

# THE PARENT Journey

a *grief Haven* newsletter for grieving parents and those who support them

july - september 2013

## men and women—their grief journeys understood

by roger dafter, ph.d.

### Message from Susan Whitmore, Founder & President

While Erika, my daughter, was going through cancer treatment in 2001 at UCLA Medical Center, we met Dr. Roger Dafter who quickly became a positive beam of hope and light in our bleak and painful days—days filled with chemo, radiation, and all of the physical and psychological issues that attend cancer treatment.

After Erika died in 2002, I continued seeing Dr. Dafter for two years. It was during that first year that I decided to produce the *Portraits of Hope* documentary film and start griefHaven. I asked Dr. Dafter if he would join our Board of Advisors. Thankfully, he accepted. His wisdom, compassion, knowledge, and kind heart have helped me come as far as I have on my own grief journey. As an Advisory Board member, Dr. Dafter has provided sage advice and answered parent and sibling questions, as well as guided griefHaven's grief specialists as needed.

Several years ago I worked with a couple whose daughter had recently died. They were experiencing problems in their relationship because they were both grieving differently. They were upset with one another because of those differences. The mom was emoting and letting her pain and sorrow out, often wailing and crying. The dad was more withdrawn and not showing his grief outwardly. The mom felt that perhaps her husband didn't love their daughter as much as she did, and she felt alone in her grief. The dad felt he was supposed to do something to help his wife with her pain, to somehow "make it better," but nothing he did seemed to work. Of course, he had his own grief and ways of dealing with his loss.

He felt that there wasn't any way to change what had happened, so "why bother?" He would



where hope resides

There are often differences in the way mothers and fathers grieve. It's such an important topic that we have dedicated this issue to it, and there will be future issues dealing with it. I know we are "generalizing" and that not every mother and father fit the approaches discussed here, for sometimes the mother is more introverted in her grief and the father more outward. However, because the majority of men and women grieve so differently, that is what we are addressing this time.

In my work with griefHaven, and especially as a grief facilitator and specialist, I hear the stories couples tell about their grief differences. Often connected with their stories are concerns for the stability of the relationship surviving the death of their child. So let me first dispel this long running myth so you may take a deep sigh of relief and not have yet another thing to worry about: most couples not only survive the death of their child, but their relationships go on to be even deeper, richer, and more meaningful. Educating themselves about grief and the male-female differences is an important part of that journey.

So we bring to you Dr. Roger Dafter's powerful information and step-by-step "how to" for all of the couples out there.

The perfect combination to Dr. Dafter's article is Samantha White's "Recipe for Healing" article and her step-by-step process outlined in her amazing book for which Samantha won the 2012 Nautilus Book Award.

I know you will gain great value from all we share in this quarterly newsletter. Be SURE to pass this along to everyone you know. I am sure they will be grateful you did. OH! And please be sure your grief groups are receiving our newsletters.

~ Susan Whitmore  
founder & president



often pose this question, “What good does crying and talking about it do? It just makes me feel worse, and it won’t bring her back. I have to get on with life.”

Dr. Daffer and I have had numerous consultations regarding mothers and fathers and their frequently disparate modes of grieving. Further, over the years, I have read, researched, and learned what is “out there” regarding this area. Because this is such an important topic that impacts so many mothers and fathers, I decided to share Dr. Daffer’s insights with you. This information is not only helpful to grieving parents, but also for anyone needing to better understand the grief journeys of mothers and fathers.

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#### FROM DR. ROGER DAFTER

The scenario Susan describes above, although not always exactly the same with every couple, is typical of what I see in my practice when dealing with the differences in the way men and women grieve. In this scenario, the wife, who was used to leaning on her husband when times were stormy, felt abandoned by him at what was the worst of all times in their lives. The husband felt as if there wasn’t anything he could do to help her anyway and that dwelling on the pain only made matters worse. What it didn’t mean is that either of them was grieving the wrong way or that they weren’t equally grieving over the death of their daughter.

Here is a question I received and responded to in a griefHaven newsletter several years ago:

*Ten months ago, our only child, our beautiful daughter, died in a terrible car accident. My*

*husband and I have been married twenty years and love each other, but we are grieving so differently, and it’s starting to tear us apart. How do we go on and not destroy our marriage? I’m crying all the time, and he is closed off and distant.*

So let’s explore this extremely important area of dealing with life after a child has died.

The death of a child cuts into the core of the marriage bond because it is the most painful loss of all. It won’t surprise you to hear that any marriage facing the challenges of this greatest of all losses finds an increase in the tension in the relationship, causing it to be more fragile. That is why—just as each person impacted by the death of the child needs to be given patience, love, tenderness, and compassion—so too does the marriage itself. This is how its preciousness may be preserved.

Why does the death of a child create so much trouble in a marriage? Grieving is, generally speaking, different for moms and dads. The nature of the biological bond between the mother and the child is different than that with the father. A mother literally experiences her child as part of her flesh by carrying the child inside of her, nursing the child, and providing other succoring attachments between mother and child. The very nature of these attachments also has a biochemical element to it, so it makes sense that the bond for each would be different and would manifest differently. These are, in part, hormonally mediated, and the hormones governing men’s and women’s emotional attachments are quite different. For instance, the mother-child bond of an adopted child is just as biologically powerful, since the very core of the child emerges from the mother-infant interactions and shapes the molding of the child’s brain and endocrine development.



Dr. Roger Daffer

This is just as powerful as the mother who carried the child. Of course, this in no way indicates that either the mother or father is closer to the child—just that the bond manifests differently.

Generally speaking, men and woman have different styles of grieving, although there is a lot of individual variation depending on many factors surrounding each person. Women tend to be more fluent in their emotional expression—they want to outwardly express themselves and be heard and understood. Men tend to want to fix and do things to “make it all better,” not necessarily dwelling on the feelings, though men obviously need to express their grief as well.

The mom and dad relationships that actually develop in life (as opposed to the biological attachment) can be very different. This is dependent on several factors, including the activities each parent participates in with the child, as well as their individual roles in raising the child. Such variations in life experience can result in differences in the grieving process. Differences can be especially pronounced if the child is a stepchild to one of the parents, or if parents are separated or divorced.

Loss also activates and intensifies relationship problems that existed before the death of the child. So, in addition to the shock and utter pain of loss, the ripples of previous problems grow larger and become overwhelming. Even the strongest of relationships is challenged by such a loss. However, these relationships can be sustained by constantly renewing and refueling the love bonds between partners. When the shock, rage, sadness, and fear from the loss of a child hits, the intensity of these core emotions can be turned against each other, sometimes

“Women tend to be more fluent  
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resulting in blaming and attacking the very integrity of the other. I call this “burning down the house.” In other words, the partners may turn against each other when driven by their intense negative emotions. Additionally, when there is grief, it can be hard to experience pleasure of any kind for months or even years. So while this tearing down process takes place, no positive, joyous, and pleasurable experience off-sets the attacks to the marriage bond.

So how do you preserve the marriage?

1. Identify the most important elements that hold your relationship together. Acknowledge your love for one another, the continuity of your lives together, and the spiritual basis for your relationship if that is part of your belief system.
2. Acknowledge the differences in each of your grief styles, and encourage each other to express grief in your own unique ways. Reflect on how your relationship to the child may have been different for each of you. Appreciate the unique needs you each have in the ways you express your grief. For instance, one of you may wail and cry openly, while the other may need to go into a room alone. Do your best not to judge the other’s grief process.
3. No couple can bear the loss of a child by themselves. Support for both must also come from other people, including family members, friends, support groups, other grieving parents further down the road, and grief specialists. It is too much to expect you to be there solely for each other—you are each already having to endure as much as you can handle. So don’t expect your spouse to always be the one to be there for you.
4. Although emotional attacks against one another must be recognized as a likely part of the natural grief process, you do need to work to channel the grief in constructive directions, rather than against each other. You are both dealing with great pain, so personal attacks only add to a broken heart. When this does happen, however, it is imperative that you apologize and take responsibility to redirect the powerful grief emotions. Also, as hurt as you might be by an attack, be willing to forgive the other by understanding that the attack was motivated by the powerful pain of loss and not true feelings of contempt.
5. As soon as possible, participate in positive experiences, even if, at first, you

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do not feel like it. This could be as simple as taking a short walk. You both need to break up the pattern of grief, even if just for a few moments.

6. Remember what you still have in life, such as other family, children or friends. Other valuable parts of your life need to be acknowledged and honored.

As difficult as the death of your child is on

your relationship, you can work together with a renewed sense of each other and the strength of your love. It happens all of the time. No one can tell you how to grieve or when, exactly, to take each step. But each step can, in the end, bring you closer to each other. Participating in life as much as possible between the waves of grief that occur will be helpful in keeping your relationship meaningful and whole. And remember that the old rumor that most marriages end in divorce after a child dies is just that—an old rumor.



Roger Daffer, Ph.D. specializes in mind/body medicine and grief. He also serves on the griefHaven Board of Advisors. Do you have a grief question? Please send it to us at [hope@griefHaven.org](mailto:hope@griefHaven.org).

## griefHaven and the military

For years griefHaven has attempted to provide its resources to military families. We have had limited success so far. Recently, through Didi Reuben, we found a potential lead to get our foot in the door. As our first project, we have designed a military grief pin. As you can see from the drawing below and alongside our original grief pin currently given to people around the world, it is similar in symbolism and beauty, yet it has its own identity. We can't wait to start sending these to military families everywhere. If you know of a military family who would benefit from one of our packets and a special grief pin, please email us at [hope@griefHaven.org](mailto:hope@griefHaven.org).



(original grief pin)



(drawing of military grief pin)

# about my recipe for healing

by samantha m. white

## An Introduction by Susan Whitmore, Founder & President

Several months ago, I received an email from Samantha White about a book she had written, *Someone to Talk To: Finding Peace, Purpose and Joy After Tragedy and Loss; A Recipe for Healing from Trauma and Grief*, asking if it would be of interest to people who visit our website. As we do with every book we are offered, we asked Samantha to send us a copy so someone on the griefHaven Board could first read it. I was the person who chose to read her book when it arrived, and I am so glad I did. Samantha White, a clinical social worker, was honored with a 2012 Nautilus Book Award in the category of Grieving/Death & Dying for her poignant memoir. Previous winners of this prestigious nationwide award include the Dalai Lama, Carolyn Myss, Julia Cameron, Deepak Chopra, Christiane Northrup, Andrew Weil, and many other respected authors. ~ Here is Samantha's behind-the-book story. I hope it will spark your interest in reading her book, where I believe you, too, will find education, hope, support, and love.

### FROM SAMANTHA M. WHITE

I've chosen to use a photo that doesn't show people because too many things happened—painful and terrible things—around which my family has requested confidentiality. Yet, despite the delicacy of the hidden issues, and my love and respect for my family, I felt driven to write a book about what happened.

Why? Because most of us who have experienced the tragedy of losing a child can find some support in sharing our stories with each other. I have needed to share, too, so I have changed names and hidden faces. Except for mine. I use my face, and the name is my own. The same holds true in the book. Everything else is true and, to the best of my tortured memory, really happened as I have told it.

Paul and I met at a summer picnic when we were both in our twenties. We had been raised in the same faith, both completed college and shared work, politics, and many other interests. We fell in love quickly and were married the following spring. The black and white photos from our wedding day long ago show a shy bride wearing white lace, and a thin young man in a dark suit that seems too large for him. We exchanged vows in front of the fireplace in my parents' living room, surrounded by aunts, uncles, cousins and friends. Our heads were full of dreams of an enchanted life, a carefully planned life, for which we were willing to work as hard as we had to, and for as long as it took, to create a solid, safe, and happy family of our own. We had everyone's blessings.

Over time we grew into becoming the picture in our

minds—we first became parents of the lovely Sasha, and almost two years later tiny, adorable Rebecca. We moved our perfect family into a large suburban house in a neighborhood of grassy, well-treed backyards teeming with playmates for our daughters. Weekdays, Paul went off to work while I stayed home to tend to the needs of the girls and our home. On weekends we made family excursions to visit the grandparents or walk in the woods or visit the zoo. When the girls started school, I resumed working part time.

Like all normal parents, we watched with pride as our daughters played and learned and grew. It was all going according to plan, and, except for the usual childhood illnesses and minor scrapes nothing, it seemed, could go wrong.

While Sasha was the tomboy, the athlete, the climber of trees and collector of frogs, younger Rebecca was the quiet, sensitive one, deeply

moved by wistful music, certain colors, and tender stories. She was consistently kind and caring of others, and full of questions. When she was seven she asked me, "Is it hard to be a mother?" I chose my answer carefully: "Of all the jobs I've had, and I've had many, being a mother is the hardest, but the most rewarding."

When Rebecca was twenty, just before her death, she told me she wanted children and was looking forward to the time when she could be a mother, too. That conversation was as close as I got to becoming a grandmother. She was killed before she could start on her dream.

But as I said earlier, there were other terrible things that had happened, too. It had seemed to come like an avalanche, starting with a faint rumble and growing to a lethal storm. Before Rebecca died, our "perfect family" had already begun its plummet into living hell as it all crumbled away.

First, Paul had become mentally ill. Maybe the signs had been there for a long time and I had no idea how to read them. Or maybe he was totally healthy before the overpowering stresses of work ground him down.

We had been among the first families to hand responsibility for our health over to the managed care system, expecting that our medical needs would be met by their staff and facilities in exchange for affordable premiums. It worked for as long as we had no unusual needs. But when Paul's mind took its first, deep dive into paralyzing depression, managed care had nothing for him except the new, relatively untried medications for which the proper dosage levels had not yet been worked out and side effects were still unknown. I



advocated—fought!—for psychotherapy for him, but psychotherapy takes time and so is more costly than prescriptions, which are quick to write, and so as his depression worsened, all they would do for him was try different versions of the still-experimental drugs and increase the dosages.

I succeeded in getting Paul admitted to a day treatment program, but managed care discharged him, saying he really didn't need it. Meanwhile, the medications were wreaking havoc on Paul and on us as a family, as his moods swung wildly and were complicated by the drugs' side effects of paranoia and painful, debilitating anxiety. Throughout the next five years he lost jobs, gained new ones, and lost them again, each termination plunging him deeper into the maelstrom of his emotional and physical agony. His pain infected us all, and eventually our home became a prison in which we all suffered. Sasha left home at sixteen, but Rebecca clung to me. I saw her going down the same tortuous path her father was on as she became depressed, too.

Personal ethics prevent me from describing in detail the horror of those five years. At the end of it our family had dissolved, and I found myself alone. My daughters were grown, but my dream of growing old with the man who had stood beside me on our wedding day was lost.

I was on my own. And exhausted, lonely, and afraid, and feeling like a failure, because I hadn't been able to save him, and us. So I fell in love with a man who saw himself as a rescuer of lonely women. Rescue me he did, and he made me feel stronger and even sometimes wildly happy, but I made the enormous mistake of believing his empty promises of commitment and meaningless proposals of marriage. Naively, and hungrily, I became ensnared in his romantic fantasy,

*I* felt driven to share this five-ingredient recipe with others who might be looking for a way out of their own pain.”

giving myself over to him for two years—years I thought were an investment in our future together. Then, quite unexpectedly, I learned that I was not his intended at all, but “the other woman.” He was already committed to someone else.

Two days after I made this crushing discovery, Rebecca was killed.

She had been out with friends, someone else was driving drunk, and a horrific car crash left her and two of her friends dead. The news came in the wee hours of the morning and turned my teetering world upside down. I became the damaged one, stumbling from job to job, trying to keep myself from sinking into immobility and madness. I had always wanted a family, and I had had one, and then I lost it all. I felt as though I had been broken into a million jagged little pieces, and I didn't think I could ever be whole again.

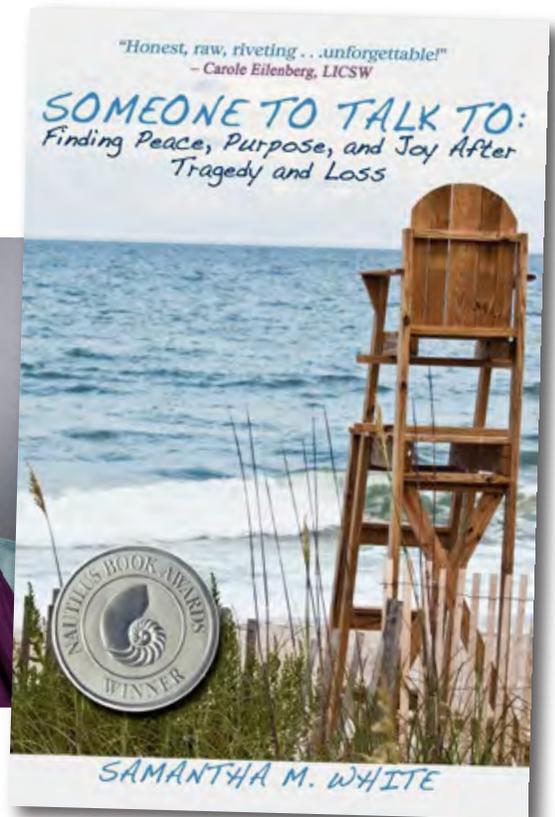
Rebecca died not at the beginning of her life, but somewhere in the big, long middle. We had already built up a rich history of sharing many interests and activities, including cooking, and together had hatched a project: each week she would choose a recipe from the cookbook her uncle had given her on her birthday. I would buy the groceries, and we would cook together. We both looked forward to the times we would spend in the kitchen as I passed on my culinary skills, and then we would enjoy the meal together. We had set the date, she had chosen the recipe, and I had made my shopping list for the first of these cook-fests when her life was cut short.

So...why did I write a book?

Because all these many years later, when I look back on the years that followed her death, I see a clear pattern, a step-by-step process, a “recipe” which I had unknowingly followed in my climb out of pain and grief. Rebecca's death had propelled me in a direction that I chose as a way of honoring her, and I had become transformed. No longer the shy bride, the lonely woman, or



Samantha M. White



the broken mother, I healed and became a healer of others. My pain, guilt, and neediness gave way to strength I didn't know I had, a purpose I had only dreamed of, and a new kind of peace.

I felt driven to share this five-ingredient recipe with others who might be looking for a way out of their own pain. So I wrote a memoir of my time of healing and included the “recipe” that emerged from that trial. I could not NOT write it—it propelled me from within, this need to share what I had learned through effort so great that it left me chronically ill, but wiser, knowing firsthand how pain can transform us and how we can honor the children who have been taken from us.

It's not the recipe that I would have enjoyed preparing in the kitchen with my lovely, grown-up young daughter, whose children I would later have showered with love, but it's the recipe that saved me and keeps her spirit alive in this world that holds so much pain, and so much love. I wrote the book for you, for her, and for me. It has a bittersweet, but happy ending.

My greatest reward is when readers tell me, “I decided that if you could get through all that, and come out like this, then I can get through what I'm going through, too.”

Which is the point of the book, and the recipe, my gift to all who might find courage and hope there.

# please...

author unknown, rewritten by susan whitmore

Please don't ask me if I'm "over" it yet.  
You get "over" a cold, not the death of a child.

Please don't tell me she's in a better place.  
She's not here with me, and that's what hurts so much.

Please don't say, at least she's no longer suffering.  
I haven't yet come to terms with why she had to suffer at all.

Please don't tell me you know how I feel.  
Unless you have lost a child, you can't know.

Please don't tell me that I had her for so many years.  
What year would you choose for your child to die?

Please don't tell me God never gives us more than we can bear.  
That does not alleviate any of my pain now.

Please just let me cry without trying to fix me.  
I am not broken, not needing to be fixed—just grieving.

Please just say you are sorry.  
Those are special, powerful words.

Please, if you have one, just share a story of my child.  
It reminds me of the special times we shared.

Please just let me talk about my child.  
I need to make her part of my new life without her physical presence.

Please freely mention my child's name in conversation.  
That shows me that she is not being forgotten.

Please remember that death only ends a life.  
It does not ever end a loving relationship.

Please remember that my child will always be my child.  
That her body is no longer here does not change that fact.

Please make my child a part of your life, too.  
I will be eternally grateful.

# griefHaven on the radio

Susan Whitmore, Founder and President of griefHaven, is being interviewed on live online radio August 6, 2013 at 11 a.m. pst at [www.W4WN.com](http://www.W4WN.com). Anyone may tune in to hear the show. We will also have the show available to hear on the griefHaven website once the show is over.

The show was started by Joni Aldrich who lost her husband to cancer. Joni has published six books, and her shows include: Cancer S.O.S., Caregiving S.O.S., Ladies Who Inspired, Diagnosis S.O.S. and Treatment S.O.S. Mark your calendars!



## did you know...?

That anyone may make a donation to griefHaven throughout the year for any event, celebration, or just because, and griefHaven will put up a beautiful memory tile in honor or memory of the person, as well as send a personalized card to the person of your choosing with the wording exactly as you write it. For instance, people send donations in honor of a friend's anniversary who lost their child several years ago or in memory of someone's child or on a person's birthday or as a graduation tribute or... You get the idea. The list goes on and on. It makes a wonderful gift and is a way to let people know you remember or are commemorating them or someone they love.

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We make money just by your searching!  
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**\$219.47**



It's SO easy. All you need to do is go to [www.goodsearch.com](http://www.goodsearch.com), name griefHaven as charity of choice, and the website will walk you through the rest!

Thanks for supporting us!