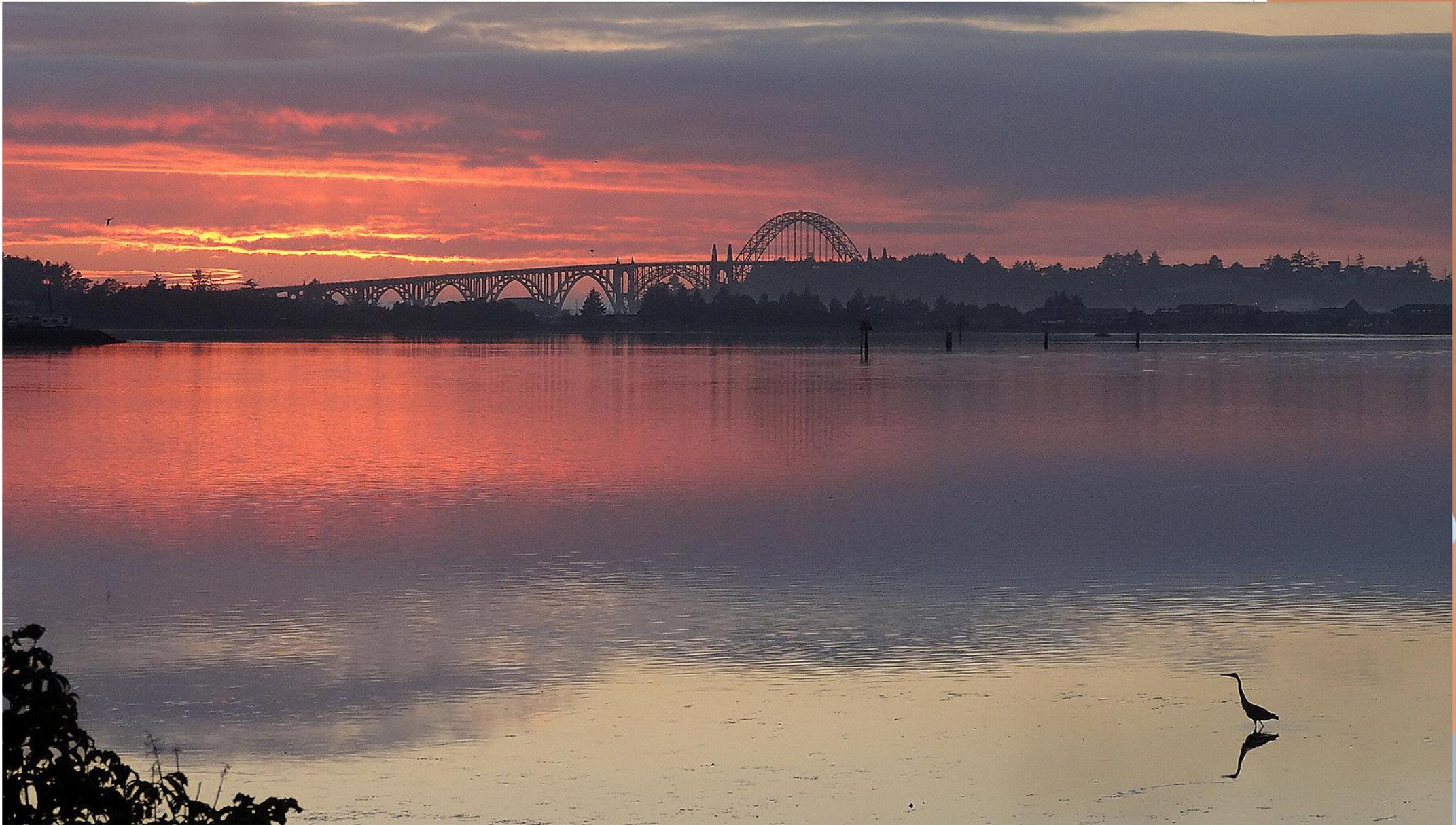


UNDERSTANDING GRIEF

A VERY CHALLENGING JOURNEY

By: Chaplain Patricia Harrison, MA, BCC, DSC

- ▶ Welcome to this learning module on Understanding Grief. Grief can be a very long and challenging journey at times but it is a very normal part of the paths we trod throughout life. Wanting to avoid it or deny it is very normal, but not helpful. Feel your feelings and honor them. You are a most important person.
- ▶ Knowledge empowers. We care about our neighbors and we care about you. We often see many who are grieving. It is quite common to feel helpless yet want to make a difference in their sorrow.
- ▶ So we ask: “Is there anything that I can do to make a difference?” “What?” “How?” In reference to myself when faced with a death: “How can I survive?”
- ▶ This module was designed with this in mind. My hope is that this learning module will make a difference for all of us. It is designed to equip us to better understand our neighbor and ourselves and this thing we call grief.



Sunset...

- ▶ Pause for a minute here and take a deep breath as you focus your gaze on this beautiful sunset. Rest in its beauty. Don't be too quick to move on.
- ▶ My sister-in-law sent me this with the subheading, "My brother's last sunset."
- ▶ A sunset is often used to talk about the final days of life on earth. There is something settling to the inner spirit about a sunset like this one... It invites us to a certain center within ourselves and acceptance of life as it has been for that day, for that life.
- ▶ There is also something mysterious and hopeful that invites us to move forward to what is ahead with hope...even is only a glimmer of hope... a letting go of the past and embracing the new not yet seeable.
- ▶ Letting go of the past and embracing the new is no easy part of life although a very natural part of living. When there are turbulent issues in the relationship with the deceased or experiences concerning the event around the death, it is even more difficult. These things can, however, find resolution over time.
- ▶ When you are ready move to the next slide.

Defining Terms

Bereavement/Bereft: a state of being deprived.

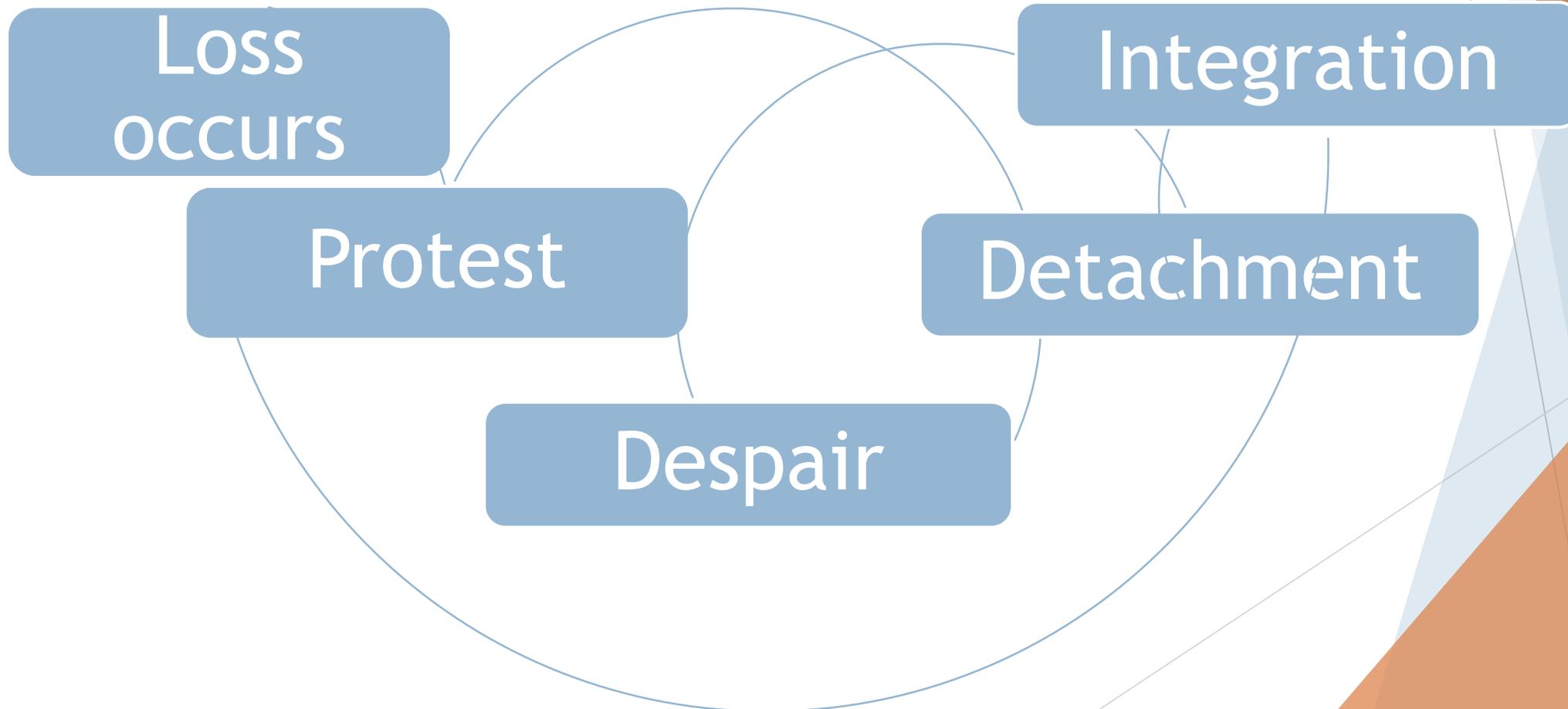
Grief: sorrow, tribulation, heart ache, distress of mind & soul.

Grieving: the process of mourning & carrying sorrow.

Definitions...

- ▶ This slide presents a few basic definitions for common understanding.
 - ▶ Bereavement: The reality of being deprived.
 - ▶ Grief: The heartache and distress of mind and soul.
 - ▶ Grieving: The burden and process of mourning, carried in the heart.
- ▶ These are all normal aspects of the journey of grief that a person walks through following a death or great trauma. Depending on many factors, these will play out in their own way for each person and for each death encountered. The length of time is also different for each death and each grieving person.
- ▶ Sometimes it is beneficial to talk with a professional.

Grieving Cycles



Cycles of Grief:

- ▶ The **death occurs** and frequently everything within us screams against it. We are launched into a time into which we do not want to go.
- ▶ In varying degrees, it is not unusual for the bereft to **protest** strongly and sometimes loudly the death that has just occurred. As people we have two major defense mechanisms used frequently for survival... fight or flight... anger or denial. These tools give the bereft person space to grow into a very hard, often jarring, reality that is before them.
- ▶ Within the next few months the bereft person experiences a deep sense of loneliness, empty space, hopelessness, powerlessness, feeling lost, disconnected, angry. A season of **grief depression or grief despair** is natural. It may go on for several months or even into the next year, but in time it will change. It is wise, often, to keep your doctor aware of how you are doing.
- ▶ Gradually, a new emotional space/**detachment** with love, begins to take hold, followed by a new sense of purpose/**integration** of the past and the present begins to slowly take hold as it is birthed within the heart and mind.

Grief seen as Seasons of a Year

Fall/Loss

Winter/
Hopelessness

Spring/
Adjustment

Summer/
Integration

Grief as the Four Seasons Model

- ▶ A pictorial way of describing the grief is to equate it to the four seasons of the year beginning with Fall. In **Fall** the leaves begin to turn and fade and die, falling to the ground.
- ▶ In **Winter** everything is more withdrawn and often covered with snow. The bear retreats to its cave and hibernates waiting for spring. Other animals wonder searching for food but find little to nourish them.
- ▶ In time, **Spring** does arrive though often very quietly and gradually... observed only as we look back and see where we were and where we are now.
- ▶ Finally, the hardest months of the year are gone. **Summer** arrives and life is sunnier, brighter, fresher. We don't forget the past, but we treasure it in a new way. We now can find meaning and hope in the present not forgetting the gifts of the past.

How Grief Presents itself Psychosomatically:

Physical Indicators



Social Indicators



Emotional Indicators



Spiritual Indicators

Good Self-Care...

- ▶ Grief shows itself in many ways, even if we do not think so. Good self-care and patience with yourself as well as with others is vital. Living in the present, taking the next indicated step, and not looking too far ahead is very helpful. In time you will be able to plan as you had at one time. Since Americans tend to be planners, you may need to adopt a disciplined focus to stay in the present and let yourself have this time to walk through this time of grief.
- ▶ Making peace with the loss and learning to live with it with peace of heart is the challenge. It is said that it takes two - six years to fully integrate the death of a spouse and that for a child one never ceases to think of him/her daily. Give yourself time... one day at a time. Know that you are on a path of discovering how to live well now. Respect the journey and keep going forward.
- ▶ Daily gratitude for little things... like a rose, a smile, a sunrise and sunset, is a helpful tool... You will gain strength and encouragement only by walking this out.

Physical Indicators of Grief:

- ▶ The physical Indicators of the grief we are experiencing show up in the BODY, in the BREATHING, in the SLEEP and DREAMS, and in the APPETITE.
- ▶ In the BODY it is very common to experience tightness in the chest, headaches, back aches, muscle and joint pain.
- ▶ BREATHING can be shallow, even, holding one's breath without realizing it. Deep sighing is not uncommon with the bereft person. When you hear this or experience it in yourself, recognize this as an indicator of the grief you or another is experiencing. For yourself, take time to pause, reflect, own/name the feelings you are experiencing at that moment. That in itself empowers you to keep going forward without denial or anger reactions.... Acknowledge, "Yes, I am, still grieving a lot. It is normal and it is okay. I will get through this."
- ▶ SLEEP disturbances and difficult dreams are very common. Try to have a routine. Turn lights down low an hour before bed. Sometimes sleeping on the spouse's side of the bed helps. Comforting DREAMS may occur, as well, or a sense of the person's nearness, or some sign of hope. Look to the fruit these produce...peace, joy, love, encouragement. Be grateful. To be authentic, these cannot be force.
- ▶ Loss of APPETITE and weight loss or gain even when eating regularly are also part of the picture. Again some food with routine keeps up your immune system.

Social/Emotional Indicators of Grief

Withdrawal from Activities

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graph TD; A[Withdrawal from Activities] --> B[Isolation: Time in the Cave]; B --> C[Impaired Functioning [temporary]]
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Isolation: Time in the Cave

Impaired Functioning [temporary]

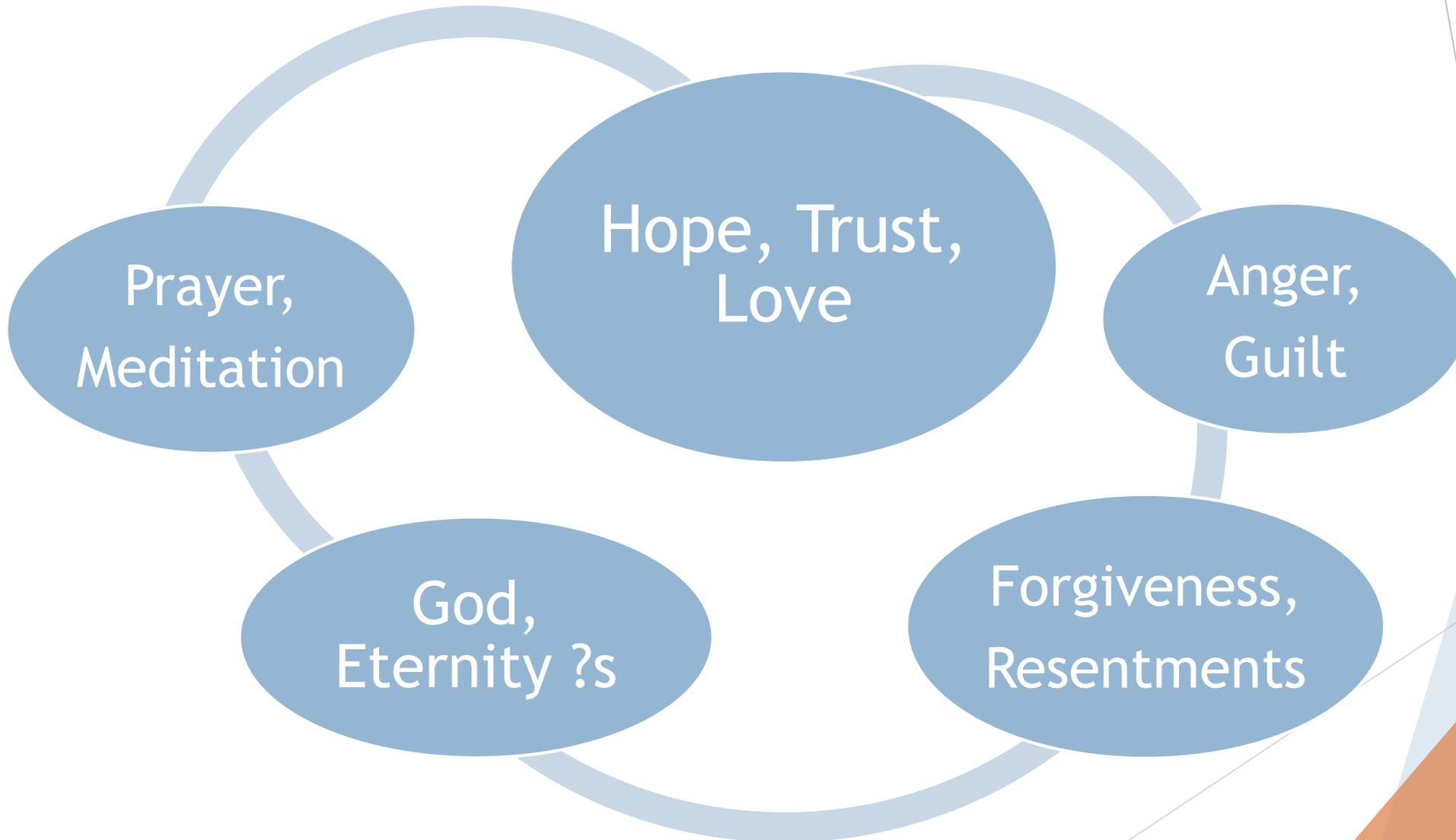
Social/Emotional Indicators:

- ▶ A grieving person frequently experiences little to no energy. The mind is very preoccupied with the deceased. This is a very necessary and normal part of the healing process. In time over the year renewed balance will return.
- ▶ It takes considerable energy and attention and emotion to be engaged socially. Usually we don't give that much thought, but with grief to focus that energy outward is often too much demand on the mind and the heart of the grieving person initially. Grief is necessarily a very inward demanding path.
- ▶ Please, respect that and let the neighbor or your family members know that you are there for them but keep your kindnesses sensitive and brief. Let them set the pace. Check in with the bereft person regularly, run errands or send a card or pray over the phone, or whatever is brief and meaningful to the two of you for the beginning months. You may need to be the one to gently teach others what you need if they have not yet been able to learn what you are right now.
- ▶ A daily walk with or without a friend, a shared but brief coffee or tea time at the house rather than a public setting can greatly support and undergird the person in deep sorrow. What works for one is not always helpful for another. Be sensitive.

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- ▶ Much crying is a very good thing... a very necessary thing. Crying releases endorphins into the body that actually help maintain health when a person is grieving. Remember the grieving person has encountered a major shock to their whole being. The impact is in the area of the physical, mental, and spiritual well being of a person.
- ▶ Finding ways to cope in this major adjustment time is no easy thing. We often cope through a “flight” or “fight” syndrome. Both withdrawal and miss-placed anger are simply manifestations of the grief at this time.
- ▶ It is common to be flooded with regrets and “only ifs.” Most of these speak to the utter powerlessness experienced with a death. Even though death is a normal part of life and will come at some time we can be caught off guard with our lack of control. We can take some steps to control it but the final call is not ours. We can take some steps to delay it but the final call is not ours.
- ▶ Even when tempted with suicide, a study shows a 100% outcome when a small group of survivors whose attempt had failed, were asked if they regretted their choice. A person deep within has a core instinct to live.

Spiritual Challenges in Grief:



Spiritual Aspects Common to Grief

- ▶ HOPE...TRUST...LOVE are at the heart of Spirituality. Spirituality is a core part of human existence. It is a deep inner part of every human being and is discovered as one lives and becomes more aware their inner world and searches for truth and answers to life's deepest questions about God, meaning, existence and what awaits after the death of the body.
- ▶ When you have encountered a death, it is a good time to let yourself explore these areas of spirituality that arise for you. You may have or have not settled these questions in your own mind before, or you may have new questions because of this death. Do not brush them under the rug. They have surfaced for a reason even if uncomfortable... give yourself a greater gift of interior freedom as you honestly look at what rises up in your heart and mind.
- ▶ When a death has happened it is not uncommon to have to make peace with disturbing circumstances around the death and/or unresolved issues in the relationship with the deceased. Sometimes this can be the most challenging part of adjustment. Face it squarely. Talk to a professional as needed.

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- ▶ When grieving some people report not having an inclination or ability to pray and/or meditate and others report turning to that consolation more. Know that all of this is natural. Sitting in Silence with a simple, quiet focus on a rose or a cross or the picture of the one you love can be a comforting approach to prayer and meditation.
- ▶ Silently sitting in nature, being present to the sounds, images, and all that is there is often helpful. In grief a person is more in the heart than the active left brain. Honor and accept this different kind of reflective or prayerful quiet. The use of music, special songs, religious songs, classical pieces, the harp and more can help console and comfort.
- ▶ It is not uncommon for people to have experiences of their loved one's presence, a dream, a sign, a quiet inspiration or thought that brings encouragement and somehow is uniquely that person. If the fruit of that experience brings peace, joy, encouragement, or love, courage... keep it simple but receive it with gratitude. It cannot be manipulated.

How can I Help & Comfort my Neighbor?

When I'm feeling responsible for:

- I try to fix or control, I don't listen.
- I feel... tired, anxious, and fearful, distracted.

When I'm feeling responsible to?

- I listen, encourage show empathy.
- I feel...relaxed, free, and aware/tuned in.

Bringing Comfort to your Neighbor:

- ▶ First, to comfort your neighbor, check in with yourself and see where you are as this slide demonstrated. Are you trying to fix the sadness of the other person or even control it? Are you able to simply let them tell their own story without your interruptions? Can you show empathy and be a quiet listening presence?
- ▶ You may well be grieving, yourself, and you want your neighbor to feel better. But the reality is that it is easy to say what comforts oneself all too frequently. Our own feelings are what is really driving us. Grief is very uncomfortable for everyone, at times. It is experienced and dealt with individually.
- ▶ Let your neighbor speak for her/himself as you show a simple, gentle concern. Ask, “How are you today? This must be very hard.” Then listen and be present to them. This is a time to keep most comments to yourself, but your prayers, kindnesses and respect provide a platform of stability at a very shaky time.

What your Friend does NOT Need:

Opinions

- Giving advise
- About them or their situation

Clichés

- Well intended, perhaps
- But very misguided

What your friend does need:

▶ **KEEP IT SIMPLE:**

Warmth more than words.

Hugs or Hand Shakes or a High Five.

▶ **BE AVAILABLE:**

A daily walk together.

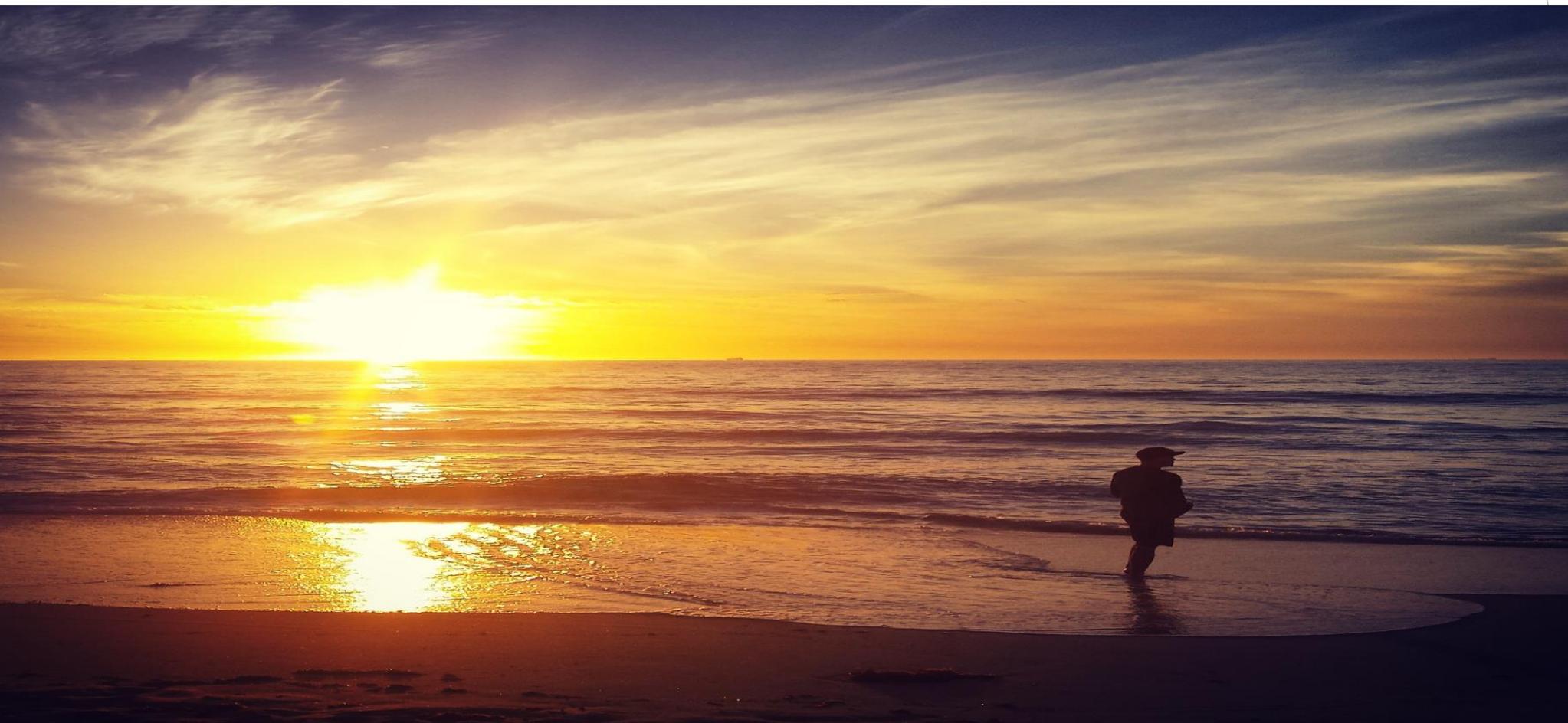
Invite to tea/coffee at the house.

▶ **RESPECT:**

Each person grieves differently.

Be a respectful, quiet, listening presence.

There is hope....



Coming through the darkness....

Finding the new Sunrise....

- ▶ Bringing comfort and assistance to a neighbor is a wonderful gift of love and concern. But sometimes good intentions with little knowledge is more harmful than good. Hopefully this module has helped to empower you with good knowledge as well as good self care when you are grieving.
- ▶ First, learn about the journey of grief and come to understand better the profound challenge this experience is for all concerned. Begin with the thought: “I really do not know this. I have not been through it.” If you have been through severe grief then you do know something wonderful to bring to your friend and to yourself. However, You are not that friend, and they are not you. Recall that everyone grieves their own way. So reflect upon what did help you and be very sensitive as you learn what can really help your friend. Thank you for trying. It takes time. Don’t give up.
- ▶ To find one’s way through grief is a journey of discovery done alone, sometimes with another, and sometimes with a group or a grief counselor. Your friend needs you to respect their path. Yours will be your own. Do respect that, as well. Genuine regard for one another and yourself empowers.
- ▶ Taking time for crying, remembering, reflecting, feeling the feelings, and reliving the memories, telling the stories, writing, meditating, learning to pray again, writing the thank you notes [of which you have a year to do!], going through the picture albums alone or with family or friends are all a necessary part of the journey through grief.