

When You Are Grieving



A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING LOSS

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Introduction

If you're reading this, you've probably lost someone close to you. You may be feeling a lot of strong or confusing emotions. Sometimes people who are grieving feel like something is wrong with them. We want you to know that what you are feeling — whatever you are feeling — is most likely normal.

Grief is the natural way we cope with loss. It is the sum of everything you feel when something or someone important to you is no longer in your life. Grief can leave you feeling exhausted, raw, and overwhelmed.

You *can* get through this. That may be hard to believe right now. It will take time and patience. We hope this booklet will help you understand what you're feeling. Understanding your grief may help you find comfort and healing.

"Grief is not a disorder, a disease, or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical, and spiritual necessity, the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve."

— Dr. Earl A. Grollman, author of
Living When a Loved One Has Died

Your Own Grief Journey

As you begin your grief journey, remember that you will be grieving in your own way. You are a unique person. Your relationship with the person who died was unique. So only *you* know what feels right to you when you are grieving.

You might have been taught that grief is supposed to happen in stages. Unfortunately, that's not really how grief works. There are no set stages of grief. One day you may know exactly where you are with your grief. The next, you could feel totally lost again.

This can make you feel scared and out of control. These feelings are normal. Symptoms and emotions will often come in waves. Some will be so intense you can barely function. Others will be easier to handle.

You may not feel every symptom of grief mentioned in this booklet. That's okay. There are parts of grief that many people share. But that does not mean you need to feel the same way.

What you can do:

- **Take as long or as short a time as you need to grieve.** There is no set timetable for grief. It may take days, months, or even years.
- **Be gentle with yourself as you grieve.** Remember that grief is a process, not an event.
- **Know that it is normal to have grief attacks.** Grief attacks are overwhelming waves of grief. They are triggered by things that remind you of your loved one, like a song or a smell. They often come by surprise. Or they may hit you on special days, like birthdays or anniversaries. The first year may be hard as you go through all the "firsts" without your loved one.

After the Loss

The days or weeks just after the death can be hectic. For many, this first part of the grief journey involves family, visitors, and planning. This can take a lot of time and energy. The stress of these days added on top of grief can be overwhelming.

The full reality of your loss may not have hit you yet. It may seem unreal that your loved one is gone. You may feel like you are just going through the motions of daily life. It may be hard to take time to grieve in all of the chaos.

For some, having a ritual such as a funeral, wake, or memorial service can help bring closure. Some people prefer to have a small family get-together. Some make their own rituals. If there is no ceremony, you can remember your loved one in your own way.

What you can do:

- **Keep plans for the ritual manageable and within your budget.** Simplify things as much as you need to.
- **Reach out for help.** Assign tasks to others. Get help from family, friends, and the community.
- **Be aware that preparing for even small rituals can be overwhelming.** If you feel overwhelmed, try taking one small step at a time.
- **Give yourself time to acknowledge the loss.** Take quiet time to reflect whenever you need it.

Physical Effects of Grief

Grief may affect you in ways you did not expect. You probably knew you were going to feel very sad. But there are often physical side effects after a big loss. Some common symptoms:

- Trouble sleeping
- Sleeping too much
- Eating too much
- Not eating enough
- Chest or stomach pain
- Headaches
- Trouble concentrating
- Trouble with memory

These are normal physical reactions to grief. It does not mean you are sick or going crazy. Physical symptoms should improve as your emotions level out. See your doctor if you are suffering from serious pain or prolonged pain. A doctor can tell you if this is a symptom of grief or something else.

What you can do:

- **Rest.** Your body needs rest to bear the physical symptoms of grief. If you can't sleep, try herbal teas or soft music to help you relax. Avoid taking sleeping pills every night.
- **Go easy on yourself.** Limit your "To Do" list. It's okay if you can't stay focused. Be patient with yourself if you forget things.
- **Get regular exercise and eat a healthy diet.** Drink plenty of water. Healthy living helps both body and mind.
- **Cry.** Crying helps let the pain out. Tears help relieve stress, lower blood pressure, and promote healing.
- **Avoid negative habits.** Alcohol and drug abuse, overeating, or other negative habits will only mask grief. This delays the grieving process. It may be even harder to face the pain later. Seek help if you start turning to these types of things to handle your grief.

Emotional Effects of Grief

Just as each grief experience is unique, so are the emotions of grief. If there are others around you grieving the same loss, their feelings of grief may be different than yours. There is no right or wrong way to feel when you are grieving.

Allow yourself to feel all the emotions you need to feel. Try not to ignore them. Also, don't let others tell you how you should feel. Remember that whatever you are feeling is right for you.

There are many different emotions of grieving — too many to list here. Some common feelings shared by grieving people are:

Feelings of Frustration

You may be frustrated that just when you feel as if you're moving forward in your grieving process, you get pushed back again. This kind of back-and-forth is normal. Grief is an emotional — not an intellectual — journey. You can't reason your way through grief. It might feel awful now, but letting yourself feel these different emotions will help you heal.

Feelings of Anger

Anger over a loss is normal. You may be angry with yourself, with the person who died, with someone else, or with God. It's okay to be angry. Recognize your anger. Then let it out in ways that do not hurt yourself or others. Scream in your car, hit a pillow, or go for a walk or run to release anger.

Feelings of Shock

It is also normal to not feel anything at all after a loss. You may feel stunned, lost, or empty for a period of time. If you feel this way for a very long time, reach out for help.

Feelings of Relief

You might feel relieved if you were taking care of the person before the death. Relief may also come if you had a bad relationship with the person who died. If you feel relieved, you might react by feeling guilty. It's okay. You are allowed to feel relieved.

Feelings of Guilt

You might feel guilty for something you did or did not do before the death. Acknowledge what you could have done differently. But also accept that you cannot change what has happened. Try to let go of feelings of guilt. Forgive yourself.

Feelings of Isolation

You may try to hide your feelings in order to feel accepted. Some people may feel ashamed about crying or showing emotion. You don't need to feel ashamed about grieving. It is not a sign of weakness.

You might find that others are uncomfortable with your grief. This could make you feel isolated, or alone. This is especially true of those suffering from disenfranchised grief.

"Disenfranchised grief" happens when a person is denied the right to grieve or when others do not see the person's loss as valid. Examples include loss of an unborn child, loss of a pet, loss of a partner in a non-traditional relationship, or loss by death thought of as shameful to others.

Every loss is valid. You have the right to grieve, no matter what. If you feel alone in your grief, reach out. If the people in your life do not support your grief, find others who will.

Getting Back to Daily Life

The phone calls and flowers have stopped coming. Family and friends have gone back to their daily lives. Now you're faced with getting back to your own life. But how can you? Your life isn't the same anymore.

After the loss, it can be hard to adjust to daily life. You may feel like you cannot face the day. Routines involving the person who died have been disrupted. Now you may dread those scheduled times because they feel empty.

You might find you are overwhelmed by tasks that used to be simple. Or you might have to take on new tasks. You may feel guilty for not appreciating the things your loved one used to do. Or you may be angry that you did not learn how to do them before. Be patient with yourself. Don't be afraid to ask for help, or to admit that you are feeling stressed.

What you can do:

- **When you are ready, try to find new, positive habits to fill your time.** Consider doing them during times you used to spend with the person. You might start to look forward to those times again.
- **Make a list of activities you really enjoy.** Make them easy to do. Put them on your calendar at the scheduled times. Some ideas:
 - Meditate or do yoga
 - Call or visit with a friend
 - Go for a walk or exercise
 - Watch your favorite show
 - Read an uplifting book
 - Work in a garden
- **Be aware that grief can affect your judgment.** If you can, try to wait a while after your loss before making big decisions like moving or changing jobs.

Helping Others Help You

When you are grieving, some people might not know what to say to you. They may say things like “He/she’s in a better place now” or “Everything happens for a reason.” It may seem like they are downplaying your pain.

For many people, death can be a touchy subject. Death brings up questions about the meaning of life and our existence. Some people may turn away from you. This can be even more upsetting. It might leave you feeling alone and misunderstood.

What you can do:

- **Try not to take it personally** if someone is not sensitive to your feelings. Find people who will give you the support you need. There are people out there who understand how you feel.
- **Make a list of things you need help with.** Some people really want to help but don’t know how. Consider sharing this list with them. You might add things to your list like:
 - Please be accepting. Please don’t judge me or tell me I shouldn’t feel the way I feel. I need your support.
 - Be patient. Give me as much time as I need to grieve.
 - Please listen. Sometimes all I need is to be heard. Please don’t interrupt or give advice unless I ask for it.
 - Reach out. Don’t let discomfort or fear stop you from staying in touch. Stop by, call, text, send a card, or email me.
 - Please be specific. If you want to help, pick a task you can help with and offer to do it. Instead of asking, “Is there anything you need?” ask, “Can I bring you dinner tonight?”

Expressing Your Grief

Expressing grief is an important part of healing from loss. Doing this might seem too overwhelming at first. Try small ways of expressing your grief when you feel ready.

Talking about your grief is a healthy way to express it. Share your feelings with a trusted friend, a counselor, or a grief group. Even if you can't make sense of it all right now, sorting through the details of the loss can be healing.

If you are not comfortable talking, you may want to express yourself creatively. Writing, drawing, music, or other forms of art can help. Keep your work private or share it with others. You don't have to be a great writer or artist. The goal is to let your feelings out in positive ways.

What you can do:

- **Some ideas for creative expressions:**
 - Keep a journal
 - Write poetry or a story
 - Start a blog
 - Sing or play an instrument
 - Paint or draw
 - Build or create something
- **Contact us.** We may have a counselor, hold support groups, or have other resources.
- **If faith helps you, connect with your spiritual community.** Some people might turn away from their faith or change beliefs while grieving. This is also a normal reaction to loss.
- **Try online support groups.** Just reading other people's grief stories can be comforting.
- **Look for more resources to learn about grief.** There are countless books and websites with different tips to help you cope.

Remembering Your Loved One

You may be worried that you will forget the person who died. Creating activities in honor of your loved one can help you stay connected to his or her memory. This can allow the relationship you had with the person to continue to have a place in your life.

Moving forward with your life does not mean you will forget. Once you come to realize that you will never forget your lost loved one, you can truly start to heal. We grieve because we have loved. That connection cannot be broken.

What you can do:

- **Keep the person's belongings for as long as you need to.** Some people keep them for a long time. Some donate everything right away. Do what feels right to you. Consider keeping a small memento to carry with you.
- **Gather with others on special days to share memories.** Cook your loved one's favorite meals or plan an activity in honor of your loved one.
- **Make a scrapbook or photo album** of your loved one.
- **Create online memorials.** Start a website or blog. Share photos or thoughts on social media. Help grieving teens express themselves on social media in healthy, safe ways.
- **Light candles** in the person's favorite scent.
- **Plant your loved one's favorite flowers.**
- **Pick a symbol that represents your loved one,** like a heart, bird, or a butterfly. Think of the person whenever you see one.

Complicated Grief

Grief is such a hard journey that some grieving people think they are suffering from depression. But feelings of grief will ease over time for many. One day, they will be able to accept their loss and move forward.

It is important to know the difference between normal grief and clinical depression. Many of the therapies used to treat depression will not heal grief. *Grief* is a normal reaction to loss. *Depression* is generally caused by a chemical imbalance.

However, for some people grief does not get easier over time. Feelings of emptiness and despair can stay intense for a very long time. These people feel stuck in grief.

This is known as prolonged grief disorder (PGD), or complicated grief. Some experts compare this to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is an intense emotional reaction to trauma, such as war or disaster.

Regular grief has ups and downs. It's like an emotional roller coaster. PGD does not have any ups at all. You may feel constantly hopeless, worthless, and empty. Or you may seriously think about suicide.

If you have feelings like this but they come and go, you are probably experiencing normal grief. Reach out if you're unsure. A professional can tell if what you are feeling is normal or if you have PGD.

What you can do:

- **Reach out for help if you think you are suffering from PGD.** Call your family doctor or contact us. If you have PGD, we can lead you to the right treatment to get you through this.

Grieving Children and Teens

Children and teens have special emotional needs after a loss. Many people assume children are too young to know what's going on. Some don't think children can feel intense grief. Some are too caught up in their own grief to help others.

This lack of understanding can make grief even harder for the kids in your life. You are suffering right now. But so are they. It is important to try to guide children and teens through this hard time. Helping kids to heal may be healing for you, too.

What you can do:

- **Let children see you grieve.** Show them it's okay to cry. Show them how to work out their grief through play, art, or talking. Be honest when talking about death. Avoid saying things like "He went to sleep" or "She went away." This can make kids afraid of sleeping or of people leaving.
- **Try not to emotionally burden grieving kids.** Avoid saying things like "You're the man/woman of the house now." Do not expect kids to act like adults as they grieve. Children and teens need to know they will still be cared for and protected. Loss can make kids feel abandoned. They may worry they'll be left alone.
- **Keep in touch with how older kids are doing in school.** They may begin to act out as they try to cope. Ask for help from teachers or the guidance counselor. Watch for risky behavior, big drops in grades, disinterest in activities, or alcohol/drug abuse.
- **Consider contacting a counselor specializing in grieving children or teens.** It may give you peace of mind to work with a professional. There may also be support groups or grief camps for kids in your area. Check with us or search online for support.

Looking Toward the Future

As you travel through grief, you may wish you could get back to the way life was before the loss. It may help to realize life is never going to be the same as it was before. But you *can* be okay again. You can find a new normal.

One way you can honor your loved one's memory is by giving yourself permission to be happy again. Allow yourself to enjoy life and have meaningful relationships. May you find moments of peace and happiness — now and in the future.

The death of your loved one may have changed your life. But it has not destroyed you. Trust that your grief will get easier with time. Know that one day you will be able to look toward the future with hope.

What you can do:

- **Take life one moment, one step at a time.**
- **When you are ready, adjust your focus to the future.**
Start making plans and setting new goals.
- **Continue to be gentle with yourself.**


“What we have once enjoyed deeply
we can never lose. All that we love deeply
becomes a part of us.”

— Helen Keller, author, political activist, and lecturer

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