

# Understanding and coping with grief

Experiencing a major loss can upend one's life. When a loved one has passed away or we've lost something important in life, accepting and coping with the loss is one of the hardest journeys to take.

Grief does not have to be as isolating as it seems. Look for a support group, lecture, or seminar that pertains to your situation.

The path through grief can feel painful and confusing, but people don't have to walk it alone. Sharing feelings with friends and family, and reaching out for expert guidance when needed, will provide healing in time.

Suffering after the death of a beloved family member, friend, coworker or even a pet is the most obvious form of mourning. But there are ways to mourn 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.

## Common effects of grief

Early on, grief can bring on physical effects, some of which can be mistaken for symptoms of physical illness:

- Fatigue or sleep disturbances
- Weeping
- Nightmares
- Body aches or trembling
- Loss of appetite
- Dizziness or headaches
- Gain or loss of weight
- Tightness in chest or throat
- Nausea or stomachache.

Sometimes feelings of numbness and disbelief occur shortly after experiencing a loss. This can transition to depression, when the full weight of grief may come through and feelings of extreme sadness may begin to take over. This is normal, and it shows that healing has begun. In time, acceptance of the loss often occurs and the individual can start to move on.



Regardless of the types of grief effects experienced, it's important to remember that there's no right or wrong way to react to a great loss, and there's no need to rush grieving. Everyone copes differently—according to their own personalities and coping styles. Some grieve for a few weeks, some for a month or many months, and some don't fully work through grief for several years.

### Take care of yourself

If you're grieving, you may need to withdraw temporarily to reflect on the loss and examine the new situation you find yourself in. It may also be necessary to recharge your batteries for what's to come. And that means focusing on some of your most basic needs.

- Eat regular, nourishing meals. If it is too difficult to eat three regular meals, try four or five small ones. Have nourishing food such as fruits and vegetables available to snack on, rather than chips and candy which have excessive calories, fat and sugar.
- 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. So, drink lots of water and other healthy fluids throughout the day.
- Get plenty of rest. Try to develop regular bedtime routines. If you are having a hard time getting to sleep, try a glass of warm milk or some soft music or nature sounds to soothe your thoughts.
- Exercise for good health. Resume your exercise program and develop a manageable routine. Exercise can help you refocus your

thoughts and redirect your energies—even if only for a little while. At the very least, get outside and take walks; this can help you engage your muscles, change your perspective and avoid being isolated.

- Meditate to calm your body. Meditation, perhaps in the form of prayer or yoga, can help you get some needed relaxation.

### Express your feelings

Grief is a powerful emotion, and it is best to work through the sadness and emotion that you may be feeling.

- Allow yourself to express your feelings—whatever they may be—to friends, family and others around you.
- Have a good cry as often as needed. You often feel lighter after you have done this. Consider sharing your tears with other loved ones.
- 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.
- Avoid using alcohol, drugs, or tranquilizers to self-medicate. These will only mask the pain and could lead to problems later on.
- Keep a journal to identify your feelings and also to see progress.

### Seek outside support

It can be helpful to find additional support during this difficult time. If religious services have been a source of support to you, continue attending them and stay in close contact with your church “family.” Let your friends and other family members know about your emotional or physical



needs. The more they know about what to do to help you, the more available they will be. If you are having significant difficulty dealing with your grief, or it is interfering with your relationships or marriage, you may want to talk to a professional for guidance and coping strategies.

### Tips for healing yourself

- If you need some time alone, take it as often as needed.
- Treat yourself to some rewards along the way as something to look forward to.
- Look for small ways to pamper yourself, such as bubble baths, new cologne, soft pajamas or a new haircut.
- A short trip can be a good break from grief, but be aware that upon your return, the pain of grief will be waiting for you. However, you will have had a rest and have hopefully gained the knowledge that you can enjoy some things in life again.
- Be open to some new interests—perhaps a new hobby or resuming an old one.
- Carry a special letter, poem, or quote with you to read when the going gets tough.
- Try to enjoy the good days and don't feel guilty for doing so.
- Reach out to help someone else.
- Learn to have patience with yourself. Remember that grieving takes time.

### Managing grief over the long term

Although time does help, everyone's grief is unique, and people deal with the emotion in their own way and time frame.

- Grief does not follow a set schedule. Some people feel that once you “work through” your feelings, they are over, and you move on to the next phase of your life. However, these feelings won't come in any set order or over a specific period of time.
- Grief can be an ongoing process. It can take on different forms and meaning over time. With time, the intensity and feelings of grief do change. The anniversary of the loss of a loved one can be a day to appreciate the happy times you shared with your loved one, even though you're still grieving his or her loss.
- Grief does not mean “letting go.” Your loved ones will always be an important part of your life. Part of the grieving process involves keeping your loved one with you emotionally, even though he or she is no longer with you physically, as you continue to move forward with your life. This is a subtle process that happens over time.

*Source: American Hospice Foundation  
([www.americanhospice.org](http://www.americanhospice.org)).*

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