
“Only a small minority of those who experience Traumatic Grief after the violent death of a loved one will become psychologically disabled with Prolonged Grief. The vast majority of those bereaved after violent dying will show spontaneous improvement following the early months of distress and will not require psychotherapy. Instead, high levels of early distress would benefit from the supportive presence of an empathic and “restored” companion – from someone who suffered a similar loss and can now offer consistent guidance and support.” Dr. Ted Rynearson

THE FOUNDATIONS OF COMPANIONING

Dr. Wolfelt (quotes italicized) has broken down the word “companion” to its original Latin roots which are “messmate:” *com* for “with” and *pan* for “bread.” This is someone you would share a meal with. In the ancient world, to let one sit down with you and eat was a symbol of acceptance of the one invited.

The New Testament Biblical Greek uses the word *koinonea* for “fellowship,” which means “association,” “community,” and “benefaction.”

The companioning model is anchored in the “teach me” perspective. It is about learning and observing. In fact, the meaning of “observance” comes to us from ritual. It means not only to “watch out for” but also “to keep and honor,” and “to bear witness.” The caregiver’s awareness of this need to learn is the essence of true companioning.

If your desire is to support a fellow human being in grief, you must create a “safe place” for people to embrace their feelings of profound loss. This “safe place” is a “cleaned-out, compassionate heart.” It is the open heart that allows you to be truly present to another human being’s intimate pain.

As a bereavement caregiver, I am a companion, not a “guide”-which assumes a knowledge of another’s soul I cannot claim. To companion our fellow humans means to watch and learn. Our awareness of the need to learn (as opposed to our tendency to play the expert) is the essence of true companioning.

A central role of the companion to a mourner is related to the art of honoring stories. Honoring stories requires that we slow down, turn inward and really listen as people acknowledge the reality of loss, embrace pain, review memories, and search for meaning.

The philosophy and practice of companioning interfaces naturally with hospitality. Hospitality is the essence of knowing how to live in society.

Among the ancient Greeks, hospitality was a necessary element of day-to-day life. In a land where borders were permeable, it was important to get to know one’s neighbors as potential friends. One way to do this was to share meals together.

First, the guest and host would pour a libation to the gods. Then, they would eat ("break bread") together. Then, after the guest was full, they would tell each other their stories with the guest going first. Often, tears were shed as their stories were highly personal; battles, family, histories, and life tragedies all were a part of these stories.

After the evening together, the host and guest were potential allies. Still today, often times "breaking bread together" and "telling personal stories" are key elements in companioning people in grief.

Henri Nouwen once elegantly described hospitality as the "creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy." He observed that hospitality is not about trying to change people but offering them space where change can take place. He astutely noted that "Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own."

Also interesting to note is that the Oxford English Dictionary defines companion as "to accompany, to associate, to comfort, to be familiar with." This definition is actually illustrative of what it means to companion. In one sense, the notion is of comforting someone, which relates clearly to what a mourner needs and deserves. In another sense, the notion is of knowing someone, being familiar with that person's experiences and needs; this notion clearly relates to the process of becoming familiar (being open to being taught by another), which can take place through the telling of stories.

In sum, companioning is the art of bringing comfort to another by becoming familiar with her story (experiences and needs). To companion, the grieving person, therefore, is to break bread literally or figuratively, as well as listen to the story of the other. Of course, this may well involve tears and sorrow and tends to involve a give and take of story: I tell you my story and you tell me yours. It is a sharing in a deep and profound way.

Reprinted with permission by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., with opening comments by the editors. For more information on grief and healing and to order Dr. Wolfelt's books or training DVD's visit www.centerforloss.com.



**Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble.
- Philippians 4:4**