

# Through the Valley of Grief as a Family

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I sat in a vacuum of air space, the calm before the storm, waiting to see the reactions of my four children. My husband and I had just uttered the words that would change their lives forever. “Auntie is dead.”

For an eternity of moments, nobody moved. All the oxygen just left the room.

Silence.

Gasp.

An avalanche of sobs.

My husband held my son, I held my youngest and my oldest held her sister. As a family we grieved.

Finally, my oldest asked the words everyone was avoiding. “She killed herself?”

Experts will tell you that when someone commits suicide, you experience the normal valley of grief, only all of the feelings are 10 times greater. Helping your family walk through times of grief is hard at best and on the edge of impossible on some days.



I never appreciated the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. When I did read it, I thought that the ‘valley of the shadow of death’ was for when I was on death’s door. In the months after my sister in law’s death, as I helped my family and my in laws grieve, I discovered the truth of this Psalm in new ways; not just for me, but for my family.

**Walk** – One of the most important things I discovered is that everyone grieves in different ways. There are five stages of grief, but they are non-linear, and people pop in and out of them. One of the best things I did for my older children and extended family was to let them know early on what they could expect emotionally, and give everyone the space to walk their own grief path.

When we hardly saw my husband for the first two weeks, as he cleaned out his sister’s living space, it was hard on the kids, but a normal part of grief for him. Educating my children, and helping them walk with their father as well as identify their own journey was really helpful to them.





**The Valley** – I always thought that valleys were barren places, just like deserts. I could not be more wrong. A valley is formed by a great upheaval of nature. When Mount St. Helens blew, a deep canyon was formed in just hours. All the water, lava, rock and debris flowed with such force that it tore a hole in the side of the mountain. Now you can see the strata layers from years off

accumulation. Vegetation grows, and a river flows.

In the valley of the shadow of death, you are separated from humanity in a way. Your emotional bucket is so exhausted that you don't have the ability to interact like a 'normal' person. Instead, you walk in a deep valley, looking at the layers of your life. Sometimes the walls seem to close in on you.

When my husband and I were young, we went camping in a canyon in Southern California in the height of the heat season.

## We discovered some basics of survival in the canyon that help in grief as well:

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1. **Establish a daily routine.** If you stay in the canyon all day, you will not survive. Return to your daily routine as soon as possible.
2. **Drink lots of water.** For some reason, when we are most in need of God's Word, we tend to read less. Find ways to spend time in God's Word. You need to renew your mind even when you don't feel like it.
3. **Enjoy the benefits.** There is a river in the canyon. God is down there to replenish you. People are there to walk with you. Let them.
4. **Find a guide.** There are times when you just need a professional. Whether you need a professional psychologist or your medical doctor, get the help you need quickly.



## Shadow

A shadow is not a reflection. I'd like to look at two things under shadow:

1. Shadow
2. Shadow of Death

### *Shadow*

When you are grieving, your feelings go haywire. Feelings lie; especially when it pertains to grieving a suicide. What you feel is not necessarily reality, just like a shadow isn't necessarily reality. A shadow can look like a bird, but be two hands.



Likewise, those you are walking with are also putting off 'shadows'. They are feeling awful. It is important to respond to who they are instead of whom they are acting like. Many people don't have the emotional intelligence to act outside their feelings. You can help them discern their feelings from their actions and bring the emotional IQ of the entire situation to a higher level.

Sometimes you need to just gloss over bad behavior with grace.

### *Shadow of Death*

When someone commits suicide, they create a vortex, sucking others in after them. When my sister in law committed suicide, one of the pastors who walked with us was most concerned about making sure this vortex was shut. She had been on the task force that spoke to the Seattle Public Schools after the death of Kurt Cobain, and they had been successful in preventing any copycat suicides. This is the advice she gave:

1. Make sure you tell the kids that Auntie made a bad choice.
2. Give them lots of time to talk.
3. Reiterate that this was a bad choice and don't spend time talking about how she might be better off now.

During the first two weeks after my sister in law's death, I spent the days at my in-laws, helping them with details, and the beginnings of grief. At dinner time I came home and spent time with my kids. At about 9pm every night, my kids would begin visiting me, grieving, and the process continued until about 2am. Then I started over the next day. I was so grateful, when two weeks after her death, I got a full-time job and had to be some place every day. It put normalcy into my life. It gave me a schedule. We still grieved into the night, but slowly, we got better.



## Fear No Evil

This is the passage that made me realize this Psalm was for the living, not just the dying. When you are walking through the chaos of emotions and helping others grieve, you start to feel like you are being overcome by a big, fat, hairy monster.



In the midst of this long journey of healing, a very old hymn started playing through my head: there is a balm in Gilead. I had no idea what it meant. I didn't even know the song. So I looked up "balm of Gilead" in the Bible. I discovered that Balm of Gilead is an Old Testament reference to Jesus, and it is an herb for healing. Jesus is the herb for healing your wounds. Nothing else will do. First, you have to admit you are hurt.

When we are the caretakers, we tend to not admit our own need.

## Here is what I did to take care of my own grieving through this process:

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1. **Early on, I took time to talk to my sister in law.** Yes, she was dead, but I was mad at her. I talked to her every day for two or three weeks. Sometimes I would yell at her I was so mad. Sometimes I would just talk. I didn't do this when other people were around, but I made sure I made the time.

2. **I took time to talk to God.** For some reason, I was so shut down, I couldn't journal. I usually journal my process, but about three weeks in, I realized I hadn't been talking to God much, and I was so shut down, I couldn't write; so I made time to read a couple of scriptures and pray every day, no matter what. God met me where I was at, and I saw Him work with me even on this little level.

3. **I made myself talk to others.** I shut down under stress. My poor mom thought I was mad at her because I was giving one and two word replies to her emails. Finally, I found a friend and began to talk.



4. After the first 3 weeks, **I set boundaries on the kids** and decided that conversation had to end at 11pm because their mom is old and needs her sleep. This had an incredibly helpful side effect. They started turning to each other for emotional support, and became much closer as siblings.
5. Most importantly, **I found a routine.** Work was my outlet. There are so many details to take care of after a death. I chose to make lists and tackle one thing a day. I didn't turn off my life and focus on the lists. I did my life and tackled one thing a day from the lists. It worked.

## **God is With Me His Rod and Staff Comfort Me**

When my teens and I begin to clash too much, I tell them “if you are bouncing off the guard rails too much, you probably need to make a course correction.”

When you are in the middle of grief, you are running on emotion. You don't live in the land of the tangible. You rely on God's Rod and Staff for guidance, because you can't access the logical side of your brain very well.

God won't leave you. He will guide you. You can rest in the comfort that He will protect you and help you.

The most important thing is to remember to ask Him for guidance and help and not try to do it alone.

Every person in your family is going to grieve at a different pace. I discovered that my children heal at a faster pace than my in laws. Family gatherings become interesting when you have people grieving at incredibly different places. Helping those wrapped up in guilt give freedom to those who have reached acceptance, and helping those in acceptance give compassion to those wracked with anger and depression is very tricky. Only God's wisdom can pull this off.

**Knowing your Source and acknowledging the valley are keys to surviving this very trying time of life. With God's help, we are making it, and so will you.**

