

What is Grief?

Grief is the normal response of sorrow, emotion, and confusion that comes from losing someone or something important to you. It is a natural part of life. Grief is a typical reaction to death, divorce, job loss, a move away from friends and family, or loss of good health due to illness. The more significant the loss, the more intense the grief. However, even subtle losses can lead to grief. For example, you might experience grief after moving away from home, graduating from college or changing jobs.

How Does Grief Feel?

Just after a loss, you may feel empty and numb, as if you are in shock. You may notice physical changes such as trembling, nausea, trouble breathing, muscle weakness, dry mouth, or trouble sleeping and eating. You may become angry - at a situation, a particular person, or just angry in general. Almost everyone in grief also experiences guilt (often expressed as "I could have, I should have, and I wish I would have" statements). People in grief may have strange dreams or nightmares, be absent-minded, withdraw socially, or lack the desire to return to work or classes.

How Long Does Grief Last?

Grief lasts as long as it takes you to accept and learn to live with your loss. For some people, grief lasts weeks to months. For others, grieving may take years. The length of time spent grieving is different for each person. There are many reasons for the differences, including personality, health, coping style, culture, family background, and life experiences. The time spent grieving also depends on your relationship with the person lost and how prepared you were for the loss.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve — but there are healthy ways to cope with the pain. Grief that is expressed and experienced has a potential for healing that eventually can strengthen and enrich life.

Grieving is a personal and highly individual experience. How you grieve depends on your personality and coping style, your life experience, and the nature of the loss. The grieving process takes time. Healing happens gradually; it can't be forced or hurried — and **there is no "normal" timetable for grieving**. Whatever your grief experience is, be patient with yourself and allow the process to naturally unfold.

Common Symptoms of Grief

While loss affects people in different ways, many people experience the following symptoms when they're grieving. Just remember that almost anything that you experience in the early stages of grief is normal — including feeling like you're going crazy, feeling like you're in a bad dream, or questioning your religious beliefs.

- **Shock and disbelief** — It can be hard to accept what happened. You may feel numb, or even deny the truth. If someone you love has died, you may keep expecting them to show up, even though you know they're gone.
- **Sadness** — Profound sadness is probably the most universally experienced symptom of grief. You may have feelings of emptiness, despair, yearning, or deep loneliness. You may also cry a lot or feel emotionally unstable.
- **Guilt** — You may regret or feel guilty about things you did or didn't say or do. After a death, you may even feel guilty for not doing something to prevent the death, even if there was nothing more you could have done.

- **Anger** — Even if the loss was nobody's fault, you may feel angry and resentful. If you lost a loved one, you may be angry at yourself, God, the doctors, or even the person who died for abandoning you. You may feel the need to blame someone for the injustice that was done to you.
- **Fear** — A loss can trigger a host of worries and fears. You may feel anxious, helpless, or insecure. You may even have panic attacks. The death of a loved one can trigger fears about your own mortality, of facing life without that person, or the responsibilities you now face alone.
- **Physical symptoms** — We often think of grief as an emotional process, but it can often involve physical problems, including fatigue, nausea, lowered immunity, weight loss / gain, aches and pains, and insomnia.

If you are experiencing any of these emotions following a loss, it may help to know that your reaction is natural and that you'll heal in time. However, not everyone who is grieving goes through all of these emotional 'stages' — and that's okay. Contrary to popular belief, **you do not have to go through set stages in order to heal**. In fact, some people resolve their grief without going through *any* of these stages. And if you do go through these stages of grief, you probably won't experience them in a neat, sequential order, so don't worry about what you "should" be feeling or which stage you're supposed to be in.

Losing someone you love is very painful. After a significant loss, you may experience all kinds of difficult and surprising emotions. Sometimes it may feel like the sadness will never let up. While these feelings can be frightening and overwhelming, they are normal reactions. Accepting them as part of the grieving process is necessary for healing.

Student Resources

Coping with Grief: Tip 1 – Get Support

The single most important factor in healing from loss is having the support of other people. Even if you aren't usually comfortable talking about your feelings, it's important to express them when you're grieving. Wherever the support comes from, accept it and **do not grieve alone**.

- **Turn to friends and family** - Now is the time to lean on the people who care about you, even if you take pride in being strong and self-sufficient. Draw loved ones close, and accept assistance that's offered. Oftentimes, people want to help but don't know how. It can help to tell them what you need.
- **Draw comfort from your faith** – If you follow a religious tradition, embrace the comfort its mourning rituals can provide. Spiritual activities that are meaningful to you – such as praying, or meditating – can offer solace.
- **Join a support group** – Grief can feel very lonely, even when you have loved ones around. Sharing your sorrow with others who have experienced similar losses can help.
- **Talk to a therapist or counselor** – If your grief feels like too much to bear, call a mental health professional with experience in grief counseling. An experienced therapist can help you work through intense emotions and overcome obstacles to your grieving.

Coping with Grief: Tip 2 – Self Care

When you're grieving, it's more important than ever to take care of yourself. The stress of a major loss can deplete your energy and reserves.

Looking after your physical and emotional needs will help you get through this difficult time.

- **Face your feelings.** You can try to suppress your grief, but you can't avoid it forever. In order to heal, you have to acknowledge the pain.
- **Express your feelings in a tangible or creative way.** Write about your loss in a journal. If you've lost a loved one, write a letter saying the things you never got to say; make a scrapbook or photo album celebrating the person's life; or get involved in a cause or organization that was important to them.
- **Look after your physical health.** The mind and body are connected. When you feel good physically, you'll also feel better emotionally. Combat stress and fatigue by getting enough sleep, eating right, and exercising. Don't use alcohol or drugs to numb the pain of grief or lift your mood artificially.
- **Don't let anyone tell you how to feel.** Your grief is your own, and no one else can tell you when it's time to "move on" or "get over it." Let yourself feel whatever you feel without embarrassment or judgment. It's okay to be angry, to yell at the heavens, to cry or not to cry. It's also okay to laugh, to find moments of joy, and to let go when you're ready.
- **Plan ahead for grief "triggers."** Anniversaries, holidays, and milestones can reawaken memories and feelings. Be prepared for an emotional wallop, and know that it's completely normal.

When Grief Doesn't Go Away

It's normal to feel sad, numb, or angry following a loss. But as time passes, these emotions should become less intense as

you accept the loss and start to move forward. If you aren't feeling better over time, or your grief is getting worse, it may be a sign that your grief has developed into a more serious problem, such as complicated grief or major depression.

Are Grief and Depression Different?

Distinguishing between grief and clinical depression isn't always easy, since they share many symptoms. However, there are ways to tell the difference. Remember, grief is a roller coaster. It involves a wide variety of emotions and a mix of good and bad days. Even when you're in the middle of the grieving process, you will have moments of pleasure or happiness. With depression, on the other hand, the feelings of emptiness and despair are constant.

When to Seek Professional Help for Grief

If you recognize any signs of complicated grief or clinical depression, talk to a mental health professional right away. Left untreated, complicated grief and depression can lead to significant emotional damage, life-threatening health problems, or even suicide. But treatment can help you get better.

Contact a professional therapist if you:

- Feel like life isn't worth living
- Wish you had died too
- Blame yourself for the loss or for failing to prevent it
- Feel numb and disconnected from others for more than a few weeks
- Are having difficulty trusting others since your loss
- Are unable to perform your daily normal activities

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