



# Grief: how to help yourself and others through the grieving process

Grief is a natural response to the loss of someone or something very important to you. Grieving is the process of emotional and life adjustment you go through after a loss. There is no “normal and expected” period of time for grieving and everyone grieves differently.

Experiencing a loss can cause feelings of grief when you least expect it. You may find that old feelings from a past loss can be triggered by current experiences or anniversaries of that loss. This is normal. You may feel anticipatory grief, which happens in advance of an impending loss and helps us prepare for the loss, because a loved one is sick and dying.

Suffering after the death of a beloved family member, friend, coworker or even a pet is the most obvious form of grieving. But there are ways to grieve the loss of many things beyond a loved one’s passing:

- The end of a long-term relationship
- The loss of a job or planned career path
- Deterioration in our health or the onset of a threatening medical diagnosis
- The loss of something valued, such as a home via natural disaster or financial problems
- Unexpected changes in our families or lives
- The prolonged absence of a loved one
- The loss of a dream due to circumstances beyond our control

# Common symptoms of grief and grieving

While you are feeling shock, numbness, sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, or fear, you may also find moments of relief, peace, or happiness. And although grieving is not simply sadness or feeling the blues, you may become depressed or overly anxious during the grieving process. The stress of grief and grieving can take a physical toll on your body. Sleeplessness is common, as is a weakened immune system over time. If you have a chronic illness, grieving can make your condition worse.

Your reaction to loss is influenced by the relationship you had with the person and by your general coping style, personality and life experiences. How you express grief is also influenced in part by the cultural, religious and social rules of your community.

## **Grief is expressed physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually:**

*Physical expressions* of grief often include:

- crying and sighing
- headaches
- loss of appetite
- difficulty sleeping
- weakness or fatigue
- feelings of heaviness
- aches and pains
- other stress-related ailments

*Emotional expressions* of grief can include feelings of:

- sadness and yearning
- worry
- anxiety
- frustration
- anger
- guilt

*Social expressions* of grief may include:

- feeling detached from others
- isolating yourself from social contact
- behaving in ways that are not normal for you

*Spiritual expressions* of grief may include questioning:

- the reason for your loss
- the purpose of pain and suffering
- the purpose of life
- the meaning of death (after a death, your grieving process is influenced by how you view death)

Grieving a significant loss takes time. Depending on the circumstances of your loss, grieving can take weeks to years. Grieving helps you gradually adjust to a new chapter of your life.

## Feeling and expressing grief

You may find that you feel irritable and restless, are quieter than usual, or need to be distant from or close to others. Or you may find that you aren't the same person you were before the loss. Don't be surprised if you experience conflicting feelings while grieving. For example, it's normal to feel despair about a death or a job loss yet also feel relief.

It's important that you find some way of expressing your grief. Talking, writing, creating art or music, or being physically active are all ways of expressing grief.

# Treatment for grieving

## When you are grieving, it is important to:

- **Get enough rest and sleep.** During sleep, your mind makes sense of what is happening in your life. Not getting enough rest and sleep can lead to physical illness and exhaustion. Try activities to help you relax, such as meditation or guided imagery.
- **Eat nourishing foods.** Resist the urge not to eat or to eat only those foods that comfort you. If you have trouble eating alone, ask another person to join you for a snack or meal. If you do not have an appetite, eat frequent small meals and snacks.
- **Stay hydrated.** Dehydration is a danger if you're grieving because the shock of the loss can leave you feeling unable to focus on basic needs. You're more susceptible to dehydration when you cry and perspire. Consume lots of water and other healthy fluids throughout the day.
- **Exercise.** If nothing else, take a walk. Brisk walking and other forms of exercise, such as yoga or tai chi and qi gong, can help release some of your pent-up emotions.
- **Comfort yourself.** Allow yourself the opportunity to be comforted by familiar surroundings and personal items that you value. Treat yourself to something you enjoy, such as a massage.
- **Try to stay involved in activities** that include your support network, such as work, church, or community activities.

## To help you work through the grieving process, make sure to:

- **Have a good cry as often as needed.** You often feel lighter after you have done this.
- **Surround yourself with loved ones.** You may feel lonely and separate from other people when you are grieving. Talking about your feelings and concerns with loved ones may help you feel more connected and less lonely.
- **Get involved.** Take part in the activities that occur as a result of the loss, such as making funeral arrangements.
- **Avoid quick fixes.** Resist the urge to drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, or take nonprescription medicines (such as sleeping aids).
- **Ask for help.** During times of emotional distress, it is important to allow other people to take over some of your responsibilities. Social support, good self-care and the passage of time are usually the best medicine for grieving. If you find that your grief is making it difficult to function for more than a week or two, contact a grief counselor or bereavement support group for help.
- **Avoid making major life decisions.** Give yourself time to sort out your feelings and adjust to your loss before making big changes such as moving, starting or leaving a relationship, or switching jobs.

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## Also consider:

- Read articles or books on the process of grief so you can identify what you are feeling and gain some new ideas on how to help yourself.
- Keep a journal to identify your feelings and also to see progress.
- Participate in activities that you feel would honor the person, animal or thing that you are grieving.
- Treat yourself to some rewarding experiences along the way as something to look forward to, such as a short trip or a new hobby. Experiences like these can provide a break from grief and remind you that you can enjoy some things in life again.

# Helping others cope with grief

There are many ways that you can help a person who is grieving. The best way to help often depends on how well the person was prepared for the loss and their personality and coping style.

## Tips for helping others

### **Encourage the person to grieve at their own pace.**

The grieving process is not linear. There will be good days and bad days. Do not try to “fix” the person’s grief. Provide support and be willing to listen. Simply asking, with real feeling, “How are you today?” shows you are aware that they may be struggling to get through their day. It also shows understanding that the most intense levels of grief might not be constant or permanent.

**Don’t ignore the person who is grieving just because you aren’t sure what to say.** Check in regularly during the first year and beyond, especially on important days, including the anniversary of the death, holidays and birthdays. If you do not feel comfortable starting a conversation with the grieving person, you could send a text message with something simple like, “I know I can’t possibly know what you’re going through, but I’m here for you. I’ve been thinking about you.”

### **Recognize that this person’s life has changed forever.**

Encourage the person to take part in activities that involve and build their support network.

**Rather than offering to do “anything,” offer to do something specific**—like mowing the lawn, picking up family, holding the person’s hand, or bringing food.

**Respect the person’s personal beliefs.** Listen to their feelings without making judgments. Do not try to change the person’s beliefs or feelings.

**Suggest they reach out for more formal help from a mental health professional, mentor or clergy member**, if they are experiencing a significant amount of emotional pain or struggling to function for an extended period of time.

## When grief gets complicated

For some people, feelings of loss are debilitating and don’t improve even after time passes. This is known as complicated grief. In complicated grief, painful emotions are so long lasting and severe that you have trouble recovering from the loss and resuming your own life.

Different people follow different paths through the grieving experience. The order and timing of these phases may vary from person to person:

- Accepting the reality of your loss
- Adjusting to a new reality in which who or what you’ve lost is no longer present
- Allowing yourself to experience the pain of your loss
- Having other relationships

These differences are normal. But if you’re unable to move through these stages more than a year after your loss, you may have complicated grief. If so, seek treatment by visiting a counselor who specializes in grief. If you don’t know where to start, ask your doctor. Counseling can help you come to terms with your loss and reclaim a sense of acceptance and peace.

Sources: Healthwise, Mayo Clinic, SAMHSA, Sandberg, S. & Grant, A. (2017). *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy*. Knopf.

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