



# 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.

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, such as when 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



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# 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

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.

# 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.

Supporting someone who is grieving a death resulting from a disaster or public health crisis presents its own challenges, perhaps making it difficult to physically be together. Here are a few strategies that may be helpful.

## **Let the person know you are there for them.**

Sometimes friends, family and coworkers can disappear after a loss. They may not know what to say, worry they will say the wrong thing or overstep, fear causing more pain, feel somehow guilty about the death, or fear they can't do enough to make the grieving person feel better. Some people may see a person drowning in sorrow and then worry that they will be dragged under, too. Don't let these doubts and fears get in the way of reaching out to let the person know you care. Even people who have endured the worst suffering can benefit from an expression of caring, or from practical assistance, being included in activities, or a simple conversation. Continue to check in with the person regularly.

**Be sincerely interested and caring.** Be an "opener." Openers are people who ask questions and listen to the answers without judging. They are naturally curious and enjoy learning about and feeling connected to others. In helping others through grief, the most effective openers don't always have to be the closest of friends. Openers can make a big difference in times of crisis, especially for those who are normally reserved, or worried about being a "burden" on others by starting conversations about their feelings.

**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.

## **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.

**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.

# Supporting children with grief

It's important for adults to listen to a child and answer any questions or concerns. To express their feelings, children need an adult who makes them feel safe and secure. Childcare providers, teachers, and school counselors may also be able to help a child.

Children express grief in ways that are often different from the way adults express it. Children aren't always able to use words to say what they feel. Instead, they express their feelings through behavior.

## How to help a child during the grieving process

Here are some ideas for helping a child during the grieving process.

**Examine your own feelings about loss.** This is especially important if you lost someone or something important as a child. It may help you recognize and understand your child's feelings. Think about what helped (and didn't help) you deal with the loss. The things that helped you may also help your child.

**Help your child feel safe.** Children need to feel safe and secure with an adult to express their feelings about loss. Let your child know that all feelings are normal.

**Tell others about your child's recent loss.** Child care providers, teachers and school counselors may also be able to help your child work through grief.

**Be honest about the loss.** Not telling children about a major loss may cause them to develop unrealistic fears and concerns. Children may also feel insecure because they know the adults are not being honest. Not telling a child that a loved one has died may prolong the child's grief.

**Keep your child's age and emotional development in mind as you help your child work through grief.** Children see loss and death in different ways as they grow and develop.

- Children younger than age 2 cannot express with words what is going on in their lives. Reassure your child by holding and cuddling them.
- Children between ages 2 and 3 are just learning to use words. Talk with your child using some of the same words your child uses. Speak clearly but be brief when you explain a loss to your child.
- Children between ages 3 and 6 often believe that their thoughts and wishes cause things to happen. Offer reassurance that your child did not cause the "bad" thing to happen.
- Children between ages 6 and 10 do not always fully understand events that occur in their lives. They may invent conclusions or draw the wrong conclusions about things they do not understand. They may develop fears, such as a fear of death.
- Children between ages 10 and 12 are able to understand loss the way adults do. They see death as permanent. They often want to be included in all activities as though they were adults.

# Healing after someone dies by suicide

Losing someone to suicide can be overwhelmingly painful and there are often unanswerable questions and complicated emotions. Unlike a death that occurs naturally from old age or illness, a death by suicide is usually sudden, unexpected and sometimes violent. The shock and trauma for survivors is further complicated by the social stigma of suicide, possible police investigations, media coverage, lack of privacy and judgment of others in the community.

Death by suicide not only affects the person who died, but also others—“suicide survivors”—who cared deeply about the person. The emotional pain can be complicated, intense and prolonged. People’s reactions can range from guilt to sorrow to anger. People may feel a sense of guilt and responsibility and blame themselves for not seeing the warning signs. They may feel a profound sense of betrayal, rejection and abandonment. Grief can quickly turn to concern for the surviving family members and significant others and how they can be helped.

Following is information to help you understand why people die by suicide, the ways people react and how you can help yourself and others through the grieving process.

## Why people die by suicide

Every suicide is a unique story. There is often no way to fully understand why a person would choose to take their own life. However, there are some explanations that may help you better understand a person’s actions.

Significant depression and anxiety are characteristics of many medical and behavioral conditions. When depression and anxiety become pervasive enough, some people feel hopeless and helpless and may believe that suicide is the only alternative. People may feel that the world would be a better place without them.

Other conditions like a serious illness, chronic pain, substance use, agitation, marital, financial or a work-related crisis can trigger depressive reactions and irrational thinking that can develop into suicidal thoughts. Sometimes the loss of the rational thought, coupled with depression, can lead a person to think that there is no other way to make the pain go away.

## Common responses

Each person will respond in their own way, and it is important to understand and respect those differences. Some people may react and need to talk, and others may not.

- Shock and disbelief and feeling a need to make sense of the death and understand why the person made the decision to die. Even when survivors learn about factors related to the suicide, there are often unanswered questions that can persist for years.
- Replaying the events that took place before the person’s death and constantly second-guessing different outcomes. Thinking they should have recognized the threat and that they could have done something to prevent the suicide. These feelings are normal and common but are most often not truly justified.
- Guilt often arises when the deceased had made either direct or veiled threats to others about their desire to complete suicide. People often do not take these threats seriously or do not see them for what they are. This does not mean that people are negligent or uncaring. Most people aren’t trained to recognize symptoms of severe depression or thinking about suicide.
- Experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder such as flashbacks and anxiety, particularly if they witnessed the suicide or discovered the body.

- It is very common for people to feel angry at the person and emotionally rejected. Anger is often mixed with grief and can feel very confusing. Sometimes the person may feel that they are the object of blame or speculations or left to handle the emotional and practical challenges of a death by suicide. Suicide usually produces more anger than any other type of death.
  - Intense sadness is a normal part of the grieving process for many people. This sadness, especially when mixed with guilt and anger, can seem overwhelming. It is a natural part of the process, and it should fade over time.
  - A common reaction is to blame those close to the victim, because they 'should've seen the warning signs' or 'could've prevented the act'. Although an understandable reaction to grief, it is incorrect and unwarranted and could compound the grief of those who are left behind.
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## What makes suicide different

Losing a friend or loved one is never easy. However, when you lose someone to suicide, it can feel different from other types of loss. Several circumstances can make death by suicide different, making the healing process more challenging.

**Needing to understand why:** Understanding the circumstances of a death by suicide can sometimes lead us to ask "Why?" You may second guess actions, wish that you had noticed signs earlier, or wonder how you could have acted differently. This need to understand "why" may be a difficult path, as the circumstances surrounding the loved one's death could be unclear or not easily known. Some questions may never be answered, while you may find other answers that make sense. Sometimes you will find answers to your questions, while other times, you must learn to accept the fact that there are some things no one can know.

**Mixed emotions:** When death is by suicide, you might both mourn the person's passing while also holding intense feelings about the circumstances of their death. Feelings such as anger, abandonment and rejection can all occur after a suicide as well as positive feelings about the deceased. Sorting through all these diverse feelings can make the healing process more challenging.

**Stigma and isolation:** Talking about suicide can be difficult for those who have experienced the loss. Different cultures view suicide in different ways, and sometimes discussing it can be a challenge. This can also be made more difficult when the act of suicide conflicts with religious views. Suicide can be isolating as communities of friends each struggle differently to make sense of the loss they all experienced. Finding the right people in your support network who can help you experience your loss is important.

**Risk for survivors:** People who have recently experienced a loss by suicide are at increased risk for having suicidal thoughts themselves. After experiencing the loss of a loved one, it's not uncommon to wish you were dead or to feel like the pain is unbearable. Remember that having suicidal thoughts does not mean that you will act on them. These feelings and thoughts will likely decrease over time, but if you find them too intense, or if you're considering putting your thoughts into action, seek support from a mental health professional.

## Help someone grieving after suicide

Allow the person to express their feelings openly without feeling the need to provide answers. Grieving people need to work through their feelings and often do so by sharing their feelings with others. Alternatively, allow the person to say nothing and just be present with them. Consider these tips:

- Be non-judgmental about the other person's feelings. Each person has their own feelings about death and suicide, and it is generally not helpful to impose your own feelings on a grieving person.
- Be sensitive about what you say. Avoid clichés such as "I know how you feel" or "time will heal all wounds."
- Be mindful of the difficult dates. The day or date of the suicide can be especially difficult for the next six months for survivors.
- If a grieving person is expressing suicidal feelings, strongly encourage them to get immediate help.

## Help yourself

- Ask for support from your friends and family. Someone you know has died, and it is natural to feel that loss.
- Talk about your feelings with people who can be nonjudgmental and supportive.
- Take advantage of support services.
- Seek additional support if you feel you are having a difficult time coping after the initial shock wears off. If you are currently in treatment for depression or other psychological conditions, it is a good idea to contact your doctor or therapist if you are having trouble handling what has happened.

# Coping with the death of a coworker

Our coworkers are very much like an extended family. We spend most of our waking hours with them, forging special bonds of trust and friendship that are unlike our other relationships.

As a result, it's not surprising that a coworker's death can be difficult to deal with—especially if you were close to the person or if the death was unexpected. You may feel anxiety and guilt if the death occurred in the workplace or your last interaction with the person was unpleasant. And even if the coworker's death came after a prolonged illness, you may still experience shock and depression when you hear the news.

Grief is a personal experience and depending on who you are and the nature of your loss, your process of grieving will be different from another person's experience. Some coworkers may have been closer to the deceased than others. Everyone will need their own time and space to heal. Colleagues that handle the loss differently should not be judged. Remember that feelings may resurface when certain activities remind everyone of the coworker they lost.

## What you can do

Grief is a natural process that requires time. You may find these suggestions helpful:

- **Share your feelings.** Your other coworkers may be experiencing the same emotions you are. Mutual support can help everyone get through the grieving process.
- **Respect relationships.** Other people may have not been as close to the deceased as you were, and vice versa. Respecting that everyone will experience grief differently and may have had a different relationship with those lost will help the process along in the workplace. Telling someone they need to "move on" or "snap out of it" is never helpful.
- **Talk about it.** Even if management doesn't formally recognize the death, don't be afraid to talk to coworkers about how you are feeling and listen to what they are experiencing as well.
- **Remember the person you lost.** What were their strengths and what funny things happened? How would they react to certain changes or new ideas? Laughing and crying are both a part of grief. You can even have your own memorial service in the workplace if you want.
- **Give back.** Speak with your employer about ways to grieve together formally and informally. Consider how you can support the family as well and commemorate your coworker's life. Have a fundraiser, plant a tree or consider other ways of giving back to the community. Focusing on building something positive can help improve low morale and lift motivational levels in the workplace.

If you're not sure how to grieve in your workplace, first consider what you want to share and what you don't want to share with fellow employees. Don't be afraid to keep your manager informed if you're having difficulty adjusting to returning to work. And above all, never be frustrated if you seem distracted or get a little tired more easily at work. This is a normal reaction in the grief process.

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## If you are a manager, consider these tips to support your employees.

- Work with your human resources specialists to establish protocols for responding to a worker's death. Issues to consider include sharing information, handling personal effects, allowing time off for funerals and reassigning space or equipment.
- Encourage flexibility. Providing flexibility in work hours might be necessary during a time of loss, but don't assume a grieving person wants to lighten their workload. Their daily routine may be a welcome and necessary distraction or tool to help them through the difficult time.

# 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.

# 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.

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*Sources: American Psychological Association, Healthwise, Mayo Clinic, Psycorm, SAMHSA, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, University of Texas*