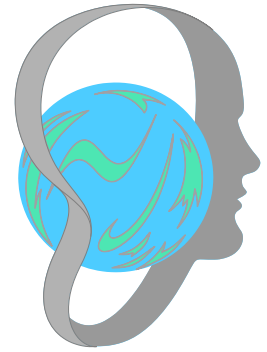


# Grieving a Loss

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Grief may be experienced in response to physical losses, such as death, or in response to symbolic or social losses such as divorce or loss of a job. The grief experience can be affected by your history and support system. Taking care of yourself and accessing the support of friends, family and the church can help you cope with your grief experience.

There are many questions that you may have concerning Grief and some of those are answered below.

## What is Grief?

Grief is the normal and natural response to the loss of someone or something important to you. It is a natural part of life. Grief is a typical reaction to death, divorce, job loss, a move away from family and friends, or loss of good health due to illness.

## What Does Grief Feel Like?

Following a death or loss, you may feel empty and numb, as if you are in shock. You may notice physical changes such as trembling, nausea, trouble breathing, muscle weakness, dry mouth, or trouble sleeping and eating.

Feelings of deep sadness and sorrow are common in grief. These and other feelings and thoughts are common. Often, people find themselves engaging in behaviours that are different or unusual, or thinking in ways that are unfamiliar and disturbing. Finding their beliefs challenged in grief, many people experience a kind of “spiritual crisis” following loss.

You may become angry at a situation, a particular person, or just angry in general. Guilt is a common response which may be easier to accept and overcome by looking at the experience in terms of “regret.” When we think “I regret I was not in the room when he died” or “I regret I was not able to speak more openly about dying” it is less critical than “I feel guilty about my behaviour.”

People in grief may have strange or disturbing dreams, be absent-minded, withdraw socially, or lack the desire to participate in activities that used to be enjoyable. While these feelings and behaviours are normal during grief, they will pass.

In general, grief makes room for a lot of thoughts, behaviours, feelings and beliefs that might be considered abnormal or unusual at other times. Following significant loss, however, most of these components of grief are, in fact, quite normal.

## How Long Does Grief Last?

Grief lasts as long as it lasts. Although this statement may not seem helpful to you, it is true. It is different for each person. It is important to realise that, while grief and its intensity will subside, most find that it is replaced with a “sweet sadness” that comes at times of remembrance. This is simply the

acknowledgement that significant loss has occurred. That the loss, and the person who is gone, matters and affects our lives.

There are many factors that affect how long a person grieves, including age, maturity, personality, physical and mental health, coping style, culture, spiritual and religious background, family background, other stressors and life experiences. The time spent grieving may also depend on how prepared a person was before the loss was experienced.

### **How Will I Know When I've finished Grieving?**

After a significant loss, you may be consumed and overwhelmed by the grief reactions you are experiencing. In time, as the reality of the loss sinks in, and all the changes as a result of the loss have been experienced, you will learn to adjust to living with your loss. Eventually, even after significant loss, you will realise you are grieving less as you discover renewed energy in living. You will become less consumed by the impact of the loss and begin to draw comfort rather than pain from the memories. In a sense, you are never "finished grieving." With a significant loss, there will always be moments when you will remember the loss, and perhaps you experience some of the feelings of grief, as in the times of "sweet sadness" mentioned above. Fortunately, the time period between these surges will lengthen considerably as you learn how to cope with your loss.

## **Types of Grief and Loss**

### **Anticipatory Mourning**

When a person or family is expecting death, it is normal to begin to anticipate how one will react and cope when that person eventually dies. Many family members will try to envision their life without that person and mentally play out possible scenarios, which may include grief reactions and ways they will mourn and adjust after the death.

Anticipatory mourning includes feelings of loss, concern for the dying person, balancing conflicting demands and preparing for death. Anticipatory mourning is a natural process that enables the family more time to slowly prepare for the reality of the loss. People are often able to complete unfinished "business" with the dying person (for example, saying "good-bye," "I love you," or "I forgive you").

### **Sudden Loss**

Grief experienced after a sudden, unexpected death is different from anticipatory mourning. Sudden, unexpected loss may exceed the coping abilities of a person, which often results in feelings of being overwhelmed and/or unable to function. Even though one may be able to acknowledge that loss has occurred, the full impact of loss may take much longer to fully comprehend than in the case of an expected loss.

### **Complicated Grief**

There are times when grief does not progress as expected; the intensity and duration of grief is prolonged and dramatically interferes with a person's ability to function. Symptoms of depression and anxiety may be prevalent and prolonged. Thoughts, feelings, behaviours and reactions may seem to

persist over long periods of time with little change or improvement. In these situations, it is important to seek help from a qualified professional who can assess your individual situation and make recommendations that will help. It is important to seek help; complicated grief does not subside on its own.

### **Finding Help for Yourself or a Loved One**

There is help and support if you or a loved one is grieving a loss. Counselling and support services can be a guide through some of the challenges of grieving as a person adjusts to their loss. Grief support and counselling can be provided by professionals. Self-help groups are often available and are there for participants to support one another. Consult a hospice in your local community, as all hospice bereavement programs provide grief support to the community, regardless of whether their loved one was cared for by hospice or not.

### **Supporting Friends or Family Who Are Grieving**

Death and grief spare no one and are normal life events. All cultures have developed expectations and norms about coping with death. It is important to understand someone else's loss from the perspective of the cultural and family traditions unique to that individual.

When people are grieving, thoughts and emotions are often heightened. People who care about the bereaved are often unsure how to be helpful; they do not know what to say or do. The primary and most important thing to do is to show that you care by being present and by listening and supporting family and friends who are grieving. Offering advice or suggestions is not needed; try to become comfortable with quietly supporting a person with your presence.

There is no right way to grieve and mourn. Be very careful not to impose your ideas, beliefs and expectations on someone else, no matter how much you think it might help. The following are some suggestions of ways you can support a grieving friend or family member.

Acknowledge all feelings. Their grief reactions are natural and necessary. Do not pass judgment on how well they are or are not coping.

Understand and accept cultural and religious perspectives about illness and death that may be different from your own. For example, if a family has decided to not allow their children to attend the funeral because of their beliefs that children should not be exposed to death, support their decision even if this may not be what you would do.

Acknowledge that life won't "feel the same" and the person may not be able to "get back to normal." Help the person to renew interest in past activities and hobbies, when they are ready, or to discover new areas of interest. Offer suggestions such as, "Let's go to the museum on Saturday to see the new exhibit," but be accepting if your offer is declined.

Be willing to stay engaged for a long time. Your friend or family member will need your support and presence in the weeks and months to come after most others will have withdrawn. Be specific in your

willingness to help. Offer assistance with chores such as childcare or meals. For example, suggest, "I'll bring dinner on Thursday; how many people will be there?"

Check on your friend or relative as time passes and months go by. Periodic check-ins can be helpful throughout the first two years after the death. Stay in touch by writing a note, calling, stopping by to visit, or perhaps bringing flowers.

Be sensitive to holidays and special days. For someone grieving a death, certain days may be more difficult and can magnify the sense of loss. Anniversaries and birthdays can be especially hard. Some people find it helpful to be with family and friends, others may wish to avoid traditions and try something different. Extend an invitation to someone who might otherwise spend time alone during a holiday or special day, and recognise they may or may not accept your offer.

Identify friends who might be willing to help with specific tasks on a regular basis. Performing tasks such as picking up the kids from school or refilling prescriptions can be a big help.

### **Supporting a Grieving Caregiver**

To support a caregiver who is grieving, ask how you can best help, and listen for what they seem to need. Express your concern for how the illness is affecting them personally. Even if you have been a caregiver yourself, don't say you know what they are going through. Empathise, by saying, "I am so very sorry," but don't say you understand. Each situation is unique and each person responds in ways that are uniquely their own. Even though you may have been a caregiver yourself, you cannot understand this situation from this person's perspective. Be willing to listen, to learn, to look for ways in which you can support and be helpful.

When care giving ends, it is normal to feel both bereaved and relieved, but caregivers often feel guilty about any feelings of relief they may experience. Remind them that these feelings are normal and common. Caring for a loved one can be exhausting work, but when care giving ends, time often seems endless. Offer to help grieving caregivers fill their day with meaningful activities. Help them get back into life at a pace that is acceptable to them. Caregivers often haven't had enough sleep, nor have they eaten well, so encourage a grieving caregiver to obtain adequate rest and nutrition.

### **Grief and Loss Following Traumas and Disasters**

Everyone has been affected in some way by tragedies that have occurred in recent years, from the Iraq War, Hurricane Katrina, the London bombings, tsunamis and earthquakes. Even if not directly affected, most people either know someone who lived where these events have happened or they have been there themselves. Perhaps you are wondering, "Why did this happen?" "What is happening in the world?!" "How do I cope?" "How do we go on?" "Are my feelings normal?"

Many people have been touched by these events at a deep, human level. The ranges of emotions you experience are normal reactions to very unusual and abnormal events. If you feel apprehensive, confused, or uncertain, it is probably related to the fact that these were very frightening events. You may have never been touched in this way by so many different, horrific situations. Understand that you may continue to experience unusual thoughts or feelings for weeks and even months after a scary event or disaster.

Take time to understand your reactions. Look within yourself to figure out what you need to do to cope and take care of yourself, both mentally and physically. Some of the normal reactions you may have include:

- Difficulty focusing
- Lack of appetite
- Difficulty sleeping
- Increased headaches or tiredness
- Feelings of guilt, anger, fear, anxiety
- Dreams or nightmares
- Frequent mood changes

If you have experienced other losses or stressful events in your life, your reactions may become even more complex. Just as you heal physically from major physical injuries, you can heal from emotional wounds. Your reactions mean you are grieving changes and learning to cope with loss. It is normal to experience these reactions, and part of what can help is taking the time to look at what you need to do to best adjust.

You may wonder if life will ever be 'normal' again—either for you, how you view the world, or for those more directly affected by the tragedies. You and the world around you have been changed by what has happened, but a sense of routine and 'normalcy' will eventually return. What develops is a 'new normal,' not a return to how things were. As you make this change, if you are feeling helpless, remember there is still much that you can do at a personal and local level.

Consider some of the following actions that are healing and can be life-affirming:

- Acknowledge emotions as they arise – allow yourself to cry, or talk things through as you need to
- Seek out others who will listen
- Consider other forms of self-expression – journaling, poetry, music
- Exercise regularly and spend time outdoors in nature
- Maintain your day-to-day routine
- Reflect upon, re-prioritise, or perhaps simplify your life
- Volunteer somewhere to make a difference
- Reach out to others, support a relief effort
- Talk to a counsellor

Hospices throughout the country offer grief support to anyone in the community who has had a loss through death. Staffed with professional grief counsellors, they are an additional resource for materials, support, and help. Volunteering with local organisations in your community are ways you can become involved and make a difference in the lives of others. Activities such as these can help to offset some of the more distressing reactions you may be experiencing in trying times.