

# Coping With Grief



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## UNDERSTANDING YOUR GRIEF

This guidebook offers some practical information for those of you who have experienced the recent death of a loved one. You will learn about the grieving process as well as some tools for coping. Losing someone you love is a very painful experience. Your grief will affect you both physically and emotionally. It will require your active participation for the healthy resolution of your loss.

Try to be patient and gentle with yourself. Don't compare your grief to the grief of others. Each individual in your family will grieve differently for the same person because their relationship to the deceased was unique.

Grief work is a continuing process of change and adaptation. It is a process of redefining yourself – “Who am I without the person I love?” This process is called “grief work” because it *is* work. In order to move ahead, your active participation is necessary.

Educate yourself about the grief process. The more you know, the more you will be able to help yourself. Reach out to others for support. There is no “right or wrong” way to grieve. In fact, there is no one, single way. You may find yourself traveling down several different paths as you embark upon your grief journey.

As hard as it may be, try to remember that death is a natural part of life. Perhaps we should consider death to be the *completion of life*, rather than the *end of life*.

The grief journey you have ahead of you will be at times a difficult one, but know that we care about you and we are available to help you through it. Please don't hesitate to get in touch with our bereavement staff for support or to address any questions or concerns you may have during these difficult times.

## HOW WE GRIEVE

Everyone grieves differently. Being aware of these differences may help you to understand not only your reaction to loss, but other people's losses as well.

- **Men and women may have different ways of expressing their grief.** Men may be more likely to control how they feel. They may be more likely to be physically active with their grief (such as getting stuff done). Women tend to share their feelings more openly with others and tend to cry more easily than males.
- **Children of different ages understand death differently.** Younger children may not understand that the person is not coming back, while older children often feel responsible for what has happened. They often express their grief through behavior (school issues, eating or sleep disturbances, stomach aches, headaches, acting out, bed wetting, etc.).

- **Cultural groups express grief in different ways.** There are rituals and ceremonies that may be followed depending on your cultural background. Some cultures show their respect for the deceased by wailing loudly in public. To others, this would seem as if they are having a hard time with their grief while it is actually their way of managing it.
- **Past losses may resurface only to be grieved again with the new loss.** Each new death may bring up memories of people you have loved before who have died, making the recent death seem more intense.
- **The type of relationship each person had with the deceased will affect the way the loss is experienced.** If the deceased was male, he would have been the husband to one person, the father of another, the brother or friend to still another and so on.

### EMOTIONAL REACTIONS: The Stages Of Grief

#### What Are The Stages of Grief?

Most of us have experienced grief at one time or another. We've felt those intense rolling waves of pain and emotion. But we do not all experience the same feelings each time we lose a loved one.

Many people have explained what grief is and have identified certain stages of grief. In her book "**On Death and Dying**" Elizabeth Kubler-Ross identified the five stages of grief as:

**Denial** ("This can't be happening to me.")

**Anger** ("Why is this happening to me?")

**Bargaining** ("I promise I'll be a better person if...")

**Depression** ("I don't care anymore.")

**Acceptance** ("I accept what's happening and am ready for whatever comes.")

Not all of these stages are experienced. Sometimes one or two prevail. Again this is a very individual response.

In her book, "**Grief, Dying, and Death**" Therese Rando found that there are certain stages of grief that have to be worked through, that all of grief's responses fall into three broad categories, each with specific emotional reactions:

<u>Stage</u>	<u>Emotional Reactions</u>
Avoidance	Shock/Denial
Confrontation	Anger/Fear/Anxiety/Panic/Depression/ Guilt/Relief/Loneliness/Spiritual Responses/ Unexplained Phenomena
Accommodation	Acceptance/Learning to Live With Loss/ Moving On

While there may be numerous interpretations of the “stages of grief,” one thing is certain: you will go through many of the emotional reactions listed above. On the following pages we will describe these emotional reactions in more detail so you can better understand what is happening to you. When you know others have experienced the same thing, it helps “normalize” what you are feeling.

You will no doubt experience a variety of these emotions during your period of bereavement. These emotional “phases” are not necessarily in a progressive order. You will not pass neatly from one into the next. Instead, you may find yourself slipping in and out of one phase several times or skipping others altogether. You are unique and your responses will be unique.

### **SHOCK & DENIAL**

Emotional shock and denial are initial responses to first learning of your loved one’s death. Experiencing shock is to be expected and it is a kind of natural anesthetic that protects you from overwhelming emotional pain. Even if death was expected, you may feel numb for several weeks. You may be able to get things done, giving people the impression that you are handling everything very well. In reality the impact of the death has not yet reached you, and may not for days or weeks.

### **ANGER**

Feeling profound anger toward your loved one is not at all unusual. Even though you know this is unreasonable, you still have these strong feelings. It is normal to feel anger toward someone for dying, even if they had no control over their death. You may feel as if you are moving in slow motion. Frustration at not being able to function the way you want to can also deepen the anger.

It is not unusual to direct some of your anger at your loved one’s physician: did he or she do all they could, did they take the best clinical approach to treatment? This is a normal reaction because you had no control over the situation. Loss of control is very frustrating and it scares us. We react with anger because sometimes our emotions just get the best of us.

If you have lost your spouse you may get angry at strangers whenever you see other couples holding hands. Likewise, if you lost a child, watching other children who are healthy and playing may bring on feelings of anger. These feelings are quite normal and they will pass with time.

### **FEAR, ANXIETY, PANIC**

When we experience uncertainty in our lives we feel insecure and vulnerable. This insecurity is especially intensified when we have to face life without someone who was very dear to us. You may have trouble concentrating on anything but your loss. You may

be consumed with thoughts and questions about your loss, such as: “How will I survive?” “I can’t sleep.” “Will I ever stop hurting?” “Sometimes I hear his/her voice.” “What am I going to do?” “I think I’m losing my mind.”

It is natural to feel confused and be forgetful about everyday things. For instance, you may forget where you parked your car and spend an hour looking for it. Or you may forget an important appointment with your doctor. It is conceivable that you won’t even recall the name of a close friend or neighbor. Just remember you are under a great deal of strain and that your brain is overwhelmed and not functioning at its full capacity. Be assured that this is normal for a grieving person and it does **not** mean you are going crazy.

### **DEPRESSION**

You will probably feel very tired and may cry uncontrollably. Try to get as much rest as you possibly can and let friends and family members help out whenever possible. The combination of crying and fatigue can be (though not always) indicators of depression. Be aware of how you are feeling and let your doctor know. Never be embarrassed to talk to your doctor about what you are going through.

You have suffered a traumatic loss. It will no doubt set you back for quite some time. You may feel that your life is meaningless without your loved one. Thoughts of suicide are not uncommon. (“I’d rather be dead than to hurt like this”). It is important to understand that passing thoughts of “death being easier” are not the same as actually considering suicide. While passing thoughts are common in bereaved individuals and usually nothing to be alarmed about, it is very important that you seek counseling, tell a loved one, a friend, or call the **Crisis Hotline at 800-479-3339** if you feel extremely depressed and are actively feeling suicidal.

### **GUILT**

Grief often involves feelings of guilt. Thoughts of “If only...” and “I should have...” may be swimming around in your head. Don’t try to second-guess yourself. You did your very best. You did not do anything wrong. If you were taking care of someone during a long illness, you may feel relief at no longer having to care for him or her. You may then feel guilty for feeling relieved. Try not to be too hard on yourself. You know in your heart you have nothing to be guilty about and your loved one knew you loved him or her.

### **RELIEF**

Relief is a natural reaction following a long illness. If your loved one had been ill for a long time, you may feel relieved knowing he or she is in a better place and is no longer hurting. You may also feel relieved for no longer having to care for him or her 24 hours a day. Caring for someone full time can be very exhausting. You are not being selfish to

feel this way. You are reacting normally. Feeling relieved does not mean a lack of love for the person who has died.

### **LONELINESS**

Feeling lonely is often the most difficult hurdle to overcome, particularly if you have lost your life partner. Your daily life is not the same. There is a sense of emptiness when you have no one to share your everyday experiences with.

This may mean no one to cook for or it may mean coming home to an empty house. If you have lost a child, you have lost the person with whom you shared future dreams. If your loved one has been ill for a long time, you no longer have to care for him or her and this creates a void in your life. No matter the relationship, your daily routine has been drastically altered. All of these things contribute to your feelings of loneliness.

Several weeks after the funeral your friends stop coming by as much as they did right after the death. When they do visit you they seem less tolerant of your tears or depression and seem to expect you to pick yourself up and get on with your life.

### **SPIRITUAL RESPONSES**

In your need to find meaning related to your loss, you may feel anger at God and question His motives. You may temporarily abandon or question your belief system. On the other hand, you may become more religious in your search for answers to the meaning of life and death. Remember that there is no right or wrong way to grieve and that your search for meaning may take you down different paths as you travel through your grief journey.

### **UNEXPLAINED PHENOMENA**

You may hear the footsteps, the voice, or the laughter of the person who has died. You may smell his or her aftershave or perfume even though you know the bottle hasn't been opened. You may also feel his or her presence. Some people have said they have actually seen their deceased loved one sitting in a favorite chair. These sensations may disturb you, or they may be comforting to you. They are natural reactions and they will eventually fade.

### **ACCEPTANCE & MOVING ON**

You will gradually adjust to your new status in life. You will begin to laugh again. Finding humor in the midst of pain is a sign that healing is taking place. You will become more optimistic and life will look brighter to you. You will regain your energy and you will re-establish old relationships and develop new ones.

As you realize you are learning to live in spite of your loss, you may have some renewed feelings of guilt. You may feel that if you enjoy life without your loved one you are betraying him or her. Quite the contrary is true. In fact, you honor your loved one by being happy again because people who have had a happy relationship usually feel the need

to develop new happy relationships. Remember that tying the length of bereavement to the loyalty you feel for your loved one can unnecessarily delay your healing. You may falsely think that “if it hurts enough it will keep him or her near.” Thinking less often and less intensely about your loved one will not cause him or her to “slip away.” Your loved one will always be in your heart and it is OK for you to enjoy life again.

Respecting pain when you feel it and getting on with your own life when you can are both ways of demonstrating loyalty to your loved one. Be true to yourself and your feelings and know that you will not necessarily get *over* the loss but you will be able to live *with* the loss.

### **PHYSICAL REACTIONS TO GRIEF**

When someone you love has died, your body reacts to the shock in a variety of ways. Your resistance to illness is lowered and you become vulnerable to infections more easily. Therefore, it is very important to take special care of yourself during this time. Many physical symptoms can appear in conjunction with your grief. The following list contains many symptoms that are common during bereavement:

- Headaches
- Stomach aches
- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness
- Tightness in chest or throat
- Muscle tension or weakness
- Weight loss/weight gain
- Insomnia
- Lack of energy/extreme fatigue
- Heart palpitations
- Tendency to sigh

Do not hesitate to see your doctor about any of the above symptoms. While they may be reactions to your grief, they may also be early warning signs of something requiring treatment.

### **ROLE CHANGES: Family Dynamics**

When a member of the family dies, it affects all of the surviving family members in many ways. The roles and responsibilities once held by the deceased person now have to be taken over by others in the family.

Adjusting to your new circumstances often involves learning new tasks or adopting new ways of dealing with living alone, raising children, managing finances, or managing the home. You are essentially faced with filling new unfamiliar roles.

Some people react to this by withdrawing from the world. They refuse to develop the necessary skills. You may even catch yourself saying “It’s not fair—this isn’t how it was supposed to be. This isn’t my job.” If you stay in this mode of thinking too long, you may hinder your own progress.

Unfortunately, life isn’t always fair and we must learn to adapt. Changing roles and adopting new skills put a strain on all of the family members. Realize that these changes may take considerable time and be patient with yourself and other family members.

### **TIMETABLE: How Long Will It Take?**

While there are similar experiences we all share during the grief process, there is no simple progression of one stage to the next. The grief stages or “phases” and your experiences with them may ebb and flow for some time. You will not go out of one phase and into the next and so on until you are “done.” Instead, expect to be in some phases of the grief process several different times and with varying degrees of intensity.

There is no clear timetable for the resolution of grief. Grief has its own timetable and it is different for each individual. There are, however, a few critical points during bereavement of which you should be aware:

#### **Six Weeks**

Don’t be surprised if you feel worse at six weeks than you did at two weeks. Shock has numbed and protected you. Now that the shock has worn off, you will have an intense awareness of your loss. During the first couple of months you may experience mental confusion. You may not remember a conversation from the day before. You may not even remember being with the person. You may forget the name of your best friend when he or she is standing right in front of you. Your thought processes are jumbled and your sentences may not make much sense if you don’t first plan in your head what you are going to say. As mentioned in a previous section, your brain is overwhelmed with the loss and is not functioning at its full capacity. This is very normal and it will pass. Be gentle with yourself.

#### **Six Months**

Just when you feel you have been coping fairly well and your pain has begun to subside you may feel a resurgence of grief. This is referred to as the “six month phenomenon.” Everything you do in your new status reminds you of the loss you have suffered. To some it feels as if the rug has been pulled out from under them. Quite often, people don’t realize that it’s been six months since their loved one’s death and can’t understand why they’re suddenly feeling so sad again. Being aware of the time frame (maybe make a note in your calendar) will help you understand what is happening to you so you don’t think you are “sliding back” when in fact what is happening is a sign that you are healing and is very normal.



## **One Year**

In most likelihood, your memories of your loved one and the relationship you shared are now warm and comforting, unlike your early memories, which may have been painful. That is not to say you are no longer experiencing the pain of your loss. Of course you are - your loss will last your lifetime. You have begun to adapt to a new way of living without that person and have acknowledged that life goes on.

You will feel pangs of sadness and loss that society won't recognize because you are "officially" over what is generally acknowledged as the mourning period. If you have a strong support system of family and friends they can be of great comfort to you at this time. Be sure to keep the lines of communication open and let your loved ones know how you feel. Don't try to keep your emotions locked up just because you think you're not supposed to hurt anymore.

Individual responses to grief will vary, but you will notice your grief will gradually lighten as you continue to heal. Remember to be kind to yourself because most people need 2-3 years to regain their sense of balance and control over their lives after losing a loved one.

## **THINGS THAT MAY TRIGGER YOUR GRIEF**

Following the death of a loved one it is not uncommon to experience a resurgence of grief at the most inopportune times. Some things that may trigger memories of your loved one can occur when you are out and you smell your loved one's cologne or perfume on another individual. This is totally unexpected and can send you into instant tears. When you are shopping you will often find that stores play background music and you may hear a song that was special to you and you may begin to cry. You may see another person that reminds you of your loved one and for a moment you think it is him or her and you almost lose your breath. These are all normal reactions in the early stages of grief and will fade with time.

## **Anniversaries & Holidays**

You can expect to feel renewed sadness during certain times of the year, particularly around holidays that are centered around family, such as Thanksgiving. Holidays, which are meant to be shared with all of the family, are especially difficult without the deceased family member. Anniversaries are also difficult. The obvious one is your wedding anniversary if you have lost your spouse or life partner, but there are other anniversaries you may be sensitive to. You may become saddened on the anniversary of the death, on the birthday of the deceased, or even on the anniversary of the date you received the terminal diagnosis. Some people are surprised by their grief reactions on holidays they did not even think about. Halloween may be a special day if you lost a child or if your spouse or life partner died and it was your day to dress up and act silly. Try to be aware of which days were meaningful to you.

Experiencing grief on special occasions throughout the year is normal and usually temporary. However, if you find that they interfere with your functioning and enjoyment of life, you may want to consider talking to a bereavement counselor or your family doctor.

It is important for you to be aware that you will create new holidays in your mind as life goes on. Your child's wedding or the birth of a grandchild may be bittersweet because your loved one is not there to share it with you.

It may be helpful to take special notice of an upcoming anniversary or special day. Try to plan something enjoyable with close friends and family. Their presence and support can be very comforting. Know that anniversaries and holidays can bring back painful feelings you thought you had worked through. This is very normal and does not mean you are "sliding back."

### **TIPS FOR COPING**

Over time you will work through the process of grieving. You will acknowledge your loss, make sense of all that has happened, and begin adapting to your new life. The following suggestions may help you cope better and adapt more quickly:

- **Maintain a routine.** This will help give a sense of normalcy to your life.
- **Be gentle and patient with yourself.** You will make mistakes and lose your concentration. You will feel anger and confusion at times. This is normal.
- **Don't set unrealistic goals for yourself.** Grief will take longer than you think and trying to "rush through it" will not hurry it along.
- **Accept the ups and downs.** Some days will be better and some worse.
- **Avoid using alcohol to numb your pain.** Alcohol is a depressant and will only prolong your grief and make it worse.
- **Pay attention to your body.** Get plenty of rest and eat good nutritious meals. Physical activity is a good way to relieve tension so be sure to get some exercise.
- **Avoid "toxic friends."** All of us have had people in our lives who get us down or take energy from us rather than give energy to us. This is a good time to avoid them or weed them out if possible. You do not need negative energy during your time of grief and healing. You need the positive energy of being surrounded by people who can support you and love you.
- **Give yourself a break from grief.** While you must work through your grief, you don't need to constantly focus on it. It is healthy to go to a movie, to dinner, a ball game, read a book, listen to music, or get a massage or manicure.

### **Keep a Journal**

It is often therapeutic to put your thoughts and feelings down in writing. It helps to sort things out in your mind by clarifying how you really feel. Some people have found it helpful to compose poems or record their dreams. Others have found solace in writing letters to the deceased, with thoughts on what their death has meant to them. You yourself

might consider writing about what it feels like to be alone. If this sounds helpful to you then you may want to keep a diary or journal of your daily experiences and emotions, or reflect on thoughts and important conversations you want to remember. Looking through your journal months later, you will be able to see your progress and how far you've traveled through your grief journey. You'll be amazed at how well you've begun to cope with your loss. You will see that you have begun to live with your loss rather than being consumed by it.

### **Your Support System**

During your bereavement it is important for you to have a strong support system. Your family can be very supportive, but some people don't like to burden family members who are themselves hurting from the loss. Try not to make the mistake of assuming that just because others are hurting from the death that you cannot turn to them for comfort. You can, and you can comfort them in return.

### **Bereavement Counseling & Support Groups**

It is likely you will want someone to talk to who is not so close to the situation, someone who has training and experience in the field of bereavement. Please don't hesitate to call our bereavement staff at Avalon Hospice for support.

Bereavement support groups can be very beneficial. Having the support of others who are experiencing the loss of a loved one can be extremely helpful and sharing experiences helps you feel less alone.

## COPING WITH THE HOLIDAYS

The holidays, usually a time full of joy and happiness, can be bittersweet for people who have lost a loved one. By planning ahead for the holidays you will have some control over the anticipated occasion and be better able to cope with your grief. Although everyone experiences grief differently there are common things a grieving person can do to get through the holiday season:

- **Share your thoughts and feelings.** Don't hold things inside. Tell your friends and family what you need. Surround yourself with people who love you. Ask for what you need. Others don't know what you need or how you feel unless you tell them.
- **Remember your loved one.** Talk about the person who has died. Light a special candle for him or her. Say a prayer, a poem or say a toast at the holiday dinner. You may want to create a memory quilt in honor of your loved one.
- **Celebrate life.** Make a donation to a worthy cause in memory of your loved one or attend a religious service if faith is part of your life.
- **Set limits.** Don't do more than you feel up to. Let someone else cook the Thanksgiving turkey this year if it has always been your job. Don't send out Christmas cards if you don't want to. Don't attend that holiday party if you don't feel up to it. People will understand.
- **If you are lonely, volunteer some time to help others.** We often find great comfort in helping others. You may want to visit a senior center or help in a soup kitchen or hospital.
- **Plant a tree or flower in memory of your loved one.**
- **Create new holiday rituals.** You don't need to always do things the same way if they bring you sadness. Have your family gathering at someone else's house this year. If you want to avoid the holidays altogether and go skiing, then do so. The most important thing is to take care of yourself and not feel you have to do it all.
- **Let others share the responsibilities of holiday tasks.** Give a family member or friend your shopping list to do the shopping for you. If you feel up to it, a couple of hours of shopping with a friend may do you some good.
- **Appreciate your family.** Don't forget you have other loved ones who need your love and want to be close to you. Don't deprive them or yourself from that closeness by pulling away too much. Their love will help you heal.
- **Avoid comparisons.** Don't set yourself up for disappointment by comparing this holiday season with the holidays of the past. Try to enjoy what you do have rather than pine for what no longer is.
- **Allow yourself little pleasures.** Hot baths, naps, and favorite foods go a long way in making you feel like a human being again.
- **Remember that the anticipation of the holiday is often harder than the actual holiday itself.**

## **SUGGESTED READING**

If you can't find the following books at your local bookstore, they can be purchased through [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

### **GENERAL GRIEF:**

**After You Say Goodbye: When Someone You Love Dies of AIDS**, by Paul Kent Froman (A sensitive look at the special issues of those mourning the loss of a loved one due to AIDS).

**Beyond Grief: A Guide for Recovering From the Death of a Loved One**, by Carol Staudache (Excellent & readable, describes the grief process for different types of losses).

**How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies**, by Therese Rando (Addresses different challenges depending on your relationship to the deceased).

**How To Survive The Loss Of A Love**, By Melba Colgrove (Applies to a variety of losses in addition to death. Easy to pick up and read the sections that apply to your situation).

**Suddenly Alone: A Woman's Guide To Widowhood**, by Philomene Gates (Discusses the loss, finding a job, making new friends, etc.).

**When Bad Things Happen To Good People**, by Harold Kushner (Rabbi Kushner wrote this book as an outlet during his recovery from the death of his son).

**When Men Grieve: Why Men Grieve Differently & How You Can Help**, by Elizabeth Levang (A straightforward portrayal of men and how they grieve).

**When Parents Die: A Guide For Adults**, by Edward Myers (No matter how old we are, the death of a parent can be devastating and the author treats this subject with great compassion and knowledge).

**Widow to Widow**, by Genevieve Davis Ginsburg (Addresses the grief issues of losing a husband and offers practical ideas for rebuilding your life).

## **SELF HELP:**

**Journaling for Joy**, by Joyce Chapman (Teaches you how to use your life as a learning tool and discover the person you *can* be).

**The Healing Journey Through Grief: Your Journal For Reflection and Recovery**, by Phil Rich (Using subject prompts supplied by the author, you learn to journal and document your grief journey).

## **FOR CHILDREN:**

**After Charlotte's Mom Died**, by Cornelia Spelman (Teaches the child that happiness was not buried with the person who died).

**I Miss You: A First Look At Death**, by Pat Thomas (Teaches a child that death is a natural part of life. Helps children understand their loss and come to terms with their feelings. Beautifully illustrated).

**Tear Soup: A Recipe For Healing After Loss**, by Pat Schwiebert (Beautifully illustrated and good for all ages, even adults).

**The Fall of Freddie The Leaf: A Story For All Ages**, by Leo Buscaglia (A Beautifully written story about a leaf named Freddie and how he and other leaves change with the passing seasons. A story of comfort describing the delicate balance between life and death).

Resources: "On Death and Dying," Elizabeth Kubler-Ross; "Grief, Dying, and Death," Therese Rando; "How To Survive The Loss of a Love," M. Colgrove; "How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies," Therese Rando

## *Gone From My Sight*

*I am standing upon the seashore.  
A ship at my side spreads her white sails to the  
morning breeze and starts for the blue ocean.  
She is an object of beauty and strength.  
I stand and watch her until at length she hangs  
like a speck of white cloud just where the sea  
and the sky come to mingle with each other.*

*Then someone at my side says: "There,  
she is gone!"*

*Gone where?*

*Gone from my sight, that is all.  
She is just as large in mast and hull  
as she was when she left my side and  
she is just as able to bear her load of  
living freight to her destined port.*

*Her diminished size is in me, not in her.  
And just at the moment when someone at my  
side says: "There, she is gone!" there are  
other eyes watching her coming, and other  
voices ready to take up the glad shout:  
"Here she comes!"*

*And that is dying...*

*By Henry Van Dyke*