

Grief: how to help yourself and others through the grieving process

Grief is a natural response to the loss of someone or something very important to you.

Grieving

Grieving is the process of emotional and life adjustment you go through after a loss. There is no “normal and expected” period of time for grieving and everyone grieves differently. Experiencing a loss can cause feelings of grief when you least expect it. You may find that old feelings from a past loss can be triggered by current experiences or anniversaries of that loss. This is normal. You may feel anticipatory grief, which happens in advance of an impending loss and helps us prepare for the loss, because a loved one is sick and dying.

Common symptoms of grief and grieving

While you are feeling shock, numbness, sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, or fear, you may also find moments of relief, peace, or happiness. And although grieving is not simply sadness or feeling the blues, you may become depressed or overly anxious during the grieving process. The stress of grief and grieving can take a physical toll on your body. Sleeplessness is common, as is a weakened immune system over time. If you have a chronic illness, grieving can make your condition worse.

Your reaction to loss is influenced by the relationship you had with the person and by your general coping style, personality, and life experiences. How you express grief is also influenced in part by the cultural, religious, and social rules of your community.

Grief is expressed physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually.

- Physical expressions of grief often include crying and sighing, headaches, loss of appetite, difficulty sleeping, weakness, fatigue, feelings of heaviness, aches, pains, and other stress-related ailments.

- Emotional expressions of grief include feelings of sadness and yearning. Feelings of worry, anxiety, frustration, anger, or guilt are also normal.
- Social expressions of grief may include feeling detached from others, isolating yourself from social contact, and behaving in ways that are not normal for you.
- Spiritual expressions of grief may include questioning the reason for your loss, the purpose of pain and suffering, the purpose of life, and the meaning of death. After a death, your grieving process is influenced by how you view death.

Grieving a significant loss takes time. Depending on the circumstances of your loss, grieving can take weeks to years. Grieving helps you gradually adjust to a new chapter of your life.

Feeling and expressing grief

You may find that you feel irritable and restless, are quieter than usual, or need to be distant from or close to others. Or you may find that you aren't the same person you were before the loss. Don't be surprised if you experience conflicting feelings while grieving. For example, it's normal to feel despair about a death or a job loss yet also feel relief.

It's important that you find some way of expressing your grief. Talking, writing, creating art or music, or being physically active are all ways of expressing grief.

Treatment for grieving

When you are grieving it is important to:

- Get enough rest and sleep. During sleep, your mind makes sense of what is happening in your life. Not getting enough rest and sleep can lead to physical illness and exhaustion. Try activities to help you relax, such as meditation or guided imagery.
- Eat nourishing foods. Resist the urge not to eat or to eat only those foods that comfort you. If you have trouble eating alone, ask another person to join you for a snack or meal. If you do not have an appetite, eat frequent small meals and snacks.
- Exercise. If nothing else, take a walk. Brisk walking and other forms of exercise, such as yoga or tai chi and qi gong, can help release some of your pent-up emotions.
- Comfort yourself. Allow yourself the opportunity to be comforted by familiar surroundings and personal items that you value. Treat yourself to something you enjoy, such as a massage.
- Try to stay involved in activities that include your support network, such as work, church, or community activities.

To help you work through the grieving process, make sure to:

- Surround yourself with loved ones. You may feel lonely and separate from other people when you are grieving. Talking about your feelings and concerns with loved ones may help you feel more connected and less lonely.
- Get involved. Take part in the activities that occur as a result of the loss, such as making funeral arrangements.
- Avoid quick fixes. Resist the urge to drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, or take nonprescription medicines (such as sleeping aids).

- Ask for help. During times of emotional distress, it is important to allow other people to take over some of your responsibilities.

Social support, good self-care, and the passage of time are usually the best medicine for grieving. If you find that your grief is making it difficult to function for more than a week or two, contact a grief counselor or bereavement support group for help.

Helping others cope with grief

There are many ways that you can help a person who is grieving. The best way to help often depends on how well the person was prepared for the loss and their personality and coping style.

Tips for helping others:

- Encourage the person to grieve at their own pace. The grieving process is not linear. There will be good days and bad days. Do not try to “fix” the person’s grief. Provide support and be willing to listen.
- Don’t ignore the person who is grieving just because you aren’t sure what to say. Check in regularly during the first year and beyond, especially on important days, including the anniversary of the death, holidays, and birthdays.
- Recognize that this person’s life has changed forever. Encourage the person to take part in activities that involve and build their support network.
- Respect the person’s personal beliefs. Listen to their feelings without making judgments. Do not try to change the person’s beliefs or feelings.

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