

**D**r. Hoy holds a clinical faculty appointment in Medical Humanities at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. A popular speaker for groups of caregiving professionals across North America, Dr. Hoy has counselled with people in grief and has worked with the professionals who care for them for nearly 30 years. Prior to going to Baylor, Bill directed the bereavement program at Pathways Volunteer Hospice in Long Beach California for more than 16 years. In addition to his university teaching schedule, he provides dozens of professional continuing education workshops and keynote addresses every year.

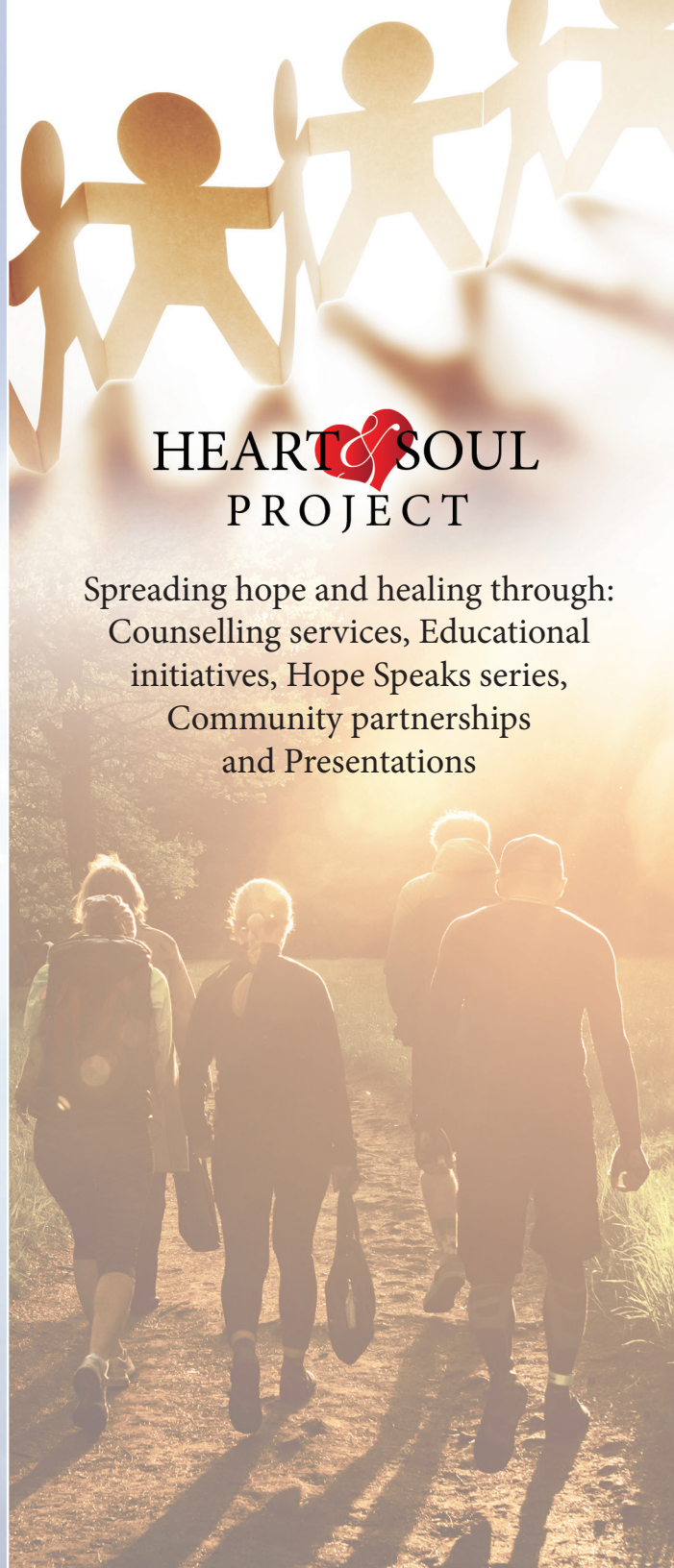


Dr. William G. (Bill) Hoy

Active in the leadership of the Association for Death Education & Counselling, Dr. Hoy holds the organization's advance practice credential, the FT (Fellow in Thanatology). Since 2013, Bill has served on the Association's board and in 2014, Bill was elected to a three-year term as the association's Treasurer.

Bill edits *GriefPerspectives*, an email newsletter read every month by more than 4,500 caregiving professionals and volunteers. His book, *Guiding People Through Grief* (Compass, 2007) is in its fourth printing and the newer volume, *Road to Emmaus* (Compass, 2008) is in its third. Along with Dr. Laura Lewis (University of Western Ontario), he co-authored the chapter "Bereavement Rituals and the Creation of Legacy" in the recently-published *Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society* (Routledge, 2011).

His newest book, *Do Funerals Matter? The Purposes and Practices of Death Rituals in Global Perspective* (Routledge, 2013) takes a practical anthropologist's look at the "anchors" present in funeral rituals around the world and throughout history. Additionally, he has written more than 100 journal articles and educational pamphlets for bereaved people and the professionals and volunteers who care for them.



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Volume 10

## WHEN YOU GRIEVE IN THE SENIOR YEARS

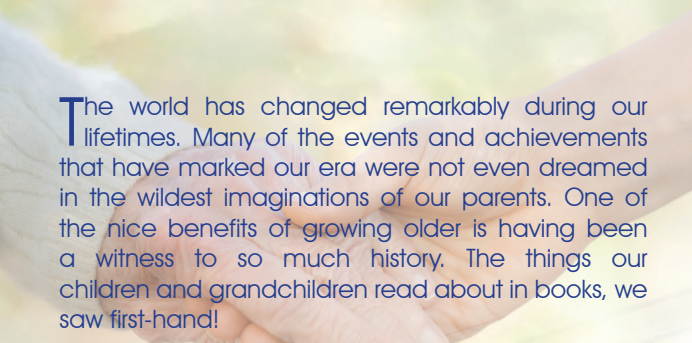
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The world has changed remarkably during our lifetimes. Many of the events and achievements that have marked our era were not even dreamed in the wildest imaginations of our parents. One of the nice benefits of growing older is having been a witness to so much history. The things our children and grandchildren read about in books, we saw first-hand!

But, one of the difficulties of growing into the senior years is that we find ourselves saying goodbye more frequently than ever. The emotions, physical sensations, thoughts, and spiritual questions that accompany these losses are what we call grief. This grief is the collection of experiences we live through whenever we say goodbye to a cherished relationship or possession.

Depending on the nature of your relationship with the person who died, you might feel somewhat like you have lost your mind. You might feel like you are in a fog or performing like a robot. These are some of the reasons most experts advise grieving people to avoid making major life decisions like selling a home or changing jobs in the first year or so of bereavement.

The emotions of grief are varied and no two people grieve quite the same. Many people in grief experience anger, guilt, fear, sadness, and loneliness. You may experience any of these or all of these—but grief has no real “timetables” or predictable stages. It is a highly personal process that you must learn to manage.

The death of a mate is one of the more common experiences in later life. When we said, “until death do us part,” we could not imagine the pain that would accompany that parting. If you’re like many of us in later

life, you have built much of your life around this person who has now died, having married him or her four, five, or six decades ago.

While not the most common experience for seniors, the death of a child occurs in more families than one would realize. Adult children get sick and are involved in accidents. This loss is particularly hard to reconcile because we are conditioned to believe that parents should never bury their children. Regardless of the age of a child, his or her death is a devastating loss.

As we grow older, we find ourselves attending—or staying away from—more and more funerals. One 84-year old widowed gentleman told his bereavement support group at the senior center, “It seems I’m going to a funeral every week now. I keep wondering who’ll be next and if anyone will still be around to come to mine.”

Of course, not every loss in our senior years is related to death. We often contend with the loss of physical abilities, drivers license, family home, independence, sight or hearing, and a host of other elements of daily life we used to take for granted.

## FINDING WHAT IS “NORMAL”

Myths abound in our society about grief and what is or is not “normal.” Some of your well-meaning friends and family members have likely advised you to just “get on with your life.” Unfortunately, this advice rarely helps and usually makes us feel even more alienated than ever from those we love.

During this time of adjustment, it’s important to take care of yourself physically. Work hard at eating a well-balanced diet and follow the exercise recommendations of your doctor. Taking care of our physical well-being has a profound impact on how we feel.

Try attending a loss support group. Many hospices, hospitals, faith communities, and senior centers offer these groups. Some are general grief groups for people regardless of their loss while others are specifically for those who are widowed or whose child has died. In addition to groups for people grieving the death of a loved person, there are also support groups for people who are dealing with disabilities or who are caring for a chronically ill family member.



Make sure you give yourself time and space for healing, too. We expect this process to be resolved much quicker than is usually realistic, so give yourself permission to feel this way for a while. Even though you would like to “be over this” quickly, most losses take at least a year or two to fully reconcile. And remember that you don’t really “recover” as much as you learn to live in a world that has been radically changed.

Now is also a great time to explore or reaffirm your faith, too. A faith community leader or other spiritual person can help you as you grapple with faith questions. Reading the Bible or spiritual devotional materials can help you as you work through the faith-related questions in your bereavement.

Finally, be sure to make connections with your family, church or temple, and community groups of which you are a part. These people who “know you best” may be some of your most faithful supporters in your grief.

This article was written by William G. Hoy, a counselor widely known to bereaved people and the professionals who care for them. After more than 16 years working with bereaved people and directing the bereavement counseling program at Pathways Volunteer Hospice in Long Beach, CA, Dr. Hoy now teaches in the Medical Humanities Program at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

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