

Grief and Trauma After the Palisades Fire

Palisadian Susan Whitmore—Founder and CEO of griefHaven—Partners With Three Colleagues to Provide Suggestions for the Community

By SUSAN WHITMORE
Contributing Writer

Shortly after the Palisades fire destroyed our sweet and beautiful town, I began reaching out to media, hoping to get them to address the inevitable grief and trauma in the aftermath of the fire. And I have been frustrated. No media I spoke with seemed interested.

As a grief and trauma expert, I understood that grief and trauma would soon visit those whose houses had burned to the ground—who had lost everything. And I knew that many with houses still standing would be going through their own, different grief and trauma.

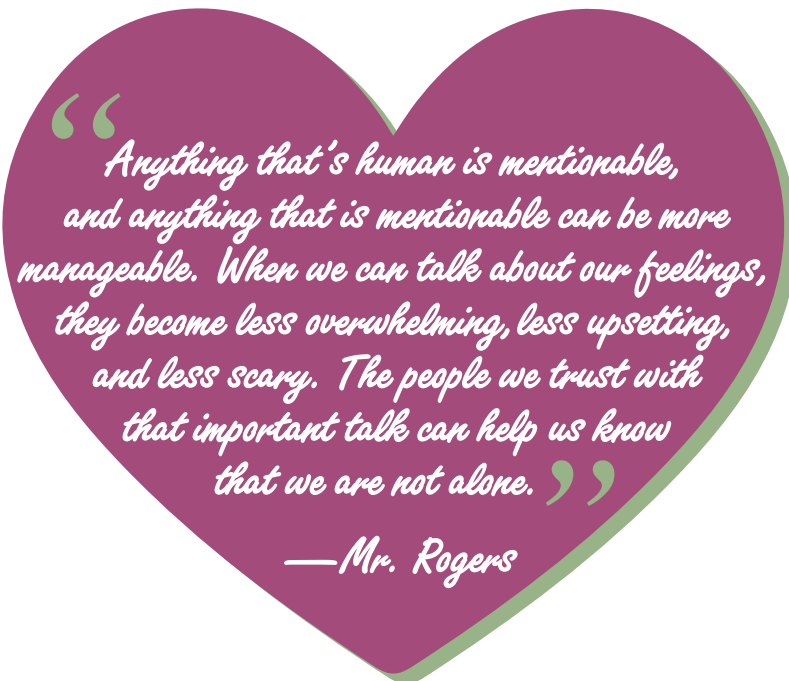
I've been earnestly wanting to share this much-needed information with you, to help you, to give you actual steps to deal with your and your family's experiences of loss, whether it be the loss of your house or your community.

When a disaster directly impacts you, when everything you know suddenly changes without your permission, the impact is life-altering and horrifying, resulting in emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual challenges. Such loss is uniquely and intimately yours.

"Even if your home, belongings and loved ones were spared, if your life has been touched by a natural disaster, you are experiencing grief," renowned grief expert Dr. Alan Wolfelt said. "You might not think of what you're going through as grief because you might associate grief with death, but whenever you experience loss, you grieve."

Yes, all these difficult thoughts and feelings roiling around inside you are part of the panoply of grief.

Often, the feelings and thoughts that follow loss through natural disaster don't come flooding in until the initial shock recedes and things begin to settle. You might even wonder if you are experiencing grief at



all. But it's when the natural protection our brains give us—numbness and shock—starts to wear off that you may be left thinking, "What is happening to me?"

Everyone experiences grief from loss to one degree or another, and if you haven't yet, at some point you will. In my work as a grief counselor, I regularly hear my clients express how their grief has "evened the playing field." This is their way of saying that grief erases distinctions of age, gender, status, wealth and all else—it affects us all, even as our individual experiences vary.

Some people think that grief is reserved for those whose loved ones die. Of course, that is a common way for grief and trauma to enter our lives, but it's not relegated to just that. Grief doesn't distinguish between types of loss, and will come to visit after the death of a person, the destruction of property or the loss of community.



Susan Whitmore

Photo courtesy of griefHaven

Perhaps you find yourself crying easily, feeling sick to your stomach, overeating, generally being sad, angry, edgy, having a short fuse, or reliving what has happened to you over and over while experiencing disbelief or a feeling like this is all a dream. These are but a few of the many normal reactions to loss.

Because the Palisades wildfire leveled our homes and community, grief and trauma will be a part of our lives going forward. Life has changed. We don't like it. In fact, we may hate it. Still, what can we do now to more easily navigate this journey we have been forced to take?

We might have questions. What are these feelings we are having? Why can't we sleep? Why are our children afraid to be left alone? How can we help our friends who lost everything? Why do we feel guilty that our place didn't burn?

Well, there is help, and there are answers. Together with my friends and colleagues, Wolfelt, Dr. Renee Schwartz and Dr. Denise Mandel, we have assembled a list of suggestions to help you and your family.

Suggestions from Susan Whitmore, Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Dr. Renee Schwartz and Dr. Denise Mandel

1

Grief after a disaster is normal and natural.

Your loss is enormous. Grief needs to be given a voice, which means having a way to get the thoughts and feelings inside of you expressed outwardly.

Everyone grieves differently, so allow yourself to grieve in the way that is organic for you. Common ways to allow expression of grief can be crying, exercising, being creative, attending a grief group or seeing a grief specialist. Just do not avoid grief or push it down. After all, the only wrong way to grieve is to deny the experience of grief that you actually have.

With a catastrophic loss on the scale of the Palisades wildfire, both collective and individual grief are present. And both may be triggered unexpectedly, coming in waves and then receding. Just know that when grief comes to visit, you can express it, learn about it and begin to understand how to incorporate it into your life.

2

Actively seek out sources of safety and comfort.

Naturally, you feel vulnerable, unsafe and anxious. Your nervous system is telling you the world can be dangerous. Something violent and out of your control has happened, and it happened to you.

To counterbalance this natural reaction, locate yourself among people and places where you feel safe. If that means moving in with a friend temporarily, that's OK. If it means avoiding certain places, fine.

Many, myself included, have avoided returning to the Palisades village since the fire. It's OK, if possible, to avoid it for a time and to more gradually expose yourself to the visual horror the fire left behind.

3

Re-establish some routine as quickly as possible.

Your routine has likely been out of whack since the fire. See if you can reincorporate at least

some of it, even when you are overwhelmed with all that needs to be handled after the fire. For instance, if you played pickleball three days per week, try to get back to it, perhaps in a new place where you feel safe and secure.

4

Find ways to share with those who have a similar loss.

Research repeatedly shows us that sharing with others who are going through the same difficult experience of loss can be especially healing and helpful. Don't fall victim to the cliché that time heals all wounds. Grief waits on "welcome," not on "time"—a way of saying that grief will wait until you deal with it.

Find a group, grief counselor, spiritual advisor or friends with whom you can share what you are going through. Support groups can be a healing, safe place for those grieving a loss to express their thoughts and feelings. This is the precise time when we can all join hands to support ourselves and others.

5

See survivors' guilt for what it is.

Survivors' guilt, which can lead to depression and anxiety, may be quite prevalent now. This guilt reaction is not actually tied to the fact that your place did not burn, but that you care and feel deeply for those who lost everything.

It is, in part, an empathetic response to the suffering of others. If your house did not burn, it is not on you, but literally on which way the wind blew. If you change your thinking to this way of looking at this issue, it will help you let go of the guilt.

6

Your experience of loss may bring up previous times of grief or struggle.

We are the sum of our experiences. Before this fire, you had a specific life experience in your community. Now, not only are you forced to deal with this loss, but it can trigger past experiences of loss or trauma, particularly if they were not fully resolved. Again, sharing with a group or qualified professionals can be most helpful.

7

Follow best practices in helping children.

Your children are grieving too. Their feelings of loss can be enormous, even when they may not recognize such feelings or have difficulty expressing them.

a) Children need to get back to regular routines as quickly as possible. They miss their friends, school, lifestyle and home. Create new routines, including times when they can get together with friends, such as in a park, in your temporary home or at a fun gathering spot.

b) If you are planning to visit the lot where your home used to be, or even if your house is still standing but there is damage in or around it, ask your children if they want to visit with you, but do not make them go. You can begin by explaining that the house burned down or that houses around you burned down. If they do not want to go, then find a time to go when they can stay behind.

c) Monitor how much news of the fire or its aftermath your children are exposed to. In the same way that repeated disturbing images can impact adults, the same is true for children. To avoid distress from the news, a child may say they have a tummy ache, leave the area or seclude themselves. Adults can watch the news at times when the children are not around. And even adults need to carefully assess how much they are watching.

d) Be honest with your children. You might think being stoic or avoiding your grief around them is protecting them. But children can cope with what they know, not with what they don't know. When they don't know, they can easily imagine something worse. Be gentle, but real. Avoid euphemisms and hidden agendas.

e) Model healthy grief. If you are feeling sad and missing your community and friends, talking openly with your children about this will help them normalize their similar feelings. Age-appropriate talk is essential. If you shed tears, you can say, "Mommy is feeling sad right now

because I'm missing our home and my friends. And sometimes when I am feeling sad, I cry. Do you miss your friends too?" It's a fine line between being "strong" for your family and being downright stoic, pushing everything away.

f) Children are afraid right now of losing more than they already have. They are feeling insecure about their safety and future. Assure your children that you will always be there for them, that they are safe and that they can talk with you about their feelings.

8

This is the time to practice self-compassion.

Self-compassion is as simple as being kind and patient with yourself. Try not to judge the way you are feeling, thinking or even lacking in ability to know what to do. Crises like these can cause people to be edgy or angry, which is also a natural part of grieving. Be aware of these feelings and try not to let these feelings lead to lashing out at or blaming others.

9

What to say and not say to those who are grieving.

Avoid expressions like "these are only things" or "things can be replaced" or "at least you have each other." Even though these statements have some truth, people have many things that are irreplaceable and filled with meaning. Also, what we might call "things" can be tied to people's identities, lifestyles and sense of community.

The depth of loss of an entire community and the sense of comfort and safety therein is deeply disturbing. You can simply say, "I'm so sorry for your great loss." Or if you have close experiences together, you can say something like, "I remember so many wonderful times in your home."

Validate that they, of course, are struggling, that the loss is catastrophic. And just listen. Let them talk. Give them a hug. Avoid oversharing your opinions or advice because what they need right now is to simply express their feelings and find comfort and refuge in your understanding and compassion.

Susan Whitmore is the founder and CEO of griefHaven, an internationally recognized nonprofit that provides grief and trauma support. She has been a grief specialist and educator for over 20 years. She lives in the Palisades and lost her griefHaven office in the fire. Denise Mandel, Ph.D., is a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice in West Los Angeles, and is a grief and trauma expert. She facilitates griefHaven support groups. Renee Schwartz, Ph.D., is a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice, and is a grief and trauma expert who has a post-graduate fellowship in child and adolescent psychology. She facilitates griefHaven support groups. Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D., is a nationally recognized grief and trauma expert and educator whose new book, "Healing Your Grief When Disaster Strikes," can be ordered on Amazon. For more information, contact griefHaven at 310-459-1789 or visit griefHaven.org.