, understanding that my well-being is a reflection of their enduring legacy.

I create memorials, tangible tokens of remembrance. A blooming garden, a cherished book, or a handwritten letter

— each tribute is a whispered promise that their influence lives on. In these gestures, I find a sense of closure, a gentle acknowledgment of the beautiful tapestry they've woven into my life.

I learn to navigate the labyrinth of grief, understanding that healing is not a destination but a journey. I am patient with myself, embracing the ebb and flow of emotions, and allowing time to mend the fractures within my soul.

In the quiet corners of my heart, where grief and love entwine, I discover the resilience of the human spirit. I am kind to myself, acknowledging that grief is not a sign of weakness but a testament to the profound connections that shape our existence. And as I move forward, I carry the laughter, the lessons, and the enduring love of those I've lost, knowing that they are forever a part of the beautiful tapestry of my life.

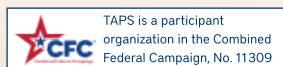
RAMESH P. ELAIDAM ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED THIS ARTICLE ON MEDIUM ON OCT. 21, 2023. IT HAS BEEN MODIFIED SLIGHTLY FOR BREVITY.





800-959-TAPS (8277) ★ TAPS.org

The Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors offers comfort, care, and resources to all those grieving the death of a military or veteran loved one.



**TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS**

3033 Wilson Boulevard, Third Floor  
Arlington, VA 22201

NON PROFIT ORG  
US POSTAGE  
PAID  
Stevens Point, WI  
PERMIT NO. 272

AS WE ENTER THIS HOLIDAY SEASON, MAY IT GENTLY BRING US HOPE FOR THE YEAR AHEAD AND FILL OUR HEARTS WITH GRATITUDE FOR THE CONNECTIONS, SUPPORT, AND MOMENTS OF GROWTH WE'VE SHARED IN 2024. WITHIN OUR TAPS FAMILY, WE FIND COMFORT IN KNOWING WE ARE NEVER ALONE IN OUR GRIEF, AND THE LIVES AND SERVICE OF OUR LOVED ONES WILL FOREVER BE HONORED AND REMEMBERED.

WITH HOPE FOR A SEASON OF COMFORT AND WARMTH.

*Your TAPS Family*



PHOTO: TAPS ARCHIVES