

Coping with grief

Grief is a natural response to losing someone or something that is important to us. We may grieve because a loved one has died, or a relationship has ended. Or because we've lost our job, had a major health setback, or experienced some other major life change. Grief may feel overwhelming. It may be unexpectedly intense. But it is a normal, expected response to such events.

Grief doesn't follow a predictable path or pace. There is no 'normal' amount of time to grieve. The grieving process will differ according to our personality and life experience, age, physical and mental health, beliefs or religion and support network. It is also likely to be impacted by the type of loss we have experienced.

We may feel affected every day for 18 months after a major loss. At times it will feel like the pain is overwhelming, or that it will never end. But over time, the intensity of grief will decrease. It will be less often at the forefront of our mind, even if the ache is still there in the background. Waves of grief may come and go over months or years. Reminders of loss, like the anniversary of a death or a familiar song, can trigger the return of grief. Nonetheless, over time, we will find ways to adjust to life in the absence of the person we have lost, or to the experience we have endured. We learn to accept our loss, and to integrate our memories and our sorrow into who we are in our new reality.

Each person's experience of grief is unique, and different coping strategies will work for different people. The most important thing is to allow yourself to experience the pain of loss. It is natural and normal to grieve. It's normal to feel overwhelmed and helpless at the idea of picking up your life and responsibilities on your own, without the support of the person you've depended and relied on. It's normal to feel anger toward the loved one who has left you behind, or toward life which has treated you so unfairly. It's normal to wonder if you'll ever feel happy again. Don't feel guilty. Don't judge yourself. Don't be in a rush to 'get over it'. Don't think you have to hide your grief and put on a brave face for others. Let yourself grieve and fully experience the feelings of grief. Let yourself react in ways that help you process and release intense emotions.

Some of the things that may help include the following:

- Talk about your loss and sadness with others. You may feel isolated in your grief and want to avoid others. But the support of family members and friends is often essential in moving on from the severe grief we experience in the immediate aftermath of a loss. Let people know when you need someone to listen, or a shoulder to cry on. Be open to offers of company.
- Forgive yourself for the things you regret doing or saying, or not doing or saying, in relation to the loved one you lost. Let go of regrets and the associated pain. Allow yourself the space to focus on the good memories.
- Maintain a routine of daily activities to help structure your time and keep you connected to familiar people and places.
- Take care of yourself. Grieving is emotionally and physically exhausting. Care for yourself by trying to get enough sleep, eating healthily, and exercising. Avoid things that 'numb' the pain, like alcohol. You'll feel worse when the numbness wears off. Consider having a medical check-up, especially if you have any existing health conditions.

- Exercise and maintain good physical health to help improve emotional resilience. Exercise can also be a good way to release frustration or anger. Consider boxing a punching bag or hitting golf balls at a driving range.
- Find creative outlets to express your feelings, using music or art, or writing in a journal, for example. Looking back through a journal will allow you to see how your grief changes over time.
- Give yourself a break from grieving. It's okay to laugh and feel happy, despite your loss. Make time for pleasant activities and interactions with family members and friends.
- Avoid making major decisions, such as changing jobs or moving, within the first year after a loss, if you can. Grief may cloud your judgement, while big changes may bring additional stress. If you must make decisions right away, seek input from a trusted family member or friend.
- Join a support group. Talking with those who have had similar experiences can offer encouragement, comfort, guidance, and practical suggestions, as well as reassurance that your experiences are normal. You may want to join a general loss support group, or a group that is specific to your situation. If you don't want to join an 'in-person' group, or can't find one that works for you, consider social media options. Maybe you want to participate in an online forum. Maybe you just want to read about other people's experiences and coping strategies. The important thing is to recognise that there are people out there who have lived through what you're experiencing, and who are willing to share their strength with you.
- Consider counselling or therapy, particularly if grief is interfering with your ability to perform daily responsibilities, or impacting negatively on relationships. A counsellor can work with you one-on-one or in a group setting.
- Be patient, and allow your grief to unfold at your own pace. Don't judge or criticize yourself for not coping as well or healing as quickly as you think you should. Each person needs to grieve in their own way.

Complicated Grief

People who have extreme or complicated grief may be unable to work through their grief without help. There are four common types of complicated grief:

- Exaggerated grief - Grief reactions are extreme and overwhelming. They may worsen over time.
- Chronic grief - Feelings of intense grief continue and do not improve over time.
- Masked grief - Grief reactions are absent or indirect, taking the form of an illness or abnormal behaviour.
- Delayed grief - Grief reactions are triggered months or years later by another loss or distressing event, rather than at the time of the initial loss.

People who experience complicated grief may benefit from grief therapy, to help them understand why they are struggling to cope with their loss, and identify barriers that are preventing them from resolution. Grief therapy is provided by a mental health professional, such as a psychologist or clinical social worker, in an individual or group setting.

Signs that suggest a need for additional help include:

- Ongoing difficulty eating and/or sleeping
- Inability to work or complete regular daily activities
- Inability to care for yourself

- Feelings of worthlessness, depression or anxiety
- Breakdown of relationships
- Thoughts of suicide.

Sources:

<https://www.cancer.net/coping-with-cancer/managing-emotions/grief-and-loss/coping-with-grief>

<https://www.webmd.com/balance/normal-grieving-and-stages-of-grief#1>

<https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/emotionalhealth/Pages/Dealingwithloss.aspx>