

Military OneSource Podcast — Surviving Milestones as a Survivor

Episode transcript

Intro voiceover:

Welcome to the Military OneSource Podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department, with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. Losing a loved one or a close friend can be a roller coaster of happy and painful memories and emotion. This is especially so around the time of birthdays, anniversaries and other significant events. What we want to do today is to talk about grief and particularly advice for survivors as they're navigating milestones. We have amazing help with this conversation. Joining us today is Audri Beugelsdijk. Audri is with TAPS. This is the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors. So Audri, welcome to the podcast.

Audri Beugelsdijk:

Thank you so much. It's good to be here, Bruce.

Bruce Moody:

It is wonderful to have you with us. What I'd like to do is just begin with having you explain the mission of TAPS and then your role within the organization.

Audri Beugelsdijk:

Absolutely. I'm happy to do that. TAPS has been in existence for ... coming on 30 years. We're approaching our 30th anniversary. And since our inception, the mission has remained steady. We're here to support the grief journey of all those who have had a loved one who served in the military and ultimately died either during service or after service.

We are here regardless of the manner of death, the location of death, the relationship to the person who died. We are here to honor the grief journey and to help people to

process what those next steps are in their lives and honor the loved one who served, up to and including their passing. I came to TAPS in 1997, myself as a survivor. I was active-duty Navy at the time. I was serving with my husband, although he was serving in California. I was serving in the state of Maine.

We were newlyweds when that tragic visit came from the casualty officer. I became a widow at 24 years old, and receiving that notification and realizing how dramatically my life changed was really only eased by the fact that within a few days I was able to connect with Bonnie Carroll, who is our president and founder.

And as the first widow I connected with, who was going through that journey like I was entering into, I found a hope that was palpable. I looked at her and I saw that she was able to get out of bed. She was able to put one foot in front of the other, and not just that she was surviving it, but she was also thriving. Seeing her be able to model that was hope that I couldn't even at the time articulate. And that's the beautiful thing about TAPS and about the TAPS family, is that we see other people who are going through that journey and because they are doing it, that gives us hope that we can do it as well.

And so being a 24-year-old widow, having someone model that for me was really life-changing, and it's been an ongoing journey that I've been on for, well, all these years since.

Over the years I've held many roles within TAPS, but currently as the vice president of Survivor Services, really what that encompasses is the primary outreach mechanisms for all of our families. What are the ways that we are connecting and growing in relationship with each person who comes to us? How are we proactively pursuing opportunities to bring healing for people through programming, through services, eliciting to what their needs are and really just meeting them where they are.

So whether it is our 24/7 helpline that falls within my team or it is a program on-site anywhere in the country, we are leveraging opportunities to use the experiences of the survivors who are professionals on my team to really make that connection and grow that ongoing support that's going to be so important for the journey for each person.

Bruce Moody:

Audri, we so appreciate you sharing that with us, sharing your story, your journey really. And as you've been saying, it's a journey that many go through, and it was just interesting to hear that that journey can actually bring someone to thriving, but there are milestones along the way, and let's talk about those milestones that can just make that journey especially difficult. Again, birthdays, anniversaries, significant events, and someone will know what those events are within their lives. We may not know them, but they know them. So what is the advice that you can share for survivors who are coming up upon these milestones?

Audri Beugelsdijk:

That's a really big question, and it's quite broad because the milestones, some of them are obvious ones. My husband's birthday actually just came and passed yet again, and the way that I mark that now is very different from the first year. So I think that's an obvious one because you know that it's coming, it's on your calendar, you see it coming and can make a plan for that.

I think the first thing that I would say is that it's important to have an awareness of the milestones that you can identify ahead of time. And having that awareness, I think, it's again important to think through how you will navigate that particular milestone or that day. Having a plan that includes who will you connect with, who will you be able to reach out to and maybe share a cup of coffee with to talk through if that's what you feel you need to do.

Maybe it's planning to take a walk and have some solitude for reflection. Each person should be able to meet themselves where they are and identify the things that will be most helpful for them. And for some people that's being in community and around people, and that should be the plan that they include because they know themselves.

For other people, again, it's having that moment of solitude where they say, "I'm going to go," whether it's to the cemetery, "I'm going to go to the cemetery and sit with my person at their grave site," and maybe that's what's most helpful. Wherever each person finds themselves though, I think that giving permission to yourself to have the flexibility in the moment that if the plan that you initially set in place does not feel supportive in that moment, that it's OK to change it. It's OK to shift and do something different to make sure that you are giving yourself the support that you need.

And so a plan is only as good as our ability to be flexible with it, and so I think it's important to do that. These are the milestones that are ones that we can see coming that we put on the calendar, but there are others that may blindsides us, things that we aren't necessarily even thinking of as milestones and they suddenly creep up on us, and

those are the ones that can really catch us off guard. And I think in those moments, it's again important to have a support network.

We talk in TAPS a lot about the stool, the concept of a stool. You sit on a stool or a chair and it has hopefully four legs on it, and each one of those legs provides additional stability. If you start taking those legs away, suddenly you become less stable, and you don't sit comfortably.

And so what are the four legs of your stool? What are the areas of support that you can call on? So whether it's a friend or a group, or a therapist, or your colleagues, or an animal that is supportive, a service animal, or it's leveraging getting out of nature ... whatever those things are, creating a list of the things that are most supportive of you and then being able to flex and choose the one that in the moment is going to most supportive at that time. So I think that's probably the most complete answer I can give you, given the fact that milestones are such a broad range, but I look forward to digging into more details on that.

Bruce Moody:

Yes. And the broad range also is with the grief itself. So how does grief differ during these different times from person to person?

Audri Beugelsdijk:

I think you even suggesting that it's from person to person is extremely important. Grief is not a one size fits all, and so I never give advice to people about their grief. I navigate my own grief, and I've understood a lot of things about my own grief, and I try to understand other people's grief as well, maybe through some of the insights that I have gleaned. But I think that grief is, while it's universal, it's also incredibly individual, and so each person has to be able to give themselves the permission to be on that rollercoaster.

I think that one of the challenges of grief is that it can sometimes be unpredictable. It's been many years since my husband passed now, and there have been some years that it's been incredibly difficult to be in that place and remembering, and I experienced just the intensity, the depth of the emotions that took me to sometimes dark places.

But there have also been times where I've remembered him where the roller coaster wasn't at the bottom, it was at the top, and I was on a high, thinking about him and his life and how beautiful he was and how amazing he was. And so I may not know from year to year where that milestone comes around ... and maybe his birthday or Christmas or the anniversary of his death. I don't know how that's going to quite land on me each year, but I have to allow myself to experience that moment where I am.

And the rollercoaster of grief can make that feel a little bit like emotional whiplash, and I think that that is what makes people feel like there's maybe something wrong with them because of that intensity of the cycle of grief, where you can be up one minute and down the next minute.

I do recall, in the very first conversation I had with TAPS, saying these words, "I feel like I'm going crazy, because one minute I was OK and the next minute I was on the floor in the fetal position, sobbing uncontrollably. And how can a person experience such intense depth of pain while also on the other end of the spectrum feeling OK in the moment?"

That rapid cycling back and forth was physically and emotionally exhausting, and so I think the important thing to understand about grief is that, that does happen and frankly, it's normal. It's normal for a person to go through those cycles. And so if we can instead of fighting against ourselves, that somehow there's something wrong with us, if we can simply relax into that being true about really the universal experience of grief, then we can relax into our circumstances in a way that can be more comfortable for us, even when it's in the deep dark places.

Bruce Moody:

Wonderful. Thank you for sharing that. Another question, how can a friend or a family member support a survivor who is approaching a milestone?

Audri Beugelsdijk:

That is such an important question. We find that one of the things that frequently happens is that people are afraid that if they bring up the subject that it's somehow going to be too painful for the person, this goes back to grieving in isolation. People don't know exactly what to say, and so they're frequently afraid to say the wrong thing, and so often they will default to say nothing and that can feel very unsupportive of the person who has a milestone coming.

So I think that there's nothing wrong with being able to join a person in that place and simply saying, "I know that this important date is coming up and I don't know if you want to talk about it, but I want you to know that I recognize it and I'm here if you want to talk through it or if you want to get a cup of coffee, just know that I'm here and you don't have to go through this alone."

Even if that's all you say, that person has had an acknowledgement that someone else recognizes that this difficult or potentially difficult day is coming. Sometimes, I recall actually getting a message from someone who reached out to TAPS. It had been 10 years since her husband had died, and we sent her a card in the mail and just recognized, we call them angelversaries, "His angelversaries is coming up. We're

thinking about you.” And she reached out and she said, “I just want to say thank you because after 10 years, you are the only people who still remember that he lived.”

Wow, Bruce, how powerful is that? I think that it's a gift, honestly, that we give to one another when we can remember that and we can feel comfortable to reach out and say, “Hey, I also remember,” because one of our greatest fears as survivors — and we hear this whether it's a child or an adult — one of our greatest fears is, “I'm going to forget the sound of their voice. I'm going to forget what their cologne smelled like. I'm going to forget how they laughed, the bounce in their step.”

When other people can join us in that, then we can feel certain that our person hasn't been forgotten, and what a tremendous blessing that is. So any person who knows that it's coming should feel comfortable and confident that they are actually blessing somebody by letting them know that they're there and that they're remembering, and then honoring however that person responds.

If they respond and they say, “Thank you, please join me in this,” then join them in that. One of the challenges I think that people have when they are reaching out, trying to support another person, is that they don't know what to say and so they just feel uncomfortable to be in that place because they feel like they're supposed to do something about it.

And the thing about grief and about emotions is that to be supportive of someone does not mean to take your emotions away or to make them stop crying. So when you say to someone, “Don't be sad,” let it be OK that they be sad in your presence and be one of the few people who loves them enough for it to be OK, for you to just sit with them in that, and let that moment be OK, because the majority of people don't feel comfortable to just sit in it, and you aren't responsible for changing it.

One of the amazing things that Dr. Alan Wolfelt, who is the author of the Companioning Philosophy, what he says is that companioning is about going to the wilderness of the soul with another human being. It's not about feeling responsible for helping them find their way out. So if a friend, if someone who cares about you can just simply be with you in that and not feel burdened to change it or help you find your way out of it, that is an honorable place to be, and people respond to that and they will respond to that.

Bruce Moody:

Audri, this is powerful, important information. We're so grateful that you're sharing this with us today. Let's change direction just a little bit and bring children into the conversation. For those who have children, how can their kids help their own memories and find comfort during these times?

Audri Beugelsdijk:

What a great question, and I'm so glad to have some conversation around this. One of the things that so frequently happens in families is that we begin to protect one another from our grief. It happens frequently that between children and the surviving parent, that children see the intensity of the experience their surviving parent is having.

And just for ease, I'll say if it's Mom, if their dad has passed, and that's certainly not universal, sometimes it's other relationships. But if their dad has passed and they see their mom's grief frequently, Mom will try to hide that from the kids. Crying alone so that the kids don't get worried, not talking about Dad because they don't want to trigger their children, trying to protect their children from their emotion. Well, the children see it. Children are pretty intuitive, and they can tell when something's wrong. So what happens is, as the surviving parent, you begin to isolate your own emotions from your children, but your children are doing the same thing.

Children don't want to burden, and this is what we hear from kids themselves. I'm not a grieving child, but have had plenty of conversations with grieving children, especially teenagers who can articulate this, that they know how much their mom is hurting. Therefore, they don't want to burden their mom, and so they also don't share where they are. They don't share their own grief. And what happens when families begin to do that is that they grieve in isolation from one another, and they don't have the support of one another.

And so whether it feels intuitive to a parent or not, there's something resilience building about allowing your children, or for children allowing your maybe surviving mom, to see that you can have a moment that is really difficult where you can experience the memory of that person. That it can move you to tears, sometimes in intense tears. And that you can work through that and come out on the other end and take a deep breath and then take a step forward.

That helps a person realize that it is cyclical, that I can work through it, and I can work through it together with my family. I don't have to do it on my own. And then you're building the family unit where you're beginning to share those memories with one another, work through them together and come out OK on the other end. Boy, when you do that, it reinforces future opportunities where we successfully navigate this as a

family, and because we did it once, we can do it again. So sometimes we protect one another from those memories.

A lot of times people who are surviving a death, they will avoid leaning into and remembering things, especially around those milestones, because they don't want to make other people cry. When in reality, it's not like you're suddenly reminding a person that their person died, they're thinking about it anyway. By sharing a memory, you're giving permission for them to go there with you, and then together you work through it. And what a beautiful resilience building thing that we can do for one another.

One of the things that I'll say specifically about children is that they're unique, one child from one child to the other. They may want to have an opportunity to talk through memories, others maybe not so. I really think it's important for us to meet each person where they are. From milestones, sometimes people want to mark them in a really outward public way, and other people are more private about that.

So I think it's important to have open lines of communication and for the parent to have some intuitiveness about who their child is, how they think, what their personalities are, what they find most helpful, which is very similar to when you're in a family. Some people want to maintain a wall of photos, and it feels really supportive, and other family members might say, "We have to take all of those down. I can't handle that. I can't walk past those and see those every day."

The challenge within a family is how do you accommodate the needs of people who are on opposite ends of that experience in that spectrum while honoring that one needs it and one doesn't? So how do you come to points of compromise that feel supportive of each person?

And I think that, that requires a lot of intentionality and communication with each person about what it is that they need. What do they find most helpful? And if we can lean into those questions with each person and then allow them the space to share that, we can begin to build a plan for how we really honor the needs of each person individually in the family, to lean into those milestones and lean into the memories in ways that feel supportive of them and what they need.

Bruce Moody:

There's an online memorial, so let's change the conversation a little bit once again. This is an online memorial. It's created by the Defense Department. It's called Military In Lasting Tribute, and I know you're familiar with it. What I'd like you to do is describe it in terms of how it would be an outlet for survivors.

Audri Beugelsdijk:

Memorials are so important, whether they're an in-person memorial or certainly online. We do so much of our grieving now, because of social media, in such a public way, and I think that that's become an expectation, the ways that we honor our people. I think that having the online tribute provides an outlet for people to share it in a broader way, where more global society now and our relationships are more global, especially being in the military.

There's the family you're born into and there's the family you create for yourself. And as a veteran myself and a member of the military, there are loved ones I have now all around the world, people that we've served with and have relationships with. And I want to be able, like others, to share the memory of my husband, to put his photo out in the world, to have some information about him out there that other people can join me in honoring him.

And I think that there's strength in numbers as well. Some people may feel discouraged about that — to see how many people are in that online tribute — and yet my husband and so many others, they are there with their brothers and sisters at arms. And I think it's an encouragement for people to be able to share that. Certainly not everybody does, but it is absolutely a place that you can take with you.

You can post that tribute. You can access it from your phone no matter where you're in the world. You can be very supportive for a person to just go to that and sit with that person. Like my husband, the only marker for him is in Indiana, and that's nowhere near where I currently live, so I can't go there. But if I have an online tribute to him, and I can go and sit in that place, it is, for some people, the next best thing.

And the continuing bond to be able to stay connected with your loved one, whether it is that online tribute, or they're at the cemetery where you have their gravestone, or it's in your own home where you have their flag and other memorabilia, that is connected to them. It's that continuing bond with the person that is the important marker.

And so online tributes, like the one through Military OneSource, is an important part of the experience of any survivor. And I highly recommend it. And anyone who has not leaned into that opportunity to remember and to put their loved one out there in the public space for other people to also honor ... I think it's a beautiful thing. I appreciate that we have access to that.

Bruce Moody:

We do. And we'll put a link in the program notes to this website: Military In Lasting Tribute. We're also going to put a link in the program notes to TAPS. Again, that's Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors. Audri, as we wrap up, we're going to put a couple more links in the program notes, and one of them is a link to Military OneSource and the counseling that we offer. For someone who just needs to reach out and talk to somebody, how might Military OneSource be a resource to take advantage of?

Audri Beugelsdijk:

I think it's important to lean into any resources that can feel supportive. Connecting with Military OneSource, it is fantastic clearing house for so many resources. Sometimes making that first connection to Military OneSource will open doors for other connections that can be an ongoing source of support for that person. So I think that it's incredible to start there.

Military OneSource, being such a great partner of TAPS as well, knows that we are here to further connect. And I think it's important to augment those supports when you're grieving especially. It's important to be able to diversify. There are professional supports that are important to have, therapeutic supports from professionals who've gone through training and counseling and psychology, et cetera. And then there's also the peer support aspect of it, which is where TAPS comes in so beautifully and dovetails with the work that Military OneSource does.

So whether you're connecting with a professional counselor, getting that connection either through Military OneSource or coming to TAPS and letting us help you vet those resources, it's important to know that that's one portion of your support. And then that peer support aspect, the 24/7 helpline that we operate as well, it's an opportunity to talk with someone who has also experienced that and can relate to you and build rapport with you and grow in relationship with you. So, I think that starting with Military OneSource is a fantastic resource.

Again, dovetailing with TAPS and other local resources that you have, because the military family as you know, we are spread all over the country and all around the world. And we can't put all of our eggs in one basket, so to speak. So we have to be able to leverage both the national platforms that we have through the resources, but also local resources. And so we want to work with people, like you do. We want to work with people who are looking for those local resources as well that we can help them connect with. So I just think it's such an incredible resource, Military OneSource, and I've used it extensively myself and certainly have used TAPS extensively as well over the years.

Bruce Moody:

Audri, we're so grateful to spend some time with you today. Thank you so very much.

Audri Beugelsdijk:

It is my supreme pleasure. I know this topic that we are leaning into is something that we could talk about exhaustively. Being able to, a little bit, scratch the surface today if anyone listening can have the hope that they're not alone in this, that the milestones will come. But as you have a plan and connect with other people who can support you through that, it can wind up easing a journey that is incredibly difficult at best, and nonetheless can be incredibly helpful when you surround yourself with people who can love you through it. So thank you for the opportunity to join you here today. I appreciate your questions, and thank you so much.

Bruce Moody:

You're very welcome. Audri Beugelsdijk of TAPS, great to have you with us. And I want to remind you all that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always look forward to hearing from you. Click on the link in the program notes, send us a comment, question, maybe an idea for a future episode.

And be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you very much for listening today. Take care. Bye-bye.