

What Companionship Is and Isn't

Eleven Tenets of Companionship the Bereaved

Reprinted with permission from *The Handbook for Companionship the Mourner; Eleven Essential Principles* by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., with comments by Senior Chaplains Merle and Cindy Meyers.

For more information on grief and healing and to order Dr. Wolfelt's books and DVDs, visit www.centerforloss.com.



Tenet One: **Companionship is about being present to another person's pain; it is not about taking away the pain.**

Companionship is about bearing witness to the pain of others. They are allowed to tell their story raw and real to a trusted listener without the answers or the judgments and doesn't answer all the "whys." Companionship offers space for grievers to painfully remove their bandage for a time, re-exposing the deep sorrow that is their wound. It is the exposure to fresh air and light that facilitates healing. It is the practice of telling and retelling the story that processes the grief and mends the torn heart.

*"I'm sorry I can say nothing
More consoling to you,
For love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing
Compared to love in dreams."*

– Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov

Tenet Two: Companioning is about going to the wilderness of the soul with another human being; it is not about thinking you are responsible for finding the way out.

After a death or other significant life loss, the griever has crossed The Great Divide, and is in the wilderness on the other side. Before, we always knew which way the river ran. We knew the destination. We had hopes, plans, and dreams about the journey on the river, and when we would arrive at our destination. Things were somewhat civilized. Now, the river runs in a different direction. We don't know when it will become a raging river, traveling violently through rocks and debris. We don't know when it will transcend to a peaceful, meandering stream or at what point the peace may again be interrupted. Any destination or new life at the river's end seems unlikely. But letting go, allowing the current of grief to guide our journey, we will observe, learn, and even test and adjust some of our long-held beliefs and boundaries that had served us well before The Great Divide was crossed.

Tenet Three: Companioning is about honoring the spirit; it is not about focusing on the intellect.

Using the pumping heart as an illustration for the "heart" of how one feels, the distance between success and failure in processing one's grief is about 14 inches—the distance between the head and the heart. We APPROACH the pain where it resides, in the "heart," the emotions. To intellectualize is to AVOID the emotional pain and the grief process, burying the pain alive only to resurface later in a form not recognizable or manageable. Intellectualizing prevents personal growth and denies the tools to make the griever able to cope and adapt. Adaptability is needed to be better prepared to persevere through future life losses. When the person's grief may take the lead, it ebbs and flows with periods of focusing on the pain of the loss, intervals of rest, then allowing for periods of restoration to focus on daily life.

Tenet Four: Companioning is about listening with the heart; it is not about analyzing with the head.

Listening means active listening, always in-the-moment, not formulating what you'll say next in your head while the person is sharing. Much of the griever's thoughts about the future revolve around fear. Many memories about the past are regret. It is best to be in-the-moment with the griever, listening (hearing) with the heart engaged.

Tenet Five: Companioning is about bearing witness to the struggle with others; it is not about judging or directing these struggles.

To bear witness is to hold, validate, and maintain human dignity to the griever's feelings and story. There is no need for advice, opinion, or any conclusion.

Tenet Six: Companioning is about walking alongside; it is not about leading or being led.

Dr. Wolfelt states that the mourner is not a patient needing to be treated. He has identified that the word "treat" comes from the Latin root word "tractare" (our word tractor), which means "to drag." This seems less than empowering for the mourner. Simply accompanying strengthens the griever's walk.

Tenet Seven: Companioning is about discovering the gifts of sacred silence; it does not mean filing up every moment with words.

When recently companioning a young widow in a group setting, as happens so often, there was a period of awkward silence. This can be during a story about the death, or after the companion validates and normalizes the story. "So, Karen, what I heard you say is that your husband's decline and death was unexpected and happened in minutes. You shared that your pastor cannot answer why God let this happen, and God has gone silent. Is that what I heard you say?" After a long period with her eyes painfully staring through mine, she nodded and softly said, "Yes." This helplessness in the wilderness needs to be embraced, and outwardly expressed to mend a torn heart. Honor the awkward silence.

Tenet Eight: Companioning is about being still; it is not about frantic movement forward.

Being still is being a peaceful presence. Does he want you close, or does he want you across the room? Does she want conversation, or silence? There is no time limit for grief, and each person's grief is unique.

Tenet Nine: Companioning is about respecting disorder and confusion; it is not about order and logic.

Grief does NOT come in nice, neat, sequential stages. Grief is much messier than that. With grief there is not a box for everything. When a griever gets hit with a grief surge, a devastating tsunami of sadness with no warning after six months of much smaller waves, it is easy to feel that one is not making progress; "I should be past this (stage)." Yet the griever is right on track. This is normal and natural. When the brain realizes the griever or traumatized person is in a safe place, it will pull up more buried emotional pain to work through (process), months to years later. This is part of healing.

Tenet Ten: Companioning is about learning from others; it is not about teaching them.

"Do we need to be the hero of their story, or is our goal to support them in being their own heroes?" We honor their journey. It is the time to normalize their physical and emotional pain, not minimize it with clichés like "Well at least...", "God will not give you more than you can bear," or "It's going to be okay." We stay in our lane, going alongside, present moment by moment, not planning the outcome.

Tenet Eleven: Companioning is about compassionate curiosity; it is not about expertise.

It's been said, "Noah's Ark was built by amateurs; the Titanic was built by professionals." People influential to us in the field of trauma and grief have been fellow companions (those with a calling, experience, credentialed or not), counselors, therapists, psychiatrists, and chaplains. They stand out because working with the traumatized and bereaved is a matter of the heart. "You are not called because you're qualified, you are qualified because you are called." If it isn't a matter of the heart, then it is little more than case management. If it is always a matter of the heart, we all grow. We welcome you to this work.

