



Understanding Grief



Grief is often described as a journey. Just like the literal journeys we take in life, the grief journey can be very unpredictable: we may know where we want to go, but we are not sure how to get there or what we may encounter along the way. Unlike the literal journeys we take, there is no road map for the grief journey. We want to know what is ahead, but no guide will tell us exactly what to expect. Grief is a uniquely individual experience.

While no two people grieve alike, the experiences of others may help shed some light on your own grief journey. Here is a list of some experiences that grieving people have had along the way. Some were expected; some were surprising. You may not encounter all of these, or you may experience things that are not on this list. No matter what your journey of grief looks like, know that you are not alone.

You can expect:

- Your grief to be surprisingly intense at times.
- Your grief to be surprisingly draining.
- Your grief to take longer than you—or the people around you—think it should take.
- Your grief to affect all aspects of your life: physical, mental, emotional, social, behavioral, spiritual.
- Unpredictable periods of “good days” and “bad days” instead of steadily feeling less pain.
- Grief “attacks”—sudden waves of grief that occur with no warning.
- A frustrating inability to be your normal self, feeling like you are going “crazy.”
- A wide range of feelings—not just sadness.
- To sometimes feel nothing, or that the death isn’t real.
- To go over and over the details leading to the death, searching for ways you could have changed it.
- To grieve not only for the person that you have lost, but also for your lost hopes and dreams.
- To re-examine your beliefs and priorities as you search for meaning in your changed world.
- A sense of changed or even lost identity, wondering “Who am I now?”
- A new awareness of your own mortality.
- Resurfacing of pain from earlier losses.
- Resurfacing of old feelings and unresolved conflicts from the past (in yourself or in your family).
- Changed relationships as you discover who supports you and who doesn’t.
- Mixed feelings about memories and photos: sometimes a comfort, sometimes a too-painful reminder of what is lost.
- Mixed feelings about “happy” events such as birthdays, holidays, weddings, etc.
- Mixed feelings about “moving on” or being happy again.
- Your grief to change over time: from the intense pain of all that is lost to a grateful awareness of all that is part of you forever.

Grief...

- Is a natural human response to loss.
- Is universal (we all grieve) but unique (we each grieve differently).
- Is an intense inner process causing many outer changes.
- Affects us on all levels: physical, mental, emotional, social, behavioral, spiritual.
- Often leaves us feeling like we are “going crazy” or “losing it.”
- Is not a predictable process of required stages, but does have recognizable patterns.
- Is a healing process, similar to physical healing from a serious injury.
 - Recovery itself can be painful, challenging, and take longer than we expect.
 - Progress is not steady; it is normal to have both “good days” and “bad days.”
 - While we can’t control or predict the process, there are ways to help our healing.
 - We must work through the pain at times and avoid the pain at other times.
 - Caring for ourselves and respecting our current limits are vital to our healing.
- Is different with every loss and is influenced by:
 - Who you are at the time of the loss.
 - Who they are at the time of the loss.
 - How the death occurred.
 - Other life circumstances and stresses at the time of the loss.
 - The history of the relationship between you and the person who died.
 - How you were taught to grieve.
- Moves from a painful sense of separation to a comforting sense of ongoing connection.



“What we have once
enjoyed we can
never lose. All that
we love deeply is
part of us forever.”

–Helen Keller

Grief is a natural human response to loss. It is often thought of as something that will get a little bit better each day, a period of sadness that must be bravely endured until it lessens with time. But the truth is that grief is an “up and down” process that is much more than sadness. When someone important to us dies, it affects every aspect of our being—physical, mental, emotional, social, behavioral, spiritual. Grief can cause profound changes in all these areas and can make you feel like something is wrong with you. But in fact, something is *right* with you. These reactions are normal, natural responses to the loss of a significant person in your life.

Physical

- Fatigue, feeling drained
- Feeling of emptiness or “butterflies” in stomach
- Lump in throat
- Tightness in chest, breathlessness
- Increased muscle tension, aches, pains
- Susceptibility to illness or exacerbation of existing health problems
- Feeling of weakness
- Shaking
- Palpitations
- Dry mouth
- Over-sensitivity to noise

Mental

- Confusion, disorientation, forgetfulness, inability to concentrate
- Vivid imagery of the illness and/or death
- Need to tell details of the loss again and again
- Disbelief, unreality
- Sense of presence
- Seeing, smelling, or hearing the person
- Wishing for death or to join the deceased
- Thoughts like “It will never be the same” or “it’s not fair”
- Dreams of the deceased

Emotional

- Sadness
- Anger
- Guilt, regret
- Relief
- Shock, numbness
- Anxiety, insecurity, panic, fear
- Apathy, lack of motivation
- Loneliness, sense of social isolation
- Resentment, envy, feeling cheated
- Yearning
- Abandonment
- Helplessness, lack of control
- Decreased self-confidence
- Humor

Behavioral

- Sleep and appetite changes
- Increase in accidents or risky behaviors
- Searching and calling out, talking to the deceased
- Crying, screaming
- Restlessness, sighing
- Irritability, feeling “on edge”
- Social withdrawal or increased social activity, changed relationships
- Changes in work performance
- Increase or decrease in alcohol or drug use
- Increase or decrease in self-care

Spiritual

- Loss of identity, loss of purpose
- Search for meaning, questioning
- Redefining personal philosophy and assumptions about life
- Turning away from or towards existing beliefs
- Increase or decrease in religious practice: attending worship, prayer, meditation
- Anger at faith or God
- Gratitude
- Peace, resolution
- Increased meaning, hope
- New life priorities

We all grieve, but no two people grieve alike. You may experience any combination of these reactions, and your responses can vary greatly from day to day. Letting yourself experience and work through them is part of the difficult, but ultimately healing, process of grief.

List adapted from *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy* by J. William Worden and *Normal Manifestations of Grief* by Gerry Haynes and Kay Kukowski.

Grief can be emotionally exhausting.

- Understand that you are different right now because you are healing.
- Be gentle and patient with yourself. Treat yourself as you would a good friend.
- Lower your expectations of what you would normally be able to manage.
- Give yourself a “pass” when something is too hard.
- Take time alone when you are too tired or too sad to be with people.
- Seek those you can trust to support you; avoid those who are draining.

Grief can be physically exhausting.

- Try to eat regular meals and maintain an exercise and sleep routine.
- Take it slowly. Choose activities that replenish you.
- Allow tears, which release stress-producing chemicals as well as emotions.
- Consider taking time off from work. Look for ways to share the load at work and/or home.
- Create small getaways like a hot bath, an afternoon nap, or a walk outdoors.

Grief can make you feel out of control.

- Establish a routine of some kind, even if it’s very different than before the loss.
- Prioritize. When overwhelmed, ask, “What really needs to be done today? What can wait?”
- Set small goals and focus on living one day at a time.
- Notice what you *can* do. Keep a “done” list as well as a “to do” list, and watch it grow.
- Make a list of strengths that have helped you face challenges in the past.
- Write your swirling thoughts in a journal to release and bring some order to them.
- Pour your feelings out through art: paint, make a collage, write a poem.
- Try brisk physical activity: work in the yard, sweep, scrub, walk fast, or work out.
- Explore relaxation practices such as breathing, meditation, or yoga.

Grief can be confusing to those who care about you.

- Don’t expect friends and family to be mind-readers, even if they are close to you.
- Communicate honestly instead of being “strong.”
- Don’t hide your tears. Being open allows you to connect instead of isolate.
- If support is being offered, allow yourself to accept help from others.
- If support is not being offered, reach out instead of waiting in silent frustration.
- Determine what you need, then who can help. Do you need someone to help with overwhelming tasks or a good listener to let you talk freely? A practical friend can help with practical matters, but may not be a good listener.
- Find people who “get it”—others with a similar loss, grief support groups, or grief counselors.

Grief is long, hard work.

- Allow yourself to find respite in small pleasures: playing with children or pets, spending time in nature, walking with a friend, watching a good movie, or gardening.
- Pay attention to the activities you are still drawn to and let yourself do them.
- Allow yourself to experience moments of humor and happiness when they come.

When we are grieving, we are changed. It can be very hard for us to accept these changes in ourselves, and harder still for others to understand and respect the difficulty of what is happening to us. Author and grief counselor Alan Wolfelt reminds us that we have special rights during this challenging time of healing. Knowing our rights while grieving can help us take care of ourselves even when others do not "get it."

Here is a summary of those rights. Dr. Wolfelt's full version and many other helpful articles can be found at his website, centerforloss.com.

The Mourner's Bill of Rights

- 1. You have the right to experience your own unique grief.**
Your grief is *your* grief. You do not have to accept others' opinions about how you should be grieving.
- 2. You have the right to talk about your grief.**
Talking aids healing; seek those who will let you talk as much as needed. You also have the right to be silent when you do not feel like talking.
- 3. You have the right to feel a multitude of emotions.**
Grief is not just sadness. Find those who will listen to and accept your wide-ranging feelings.
- 4. You have the right to be tolerant of your physical and emotional limits.**
Grief can be exhausting. Listen to what your body and mind are telling you; don't be pushed into things you aren't ready for.
- 5. You have the right to experience "griefbursts."**
Grief sometimes comes from nowhere, engulfing you without warning. This is frightening, but a natural part of the process.
- 6. You have the right to make use of ritual.**
Memorial rituals allow you to mourn the loss in the company of those who support you. You get to decide what is right and meaningful for you.
- 7. You have the right to embrace your spirituality.**
Your beliefs may be a source of comfort or a source of struggle. Allow yourself to be with those who can support you in this.
- 8. You have the right to search for meaning.**
You may find yourself asking "why" questions that have no easy answers. Others may offer ready answers such as "Think of what you have to be thankful for," but you don't have to accept them.
- 9. You have the right to treasure your memories.**
Memories are a precious, lasting legacy that can be shared with those who care about you. You don't have to ignore them.
- 10. You have the right to move toward your grief and heal.**
Healing does not happen quickly; your life has been forever changed. Be kind to your healing self, and avoid those who cannot accept you in these changes.

Adapted from "The Mourner's Bill of Rights" by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., C.T., www.centerforloss.com

How to Support Someone in Grief

Grieving people often feel alone in a society that is uncomfortable with suffering, invisible in a world where no one sees how their world has changed. You can help by simply and genuinely acknowledging the loss and the pain and by listening without judgment or haste to make it better. You might be afraid that speaking about it will cause pain for the grieving person, but the pain is already there—you are actually making it possible for the pain to be released. As the proverb says, “A joy shared is doubled; a grief shared is halved.”

Do's and Don'ts of Support

Do listen attentively.

Don't be afraid of tears or strong emotions.

Don't change the subject, tell your story of loss, or offer easy answers.

Do show genuine caring and acceptance of what they are saying or doing.

Don't judge, criticize, or try to talk them into feeling differently.

Do validate the enormity of the loss.

Don't try to make them feel better by minimizing their pain.

Don't compare their grief to yours or anyone else's.

Do give permission to do what feels right for them at this time.

Don't give advice unless you are asked for it.

Do be patient with the changes you see and the slow pace of healing.

Don't expect the person to remain the same.

Don't push them into things that you think would be good for them.

Do reach out. Offer specific practical help like childcare, groceries, yardwork, meals, or cleaning.

Don't avoid the person or wait for them to reach out to you.

Do reach out over the months and years, remembering them at holidays, anniversaries, etc.

Don't assume because they seem okay that they no longer need your support.

Do speak about the deceased and invite the person to share memories.

Don't avoid the topic or saying the name.

Helpful and Not Helpful Phrases

Don't Say

- *I know just what you're going through.*
- *Don't take it so hard.*
- *Just think of what you have to be grateful for.*
- *They're in a better place.*
- *Try to keep yourself together.*
- *You must get on with your life.*
- *We need you to be strong.*
- *You are so strong.*
- *God doesn't put on us more than we can bear.*
- *You just need to...*
- *How are you?* (Unless you really want to know and are ready to listen.)

Do Say

- *I've been thinking about you.*
- *I'm sorry.*
- *I know this must be difficult.*
- *I care about how you're doing.*
- *It's OK to feel this way. You don't have to be strong right now.*
- *It's OK to cry. Tears are part of loving someone.*
- *It can really hit hard sometimes; you don't have to hold it in.*
- *It's different for each person.*
- *I'm here to listen.*
- *It sounds like they were very special to you.*
- *It sounds like you are really missing them right now.*
- *I'm right here; take your time.*
- *Would you like to tell me more? Would it help to talk about it?*

Listen, Listen, Listen!

When in doubt, listen! Often more effective than the "right" words, listening communicates acceptance and genuine caring to a person in grief. Trust that listening is a gift. It allows a grieving person to heal by releasing the pain when it occurs instead of stuffing the pain back inside where it causes continued suffering.



Books for Adults

General Grief

- ***It's OK That You're Not OK*** Megan Devine
- ***The Grieving Brain*** Mary-Frances O'Connor
- ***Grief is Love: Living With Loss*** Marisa Renee Lee
- ***Modern Loss*** Rebecca Soffer & Gabrielle Birkner
- ***Conscious Grieving*** Claire Bidwell Smith
- ***Healing Your Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas*** Alan Wolfelt
- ***Healing Your Grieving Body: 100 Physical Practices for Mourners*** Alan Wolfelt & Kirby J. Duvall
- ***Grieving Room: Making Space for All the Hard Things after Death and Loss*** Leanne Friesen
- ***Healing After Loss*** Martha W. Hickman
- ***Life is Goodbye, Life is Hello*** Alla Bozarth-Campbell
- ***The Mourning Handbook*** Helen Fitzgerald
- ***Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy*** Adam Grant & Sheryl Sandberg
- ***The Grief Recovery Handbook*** John W. James & Frank Cherry
- ***Death, Grief, and Caring Relationships*** Richard Kalish
- ***When Bad Things Happen to Good People*** Harold Kushner
- ***Don't Take My Grief Away*** Doug Manning
- ***Grieving: How to Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies*** Therese A. Rando
- ***The Healing Journey Through Grief: Your Journal for Reflection and Recovery*** Phil Rich
- ***Surviving Grief...and Learning to Live Again*** Catherine M. Sanders
- ***Men & Grief: A Guide for Men Surviving the Death of a Loved One*** Carol Staudacher
- ***A Time to Grieve: Meditations for Healing After the Death of a Loved One*** Carol Staudacher
- ***I Promise It Won't Always Hurt Like This: 18 Assurances on Grief*** Clare Mackintosh

Death of a Life Partner

- ***Widowed*** Joyce Brothers
- ***The Cure for Sorrow*** Jan Richardson
- ***Healing a Spouse's Grieving Heart*** Alan Wolfelt
- ***Companion Through the Darkness: Inner Dialogues on Grief*** Stephanie Ericsson
- ***Widow to Widow*** Genevieve Ginsburg
- ***What Helped My When My Loved One Died*** Earl Grollman
- ***Two-Part Invention*** Madeleine L'Engle
- ***A Grief Observed*** C.S. Lewis
- ***Widow's Journey: A Return to the Loving Self*** Xenia Rose
- ***The Courage to Grieve*** Judy Tatelbaum
- ***Good Grief*** Granger Westberg
- ***The Year of Magical Thinking*** Joan Didion

Death of a Parent

- ***Surviving the Loss of a Parent*** Lois F. Akner
- ***Midlife Orphan*** Jane Brooks
- ***Motherless Daughters*** Hope Edelman
- ***Healing the Adult Child's Grieving Heart*** Alan Wolfelt
- ***Losing a Parent*** Alexandra Kennedy
- ***When Parents Die*** Edward Myers
- ***Wild*** Cheryl Strayed
- ***Orphaned Adult*** Alexander Levy

Books for Children

Expanded resource list available in Transitions GriefCare's *Understanding Children's Grief* packet.

- ***When Dinosaurs Die*** Laurie Krasny & Marc Brown
(Grief & Loss)
- ***I Had a Friend Named Peter*** Janice Cohn (Friend Loss)
- ***Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs*** Tomi dePaola
(Grandparent Loss)
- ***Guiding Your Child Through Grief*** James & Mary Ann Emswiler (Parent Resource)
- ***Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone You Love*** Earl Grollman
(Teen Resource)
- ***When Someone Very Special Dies*** Marge Heegaard
(Grief & Loss)
- ***The Invisible String*** Patricie Karst (Hope & Inspiration)
- ***How It Feels When a Parent Dies*** Jill Kremenz
(Parent Loss)
- ***Aarvy Aardvark Finds Hope*** Donna O'Toole
(Grief & Loss)
- ***Geranium Morning*** Sandy Powell
(Parent Loss & Accidental Death)
- ***What's Heaven?*** Maria Shriver
(Spirituality, Heaven, & Faith)
- ***I Miss You*** Pat Thomas (Grief & Loss)
- ***A Quilt for Elizabeth*** Benette Tiffault (Parent Loss)
- ***After a Suicide: Workbook for Grieving Kids***
The Dougy Center (Suicide Loss)
- ***I'll Always Love You*** Hans Wilhelm (Pet Loss)