Coping with Grief

With our sympathy

As you begin your grief journey, please accept our condolences for your loss. We hope this booklet helps you better understand your grief and find tools to help you cope.

People often wonder during grief if they are going crazy. They may feel that they will never be “normal” again. Grief is ongoing and changing. One day you may feel numb and the next day feel out of control. Holidays, anniversaries and other events can trigger intense feelings of grief. Even routine events may become exhausting.

Grief is a natural reaction to the death of a loved one, but most of us are not ready for it. Grief can sometimes be devastating, frightening and often lonely. We may think, do, and say things that are not like us.

Grief has been compared to a fierce storm at sea. At first, the waves are peaked and close together. With time, the sea gets calmer. But occasionally the storm strengthens without warning. For a while you may not feel grief, then suddenly you meet someone, see something or hear something and grief resumes.

No two people grieve the same, even in the same family. Like a snowflake or a fingerprint, each person’s grief is unique. Grief is not an orderly set of stages. It is different for each person, so only you know what feels right for you.

How grief affects you

When you understand how grief may affect you, you can adjust to it. Then you can take care of yourself better.

**Shock and denial.** For a short time, you may sense that your feelings have been deadened. This state of shock helps you so you do not have to feel the full effect of loss right away.

Grief can affect your judgment. If possible, try to wait a while after your loss before making big decisions like moving, major purchases, or changing jobs.

**Emotional release.** This may happen close to the time that you begin to feel the full extent of your loss. You may have a flood of grief, cry, and feel like you are “going to pieces.”

**Depression and loneliness.** Grief may bring a sense of bleakness and deep sorrow. You may feel like no one understands your pain.

**Physical symptoms.** Grief can make your body act as if you were ill. You may have an upset stomach, body pain, no appetite, headaches or fatigue. If the death was traumatic, you may have nightmares, flashbacks, or fears about safety.

**Panic.** You may panic because you can only focus on your loss. You may feel like you are losing your mind. This is natural. It usually goes away when you remind yourself that your feelings are temporary and normal.
Anger. Anger, irritability and blame are common. You may be upset with friends, doctors, nurses, relatives, children, the deceased person, yourself, or God. Anger may give you a sense that you can control the situation.

Guilt. You may feel guilt about the loss. It may be about something you had done or not done. Or you may feel guilt that your relationship wasn’t perfect or because you are angry. It’s easy to find fault when you look at what happened in the past. To help you move beyond these feelings and focus on positive memories, you can try to make amends or take a positive action that honors your loved one.

Some people find that writing their loved one a letter helps if the death was sudden or you didn’t have the chance to express your feelings. You can write a note saying thank you, I forgive you, I am sorry, I love you or other thoughts.

Social and work activities. It is common for people to have a hard time going back to work or taking part in social events. As you move through grief, you will gain confidence that you can manage your grief upsurges. Grief is a life-long process, but with support and self-care you will heal. Find positive ways to honor your loved one, and try to adjust to the many changes that grief brings.

Common grief responses

It is normal for people to have a wide variety of responses to grief. If your symptoms are severe or prevent you from functioning, get help right away from a grief counselor or other professional.

Feelings

- Sad, confused
- Lonely, empty, tired
- Relief, guilty, yearning
- Denial, shock
- Angry, irritable, resentful, frustrated
- Helpless, numb, hopeless
- Panic, scared

Thoughts

- Why did they die?
- Why me?
- It’s not real. I’m going crazy.
- I’ll never get through this and be normal.
- I should have done more.
- I wish it had been me.
- What’s going to happen to me?
- Am I always going to feel like this?
- I can’t handle things or concentrate.
- I wonder what my death will be like?
Physical symptoms
- Headaches or dry mouth
- Tightness in your chest
- Lump in your throat
- Weight or menstrual changes
- Tingling, shaky or numb
- Constipation, stomachaches or diarrhea
- Sweating, tired, or aching
- Empty arms, especially after the death of an infant
- Flare-ups of past conditions such as high blood pressure, asthma, or arthritis

Behaviors
- Irritable, bothered by noise
- Sleep problems or dreams of deceased
- Acting out feelings, crying
- Change in eating habits and appetite
- Less interest in outside events, work, or social activities
- Avoiding reminders of loss
- Hard time concentrating or absent-minded
- Preoccupied with thoughts of the deceased
- Sensing the presence of the deceased

Tools for healing

Find sources of support. Who can you share your grief with? Family? Friends? Do you have a spiritual leader or a community of faith to support you? You could join a grief support group or talk with a grief counselor.

Keep your daily habits as best as you can. They will help you feel stable and healthy. When you don’t know what to do, do what you know. This will help create a sense of order in the midst of what feels like chaos. Do your normal activities such as eating meals on time, exercising, caring for family members and pets, working, or healthy activities that comfort you.

Accept offers of help. Let others listen to you, support you and take care of daily needs such as rides, meals, baby sitting and chores. Let them lighten your load for a while.

Let yourself cry and talk about your loved one when you need to. Let others share in your grief. You may find comfort in comforting each other.

Continue to cherish good memories. Look at photos and items that bring you comfort. Tell stories and urge others to tell stories too.

Give yourself time to process memories. As you remember, it’s possible you will get more sad. But “leaning into” your grief and accepting your feelings will help you heal and move toward a new future.
If you had a difficult relationship with the deceased, you may grieve the loss of any resolution.

**Keep a journal** or talk to the person who died as if he or she were still with you. This might aid you as you work through your feelings.

**Share your thoughts** with a trusted friend or counselor. They can offer relief and perspective.

**Be gentle** with yourself and others. Think about how you can pass on to others your gratitude for the deceased.

**Limit contact with negative people.** Spend time with those who support and renew you. Don’t spend time with those who do not.

**Adjust your expectations.** Some people don’t know what to say. There will be times when friends or family make awkward or insensitive comments. Some people may give advice or avoid you because they are uncomfortable. Remember that most folks are well-intentioned and are doing the best they can.

**Tell others what you need.** Friends and family can’t read your mind. Help them to understand what is helpful and what is not.

**Create healing rituals.** Eat at the deceased’s favorite restaurant, plant a tree or memorial garden, or make a quilt of their clothes to remember them. Even something simple like lighting a candle or releasing a balloon can help you cope.

Alcohol, gambling, or drugs. Not the answers.

M. Scott Peck in his book “The Road Less Traveled” writes that people create more pain and suffering in their lives by attempting to go around the pain.

Loss can create a title wave of emotions. These emotions can throw you into emotional states you have never had before. Feeling crazy, out of control and depressed can be overwhelming. This may tempt you to turn to unhealthy ways to escape the pain. But you will create more problems than you will get relief.

Alcohol and gambling are easily accessed and often acceptable to use in society. So for the person who already drinks, takes drugs, or gambles, grief is a time to be very careful. If there has been an unhealthy habit before grief, it is certain that the problem will get worse. Even the person who only drinks, gambles, or takes drugs once in a while should be aware of how addictive they can be.

Depression is common following loss. Alcohol is a “great pretender” as a help for depression. It seems to help, but in fact alcohol makes your depression worse.

Sleeping is hard for most people in grief. It might be tempting to use alcohol to help you sleep. There is no worse drug to choose. Alcohol poses as a sedative. Before long, the effect wears off and you are worse than before. You will need more each time to get the same effect.

Sleeping pills may look like the answer. The combination of alcohol and sleeping pills is extremely dangerous, sometimes fatal.
If alcohol, drugs, or gambling become a way to cope with pain, the potential for addiction goes up. They won’t give you the lasting relief that you want. At best, they distract. More often they suck you into an addiction and rob you in the process. They will not relieve grief for more than a few hours, and it will take more and more to get the same effect. The price you pay for that relief is too great.

How much is “too much” is different for everyone. How much you drink, take drugs or gamble is less important than how important it becomes to you. A simple test is to think about how much you feel that you need to do it. A strong clue of a problem is “looking forward” to the time of day when you can start.

Be honest with yourself. If you are not happy with how often you gamble, drink or take drugs, or why you choose to do them, get help. Talk to your doctor, a trusted counselor, or reach out to a treatment facility.

If you were not a gambler, drug user, or drinker before your grief started, do not start. These behaviors will not help you heal. Feel the pain, express your feelings, accept your new reality, and re-invest in your life. These steps will help you through your grief.

Adjusting to grief

Adjusting to grief is an ongoing process. At times you may seek ways to feel more connected with your loved one. At other times you may cope by doing daily tasks that let you avoid emotional pain.

By going back and forth between focusing on your relationship with the person who died and focusing on your own current needs, you slowly will find a balance.

Although your grief may feel chaotic, it helps to move back and forth between approaching and avoiding the pain of your grief.

Ways to express your loss

- Write in a journal or spend quiet time alone.
- Write poetry, paint, or draw.
- Have rituals that honor your loved one.
- Pray or meditate.
- Give yourself time to cry.
- Read books about grief.
- Look at photos of your loved one or items that he or she enjoyed. Share stories.
- Put together a list of meaningful music.
- Create a memory quilt or scrapbook.
- Go to a grief support group or grief counselor. Spend time with others who support you.
Ways to focus on a healthy adjustment

- Focus on daily tasks.
- Take life one moment, or one step, at a time.
- Do something physical. Walk or garden.
- Take time for social activities.
- Focus on your body. Breathe. Get enough rest. Eat well.
- Make some financial adjustments and decisions.
- Gain confidence that you can navigate life’s changes.
- Balance meaningful work and enjoyable activities.
- When you are ready, start to think of the future by making plans and setting goals.

My self-care goals

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The Mourner's Bill of Rights
Based on the writings of Alan Wolfelt, PhD

You have the right to your own grief. No one else will grieve exactly the same way you do. Don’t let others tell you what you should or should not be feeling.

You have the right to talk about your grief. Talking about your grief will help you heal. Find others who will let you talk about your grief as much as you want and as often as you want.

You have the right to feel many emotions. Confusion, disorientation, fear, guilt, and relief are just a few of the emotions you might feel. There is no such thing as a ‘wrong’ emotion. Accept all your feelings and find listeners who will do the same.

You have the right to search for meaning. You may have questions. Some of your questions may have answers, but some may not.

You have the right to treasure your memories. Memories are one of your loved one’s legacies. You will always remember. Instead of ignoring your memories, find creative ways to embrace them.

You have the right to move toward your grief and heal. Grief takes time. It is a process, not an event. Be patient and tolerant with yourself. Limit contact with those who are impatient with your grief. The death of your loved one has changed your life forever.
You have the right to set limits. Your feelings of loss and sadness will probably leave you feeling tired. Respect what your body and mind tell you. Get enough rest. Eat balanced meals.

You have the right to experience “grief bursts.” Sometimes, out of nowhere, a strong surge of grief may overcome you. This is normal and natural. Find someone who understands and will let you talk it out.

You have the right to use rituals. A funeral does more than mark the death of someone. A funeral is a place for you to mourn and provides you with the support of caring people. Other rituals, such as lighting a candle for the person who died, can also be healing. Rituals are not silly.

You have the right to embrace your spirituality. If faith is part of your life, express it in ways that are meaningful to you. Surround yourself with people who understand and support your religious beliefs. If you feel angry at God, find someone to talk with who won’t be critical of your feelings.

The four C’s for holiday coping

1. Communicate your wishes to family and friends.
2. Cut back on your obligations or shorten visits. Do this when you feel overwhelmed, especially during the first year or two.
3. Change rituals to fit your needs.

Helping someone who is grieving

Most people at some time in their lives will be able to support someone else who is grieving. However, people are often afraid of doing or saying the wrong thing. The following ideas may help.

Never tell somebody to “get over it.” Mourning the death of a loved one is hard and takes time and patience.

Don’t divert the grieving person by talking about something else. When you leave, the reality of the loss just hits all the harder. Sometimes it is best just to be silent. As tough as it is, you can help the mourner by letting them decide what to do or share.

Don’t be afraid to talk about the person who died. It may be hard for you, but it helps the person who is grieving know that their loved one has not been forgotten.

Don’t be afraid of tears, the grieving person’s or yours. Tears may help. Allow them to express their grief in a healthy way while you are there to support them. Be present and give them your warmth and empathy. You don’t have to fix or heal their pain. Just be there.

Reassure, don’t argue. And don’t be offended if they withdraw at times. Simply support them wherever they are in the grieving process. Everyone grieves in their own time and way.

Keep in touch. Don’t isolate. Feeling alone is one of the hardest parts of sorrow. Be ready with a smile, a hug, an email, or caring touch. Your sincere care gives them strength.

Let them talk. People who are grieving need to talk. Don’t worry about saying the right things, just listen.
Spirituality and grief

Spirituality gives people a sense of identity, meaning and purpose. It is based on values and beliefs. Spirituality is usually a relationship with your inner spirit, with others and with God. You may or may not have a specific faith.

Losing a loved one often creates spiritual distress and pain. Some find stability and comfort in keeping up their spiritual practices. Others may feel cut off from or angry with God. During this time of distress, you can help maintain your spirituality by sharing your feelings with your Higher Power.

You may also want to ask for support from a faith community or clergy person.

Grieving is not weakness
Nor absence of faith.
Grieving is as natural as
Crying when you are hurt,
Sleeping when you are tired or
Sneezing when your nose itches.
It is nature’s way
Of healing a broken heart.
~Doug Manning

Book list for adults

- ABC’s of Healthy Grieving by Harold Ivan Smith
- Forever Ours by Janis Amatuzio, MD
- The Geography of Loss by Patti Digh
- Getting Back to Life When Grief Won’t Heal by Phyllis Kosminsky
- Grieving for Dummies by Greg Harvey
- Grieving the Death of a Friend by Harold Ivan Smith
- Healing Grief, Finding Peace by Louis LeGrand
- Healing Grief at Work by Alan Wolfelt
- I’m Grieving as Fast as I Can by Linda Feinberg
- The Journey Through Grief and Loss – Helping Yourself and Your Child When Grief is Shared by Robert Zucker
- Motherless Daughters by Hope Edelman
- Nourishing the Grieving Heart by Jane Thompson
- Second Firsts – Live, Laugh and Love Again by Christina Rasmussen
- When Bad Things Happen to Good People by Harold Kushner
Websites

- [http://www.essentiahealth.org/StMarysMedicalCenter/Grief-Support-Center.aspx](http://www.essentiahealth.org/StMarysMedicalCenter/Grief-Support-Center.aspx)
- [www.adec.org](http://www.adec.org)
- [www.hospicefoundation.org](http://www.hospicefoundation.org)
- [www.griefnet.org](http://www.griefnet.org)
- [www.widownet.org](http://www.widownet.org)
- [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org) (type grief in search section)

Grief Support Services

Essentia Health Grief Support Services offers support groups for adults, teens and children. The support groups are free and open to the public.

Individual or family therapy can help those who are grieving the death of a loved one. It can be especially helpful if you have had more than one loss or your grief is complicated.

The Adult Grief Support Group meets every month on the 3rd Tuesday from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. The Senior Grief Support Group meets on the 2nd and 4th Wednesdays from 10:00 to 11:30 a.m. Both meet at St. Mary’s Medical Center, 2nd floor, in the Grief Support Library (Room 2216).

The Person-to-Person program matches trained volunteers with people who have had a similar loss of a loved one.

The Grief Support Library has many materials for your use.

For more information call 218-786-4402 or email griefcenter@essentiahealth.org.

My thoughts and reflections:

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