

# LEARNING TO LIVE WITH GRIEF AND LOSS



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**“Grief is the last act of love  
we give to our loved one.  
Where there is deep grief there is great love.**

**Grief is a great rite of passage,  
it is a hero’s journey of courage,  
of sacred battles, sorrow, love, joy, and loss.**

**Through the darkness of grief we can see  
the light of love which transcends death.  
And with the pain can come gratitude for  
the gift of time we had, the love that was  
shared and the power to become a better  
person because they loved us.”**

**– Robert Orr**

## COPING WITH DEATH

Coping with the death of a loved one is a universal life experience. Yet, grief is one of life's most difficult passages that can overwhelm our coping and turn our lives upside down. Death reminds us that life is temporary, can be unfair, and even random, and these realities can be especially difficult to grasp. With new loss, grief may be unknown territory. Confusion and disorientation can result, and we are asked to navigate the unfamiliar landscape without a map.

As humans, we have profound capacity to endure loss and find the inner drive to keep going. Just as a physical injury heals over time, the inner wounds caused by loss heal naturally with time and care. Grieving will not bring back our loved one who died, but it will allow us to understand our experience and ourselves better, so we can better harness the energy to keep living after loss.

## WHAT IS GRIEF?

Grief is the normal physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual response to an actual or threatened loss of a person, thing, or place to which we are emotionally attached.

## ANTICIPATORY GRIEF

Most people experience grief before a loved one dies. When a loved one is diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, we start to prepare ourselves for the impact of loss. We may cry, feel sadness or anger, and have other strong reactions to the anticipated loss of a loved one. As a person declines with age or illness, we may witness a loss of functioning, potential, and loss of goals and dreams. Grieving these non-death losses gives us time to mourn and practice our coping responses to loss. It also motivates us to say what we want to say to the person who is dying.

Anticipatory grief, coupled with caregiving stress, can impact family relationships. Open communication and acknowledgment of the grief can reduce family distress. Sometimes, without the preparation of anticipatory grief, a sudden death can make it harder to cope with grief.

## HOW GRIEF AFFECTS US

The grief response can feel like a form of intense stress that affects all areas of our lives. Grief can be experienced in the following ways:

- **Physical:** fatigue, weakness, trouble eating and sleeping, stomach upset, heart palpitations, tightness in chest, physical aches and pains
- **Emotional:** anger, numbness, relief, sadness, guilt, regret, loneliness, envy, irritability
- **Mental:** difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, confusion, preoccupation, loss of attention
- **Spiritual:** disbelief, searching for signs, sensing presence, loss of faith, search for meaning, loss of purpose
- **Behavioral:** restlessness, searching, withdrawal, low motivation
- **Social:** withdrawal from social connections and normal activities

Grief is a normal and natural response to loss. Grief needs to be allowed. It needs attention and expression. Sometimes the symptoms of grief can be distressing. If you are experiencing physical symptoms, it is important to get checked by a physician to rule out any medical conditions. Note that grief can contribute to worsened anxiety, depression, or other pre-existing mental health conditions, so consultation with a mental health professional can be helpful.

**“Grief is the form love takes  
when someone we love dies.”**

– Dr. Katherine Shear

## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE GRIEVE

Humans evolved as social animals, so we need social connections for survival. We grieve because we are biologically wired to attach to each other. Adults, like children, rely on attachment figures for safety and security. Separation and absence of a loved one can lead to strong emotions, confusion, searching, and anxiety. We may feel lost and disoriented. We may have less energy for our usual pursuits. We may notice tasks that were manageable before the loss now feel overwhelming and exhausting. We may feel decisionmaking fatigue and feel less capable of solving problems. It can take enormous physical, emotional, and mental energy to adapt to the loss of a loved one.

It is important to be patient with yourself while you are grieving. Listen to your body and what you need in the moment. Try to make loose commitments with the understanding that you may have to cancel if you are not up to it. This is all adaptive and protective for the major changes taking place inside of you. Most importantly, grief is a time of immense self-appraisal, learning, and growth. You recognize what you are capable of and what your true strengths are, as well as where your limits may need to be.

# WHAT TO EXPECT IN THE GRIEF PROCESS

Grief is not necessarily a linear experience where we go through orderly stages and then come to a distinct end of the process. However, there are some patterns that are common as grief unfolds. These patterns are more circular than linear; we may repeatedly return to various aspects of grief based on triggers in our lives.

Here are some common patterns:

- 1. Shock:** We may feel denial, disbelief, and numbness right after the loss, with gradual increasing emotional pain, yearning, and preoccupation with the death as weeks and months pass and the numbness wears off.
- 2. Disorganization:** We may experience a strong stress response, sense of overwhelm with practical tasks, decreased capacity for life demands, difficulty accepting what happened, “going through the motions” of functioning, yearning to return to the past, questioning meaning and purpose, and even preoccupation with the scenes of the death.
- 3. Re-organization:** Over time we will make choices to decrease emotional pain and increase comfort: we create new routines, eventually give ourselves permission to enjoy life again, develop a new (or renewed) identity and sense of self, take turns between facing the emotional pain of grief and taking a break from grief with distracting activities, and learn new skills to function without our loved one who has died.
- 4. Growth:** We may remember our loved one with fondness and love and appreciate their full life; we may come to some acceptance or forgiveness, if that is needed, in conflicted relationships. We may allow ourselves to trust the world again, expand social connections and interests, find meaning

and purpose, learn empathy and compassion towards others dealing with challenges, undo unhelpful patterns of thinking and behaving, find ways to remember and honor the person who died, and expand self-confidence and hope for the future.

## GRIEF IN THE FAMILY

When someone we love dies, a unique and individual process of grieving begins. Each family member has their own relationship with the person who died, so each person's grief journey is different. Some people move forward in grief by talking and sharing, while others move forward by reflecting privately. Everyone grieves at their own intensity and pace, and in their own way. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, except if coping habits cause harm to oneself or others. Some people grieve intellectually and practically by "doing things" to cope. Some people grieve emotionally and feel relieved by "letting it out." Others do both. Just because someone is not tearful, or is stoic, does not mean they are not grieving. It can be important for families to talk about grief over time, and to acknowledge differences in grieving styles. Each family member may have different needs in their grief and be at different places in their grief from one another. Cultivating patience can help. Grieving together as a family through ritual or ceremony also can be helpful.

Children and teens grieve in unique ways. For more information on how to support young grievers, see the Mission Hospice booklet, "Grief in children and teens."

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

Grief expert Alan Wolfelt, PhD coined the phrase, "The Rule of Thirds." Wolfelt proposes that a third of your friends will be helpful for your grief process, a third will be neutral, and a third will be

harmful for your grief process. The latter are friends who judge you, push you to “get over it,” or try to take your grief away.

Over time, you may notice you have changed. You no longer feel like you can relate to some of the conversations your friends have. That is because grief can deepen and change your priorities. You may notice yourself leaning away from people who do not understand and leaning towards people who are more understanding. That is a healthy, natural shift when such a life-changing event happens. You may benefit from finding a grief mentor – someone who has been through a loss and can show you the way.

Many people give advice to griever in an attempt to make things better. You may notice feeling irritated at things people say to you. It may be important to recognize their good intentions. It can hurt when people dismiss or want to fix your grief. Remember that only you are the expert of your own grief and can say what you need and what helps you.

## HOW LONG DOES GRIEF LAST?

Everyone has a different timetable in this process. The acute grief period can last a few months for some, or a year or more for others. Sudden and traumatic losses can take longer to process. If there are relationship conflicts or other sources of stress, this process can be delayed or prolonged.

Much like love itself, the intensity of grief varies based on the nature of the relationship, the closeness of the attachment, how the person died, what prior losses the griever has had, the social network of the griever, and their personality traits.

Sometimes, we expect grief to end or go away. For many of us, though, it is more realistic to know that grief instead becomes integrated, or reconciled, into our lives. It is not gone but remains a part of our life in a less dominant way over time. You learn to live



with reminders of your loss without the intense pain of the earlier months. Your life activities and perspective expand around the grief. You gradually shift your focus from loss to restoration. However, holidays, birthdays, or anniversaries can be sensitive times when grief can intensify.

Sharing memories and telling stories, going to the cemetery, or doing something the person who died loved can be proactive ways to take care of the waves of grief that come and go over time. “Moving forward” is healthy and inevitable and does not mean you are forgetting the person who died. Living your life like your loved one would want you to can be a sustaining, comforting bond with your loved one.

## GRIEF FOR OLDER ADULTS

The older we are, the more losses we will experience. Aging involves multiple losses: we can lose our loved ones, our jobs, our residences, our independence, our abilities, and our lives as we have known them. When more than one family member or friend dies, it can be devastating. We lose people who truly know us and with whom we can share our histories. Sometimes it helps to set an intention to grieve one person at a time. Ritual or ceremony can be helpful to honor the loss of multiple family or friends.

Many older adults find ways to cope with grief overload. They may come from a generation or culture that does not publicly express feelings, so it can be hard to recognize their grief. Many older adults suffer from chronic illnesses. Some live with cognitive impairment. While some may not remember details, they still feel the emotions of absence. The intensity of the grief experience may exacerbate any preexisting cognitive or physical symptoms in older adults.

Seeing a loved one die can awaken personal death awareness in any griever. Anxiety and fear are common reactions in older adults

(indeed, in any adults) who are grieving. They need reassurance that they will be safe and cared for in the future.

Older adults may need help with major decisions. Choices for coping with change and loss may be more limited. Rebuilding one's life takes energy, motivation, and desire. Caregivers may push for more proactive coping, but it is important to ask older adults if it's okay to talk about the person who died or the grief process. They can be invited to show us how they grieve and tell us what they need. Being patient and creative, and having open conversation about grief can help families come together during a time of loss.

Storytelling is an important part of the grief process. Being left behind as a survivor means we carry the stories of multiple people who have died. Writing out life stories and telling stories to others can offer life review and honor a loved one's legacy. Reviewing photo albums and old family videos can inspire nostalgia and reminiscence in older adults. Exploring spirituality as we enter the last stage of life can provide not only hope and solace but also meaning and connection.

## DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GRIEF AND DEPRESSION

Grief is a natural and normal response to loss. Depression is a treatable medical illness. Both can involve sadness, low energy, change in sleep or appetite, loss of interest, low motivation, hopelessness in the present, and difficulty cultivating hope for the future. The key difference is that grief feelings center around the loss of the person who died. Feelings of depression are often centered around a person's sense of low self-worth. Also, grief tends to come in waves while depression tends to be an experience of constant depletion. Grief can shake a person's sense of self but with time, one can grow in confidence and adjust to one's new (or

renewed) identity. In both grief and depression, it is common to wonder what the point of living is without your loved one.

If you feel you are depressed, find that your depression is worsening, or have suicidal thoughts, it is important to talk to a health care or mental health provider immediately.

## WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF GRIEVING

- “Survivor guilt” (feelings of guilt for remaining alive when your loved one has died)
- Deep regret or “if-only” thinking
- Excessive denial or avoidance of all reminders of the loss
- Prolonged social withdrawal
- Pervasive negative self-talk (self-deprecation or judgment)

## WHEN TO GET HELP

While grief is a normal part of life, the death of a loved one is a major life transition. Grief is a personal journey. It is okay to ask for professional help if you feel the need. It is also okay to cope with loss on your own with your personal and social resources.

For most people, the symptoms of grief change, and even decrease, over time. Grief ebbs and flows around the activities of daily life. However, for a small percentage of grievers, grief can become overwhelmingly persistent and pervasive, characterized by intense longing for the person who has died and preoccupation with thoughts of that person. This form of grief is disabling, interfering with everyday functioning. For these grievers, there is a diagnosis called Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD, formerly called Complicated Grief). For a diagnosis of PGD, the loss of a loved one must have occurred at least a year ago for adults, and at least six months ago for children and adolescents, and grieving clearly exceeds expected

social, cultural, or religious norms for the individual's culture and context. There are evidence-based treatments for PGD, and Mission Hospice grief counselors can refer you to resources that may be helpful.

## HELPING YOURSELF WHEN YOU ARE GRIEVING

- Take care of your body with rest, good nutrition, and physical exercise.
- Practice self-calming and self-soothing skills.
- Prioritize tasks, set limits, and practice boundaries.
- Notice self-judgment and practice curiosity instead.
- Talk to yourself with kindness and compassion.
- Notice negative patterns of thoughts and behaviors and try new practices.
- Recognize your strengths and trust yourself to get through this.

## TOOLS FOR HEALING GRIEF

- Allow emotional expression through talking, writing, art, and other creative outlets.
- Set priorities based on energy and values.
- When you have the capacity, offer acts of kindness and service to others in need.
- Practice gratitude.
- Seek out support of close family and friends.
- Give yourself permission to enjoy life; engage in play and fun when you are able, and take “grief breaks.”

## MAKING CHOICES, CULTIVATING RESILIENCE

The traditional Serenity Prayer says, “Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.” While we do not have control over our loss, we can make choices to ease the weight of grief. Taking action and making decisions each day to “live well” with sorrow can be empowering. For example, loneliness is a common experience in grief. Like water quenches thirst, connection can fill the unmet need of loneliness. This means (when you are ready) finding courage to surround yourself with supportive people and create routines with meaningful social activities.

When we experience loss, we may reassess our attitude towards life. We can be consoled by knowing that grief and loss are universal human experiences. We know each of us has seasons in our lives with both ease and struggle. It is natural to welcome times of ease and to want to avoid struggle. Yet experiencing the “full picture” of life enriches our appreciation for life and expands our wisdom and maturity. Developing a personal philosophy of life to cope with this season of grief can be a guiding light in accepting our life as it is now. We mourn the life we had in the past, the life we assume we would have in the future, and we face what is given to us. It can help to shift our focus from what we had expected life to be to accepting what it is in reality. Acceptance does not mean we want or like our reality; it means we make peace with what is. Acceptance takes time.

Having hope for the future can be vital. Making plans and looking forward to something ahead can be a part of healing from grief.

## OTHER TIPS DURING THE GRIEF PROCESS

- Allow time to grieve and to feel its impact.
- Slow down and be patient; grief cannot be rushed.
- If possible, avoid making major decisions in the early months of grief (because of the “fogginess” of thinking in grief, and the possibility of regret later).
- Plan ahead, schedule realistically, and relax your standards.
- Divide problems into small tasks and work on them in increments.
- Recognize memories can be positive and negative; it is okay to honor the truth of the whole story of a loved one who died.
- Give yourself time to let go of your loved one’s belongings. There is no prescribed timeline. Trust your intuition.

## HEALING: EMBRACING THE NEW NORMAL

Grief doesn’t go away, but it diminishes in intensity as time passes. We begin to cry less frequently or talk about the person who died without heartache. We may feel their presence or remember them with fondness and love, more than with pain. We may grow more confident in managing our own life.

We move from basic survival to having more energy. Eventually, we rediscover things that excite and enrich us. Positive emotions arise which serve as a powerful antidote to the pain of grief. Other relationships, interests, and life pursuits expand around us. We make plans and reconnect to hope for the future.

We allow grief to find a place in our lives. We absorb reality as it is. We make choices to live the best life we can despite the absence of our loved one. This is healing.

It is important to recognize your progress in healing. Give yourself positive affirmation for what you have been able to endure and how

you've been able to survive. Take stock of your resilient traits and what is going well in your life despite your grief. By embracing the "new normal," you can make choices to create the life you want for yourself going forward.

## RESOURCES

What's your grief [whatsyourgrief.com](https://whatsyourgrief.com)

David Kessler's [grief.com](https://grief.com)

Center for Loss & Life Transition [www.centerforloss.com](https://www.centerforloss.com)

Modern loss [modernloss.com](https://modernloss.com)

Megan Devine's Refuge in Grief [refugeingrief.com](https://refugeingrief.com)

The Shared Grief Project [sharedgrief.org](https://sharedgrief.org)

Kara (Palo Alto) [kara-grief.org](https://kara-grief.org)

The Center for Prolonged Grief, Columbia University  
[prolongedgrief.columbia.edu/for-the-public/complicated-grief-public/overview/](https://prolongedgrief.columbia.edu/for-the-public/complicated-grief-public/overview/)

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention [afsp.org](https://afsp.org)

### **Mission Hospice Bereavement Program**

When support from friends and family is not enough, the Mission Hospice Bereavement Program is a resource for family members of Mission Hospice patients in California, and for all those living in the San Francisco Peninsula and South Bay. We offer affordable individual counseling, free support groups and educational workshops, referrals and consultation. Our licensed professional therapists and supervised interns are available to hospice family members as well as people from the community. We offer our knowledge, support, and expertise to serve the needs of our community.

For more information, please call us at **650.554.1000** and ask to speak to a grief counselor.

**“Grief can be the garden of compassion.  
If you keep your heart open through  
everything, your pain can become  
your greatest ally in your life’s search  
for love and wisdom.”**

- Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (in translation)



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San Mateo, CA 94402  
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San Jose, CA 95125  
408.554.2434

[www.MissionHospice.org](http://www.MissionHospice.org)