



Coping With the Loss of a Loved One

Grief, mourning, and bereavement

When a person loses someone important to them, they go through a normal process called *grieving*. Grieving is natural and should be expected. Over time, it can help the person accept and understand their loss.

Bereavement is what a person goes through when someone close to them dies. It's the state of having suffered a loss.

Mourning is the outward expression of loss and grief. Mourning includes rituals and other actions that are specific to each person's culture, personality, and religion. Bereavement and mourning are both part of the grieving process.

Grieving involves many different emotions, actions, and expressions, all of which help the person come to terms with the loss of a loved one. But keep in mind, grief doesn't look the same for everyone. Every loss is different.

The grief process

Many people think of grief as a single instance or short time of pain or sadness in response to a loss—like the tears shed at a loved one's funeral. But grieving includes the entire emotional process of coping with a loss and it can last a long time. Normal grieving allows us to let a loved one go and keep on living in a healthy way.

Grieving is painful, but it's important that those who have suffered a loss be allowed to express their grief. It's also important that they be supported throughout the process. Each person will grieve for their loved ones in different ways. The length and intensity of the emotions people go through varies from person to person.

Although some have described grief as happening in phases or stages, it doesn't often feel like that to the bereaved person. It may feel more like a roller coaster, with ups and downs that make it hard to see that any progress is being made in dealing with the loss. A person may feel better for a while, only to become sad again. Sometimes, people wonder how long the grieving process will last for them, and when they can expect some relief. There's no answer to this question, but some of the factors that affect the intensity and length of your grieving are:

- The kind of relationship you had with the person who died
- The circumstances of their death

- Your own life experiences

Studies have identified emotional states that people may go through while grieving. The first feelings usually include shock or numbness. Then, as the person sees how his or her life is affected by the loss, emotions start to surface. The early sense of disbelief is often replaced by emotional upheaval, which can involve anger, loneliness, uncertainty, or denial. These feelings can come and go over a long period of time. The final phase of grief is the one in which people find ways to come to terms with and accept the loss.

Shock, numbness, and disbelief usually come first

Many times, a person's first response to a loss is shock, disbelief, and numbness. This can last anywhere from a few hours to days or weeks. During this time, the bereaved person may feel emotionally "shut off" from the world. Still, the numbness may be pierced by pangs of distress, often triggered by reminders of the deceased. The person may feel agitated or weak, cry, engage in aimless activities, or be preoccupied with thoughts or images of the person they lost.

The rituals of mourning – seeing friends and family, preparing for the funeral, and burial or final physical separation – often structure this time for people. They are seldom left alone. Sometimes the sense of numbness lasts through these activities, leaving the person feeling as though they are just "going through the motions" of these rituals.

Facing the loss brings out painful emotions

At some point the reality of the loss starts to sink in, and the numbness wears off. This part of the grief process, sometimes called *confrontation*, is when the feelings of loss are most intense and painful. This is the time the person starts to face the loss and cope with the changes the loss causes in their lives.

People have many different ways of dealing with loss, so there may be many different, equally intense emotions. During this time, grief tends to come in waves of distress. The person may seem disorganized. He or she may have trouble remembering, thinking, and doing day-to-day activities. This can last for weeks to months. Some or all of the following may be seen in a person who is grieving. The person may:

- Withdraw socially
- Have trouble thinking and concentrating
- Become restless and anxious at times
- Not feel like eating
- Look sad
- Feel depressed
- Dream of the deceased (or even have hallucinations or "visions" in which they briefly hear or see the deceased)
- Lose weight
- Have trouble sleeping

- Feel tired or weak
- Become preoccupied with death or events surrounding death
- Search for reasons for the loss (sometimes with results that make no sense to others)
- Dwell on mistakes, real or imagined, that he or she made with the deceased
- Feel somehow guilty for the loss
- Feel all alone and distant from others
- Express anger or envy at seeing others with their loved ones

It's often during this time that a grieving person needs the most emotional support. Finding support can be the key to a person's recovery and acceptance of the loss. Sources of support can be family members, friends, support groups, community organizations, or mental health professionals (therapists or counselors).

Accepting the loss means learning to live without the loved one

By this time, people have begun to recognize what the loss means to them in day-to-day life. They have felt the pain of grief. Usually, the person comes to accept the loss slowly over the months that follow. This acceptance includes adjusting to daily life without the deceased.

Like the earlier parts of the process, acceptance does not happen overnight. It's common for it to take a year or longer to resolve the emotional and life changes that come with the death of a loved one. The pain may become less intense, but it's normal to feel emotionally involved with the deceased for many years after their death. In time, the person should be able to reclaim the emotional energy that was invested in the relationship with the deceased, and use it in other relationships.

Grieving can go on for many years

Still, adjustment does not mean that all the pain is over for those who were very close to the deceased. Grieving for someone who was close to you includes losing the future you expected with that person. This must also be mourned. The sense of loss can last for decades. For example, years after a parent dies, the bereaved may be reminded of the parent's absence at an event he or she would have been expected to attend. This can bring back strong emotions, and require mourning yet another part of the loss.

Grief after loss due to a long illness

The grief experience may be different when the loss occurs after a long illness rather than suddenly. When someone is terminally ill, family, friends, and even the patient might start to grieve in response to the expectation of death. This is a normal response called *anticipatory grief*. It might help people complete unfinished business and prepare loved ones for the actual loss, but it might not lessen the pain they feel when the person dies.

Usually, the period just before the person's death is a time of physical and emotional preparation for those close to them. At this stage, loved ones may feel like they need to withdraw emotionally from the person who is ill.

Many people think they are prepared for the loss because death is expected. But when their loved one actually dies, it can still be a shock and bring about unexpected feelings of sadness and loss. For most people, the actual death starts the normal grieving process.

Grief can take unexpected forms

A person who had a difficult relationship to the deceased (a parent who was abusive, estranged, or abandoned the family, for example) is often surprised after their death because the emotions are so painful. It's not uncommon to have profound distress as the bereaved mourns the relationship he or she had wished for with the person who died, and lets go of any chance of achieving it.

Others might feel relief, while some wonder why they feel nothing at all on the death of such a person. Regret and guilt are common, too, when the bereaved person had a rocky or distant relationship with the deceased. This is all part of the process of adjusting and letting go.

Getting help through the process of grief

Bereavement counseling is a special type of professional help. You may be able to find it through hospice services or a referral from a health care provider (doctor, nurse, or social worker). This type of counseling has been shown to reduce the level of distress that mourners go through after the death of their loved one. It can help them move more easily through the phases of grief. Bereavement counseling can also help them adjust to their new lives without the deceased.

Major depression and complicated grief

Depression

It's common for people to have sadness, pain, anger, bouts of crying, and a depressed mood after a loved one dies. It's important to know about normal grief responses so that you can know if the bereaved person might be getting worse—going into a major depression.

About 1 in 5 bereaved people will develop major depression (also called *clinical depression*). This can often be helped by therapy and medicines. People at highest risk for clinical depression include those who have been depressed before, those with no support system, those who have had problems with alcohol or drug abuse, or those who have other major life stresses.

Symptoms of major depression not explained by normal bereavement may include:

- Constant thoughts of being worthless or hopeless
- Ongoing thoughts of death or suicide (other than thoughts that they would be better off dead or should have died with their loved one)
- Being unable to perform day-to-day activities
- Intense guilt over things done or not done at the time of the loved one's death

- Delusions (beliefs that are not true)
- Hallucinations (hearing voices or seeing things that are not there), except for “visions” in which the person briefly hears or sees the deceased
- Slower body responses and reactions
- Extreme weight loss

If symptoms like these last more than 2 months after the loss, the bereaved person is likely to benefit from professional help. If the person tries to hurt him- or herself, or has a plan to do so, they need help right away.

In some people, the grieving process can go on for a long time. This happens more often in those who were very close to the deceased. It’s most often caused by attempts to deny or get away from the pain or trying to avoid letting go.

Complicated grief

If normal mourning does not occur, or if the mourning goes on for a long time without any progress, it’s called “complicated grief” or “unresolved grief.” Symptoms of this may include:

- Continued disbelief in the death of the loved one
- Being unable to accept the death
- Flashbacks, nightmares, or memories that keep intruding into thoughts over time
- Severe and prolonged grief symptoms such as anger, sadness, or depression
- Keeping a fantasy relationship with the deceased with the feeling that he or she is always present and watching
- Continuous yearning and searching for the deceased
- Unusual symptoms that seem unrelated to the death (physical symptoms, strange or abnormal behavior)
- Breaking off all social contacts

For some people who are taking care of a loved one with a long-term illness, complicated grief can actually start while their loved one is still alive. Caregivers under severe stress, especially if the caregiver’s outlook is bleak, may be at higher risk of having abnormal grief even before the death.

If you or anyone close to the deceased has any of the above symptoms of major depression or complicated grief, talk with a qualified health or mental health professional. Certain kinds of mental health treatment have been shown to help people with complicated grief. Treatment is important, since people with complicated grief are at risk of their emotional illness getting worse, and are at higher risk of committing suicide. Clinical trials are looking at what kinds of treatment are most helpful with complicated grief.

Coping with loss

Ideally, the bereaved person will work through the process of grieving. With time and support, they will accept and make sense of the loss, work through the pain, and adjust to a new life and identity.

If you or someone you know has lost a loved one, the following tips may help you cope with the loss:

- Let yourself feel the pain and all the other emotions, too. Don't tell yourself how to feel or let others tell you how you should feel.
- Be patient with the process. Don't pressure yourself with expectations. Accept that you need to experience your pain, your emotions, and your own way of healing – all in your own time. Don't judge your emotions or compare yourself to others. Remember that no one else can tell you how you should mourn or when to stop.
- Acknowledge your feelings, even the ones you don't like. Let yourself cry. You need to do both for healing.
- Get support. Talk about your loss, your memories, and your experience of the life and death of your loved one. Don't think you are protecting your family and friends by not expressing your sadness. Ask others for what you need. Find and talk to others who have lost a loved one.
- Try to maintain your normal lifestyle. Don't make any major life changes (for example, moving, changing jobs, changing important relationships) during the first year of bereavement. This will let you keep your roots and some sense of security.
- Take care of yourself. Eat well and exercise. Physical activity is a good way to release tension. Allow yourself physical pleasures that help you renew yourself, like hot baths, naps, and favorite foods.
- Avoid drinking too much alcohol or using other drugs. This can harm your body as well as dull your emotions. It's also likely to slow your recovery and may cause new problems.
- Forgive yourself for all the things you did or didn't say or do. Compassion and forgiveness for yourself and others is important in healing.
- Give yourself a break from grief. You must work through grief, but you don't need to focus on it all the time. Find distractions like going to a movie, dinner, or a ball game; reading a good book; listening to music; or getting a massage or manicure.
- Prepare for holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries knowing that strong feelings may come back. Decide if you want to keep certain traditions or create new ones. Plan in advance how you want to spend your time and with whom. Do something to honor the memory of your loved one.
- Join a bereavement support group. Other people can encourage, guide, and comfort you. They can also offer practical advice and information, and help you feel less alone. If you can't find a group near you, online groups may be helpful.
- When you feel ready, do something creative. Some options include:

1. Write a letter to the person who died to say everything you wish you could say to them.
2. Start keeping a journal.
3. Make a scrapbook.
4. Paint pictures.
5. Plant flowers or trees.
6. Involve yourself in a cause or activity that the deceased loved.

Family changes

When a loved one dies, it affects all their family members and loved ones. Each family finds its own ways of coping with death. A family's attitudes and reactions are shaped by cultural and spiritual values as well as by the relationships among family members. It takes time for a bereaved family to regain its balance.

It's important that each family member is able to grieve with one another to help the family cope. Each person will experience the loss differently and have different needs. As hard as it may be, it's important for family members to be open and honest when talking with each other. This is not the time for family members to hide their emotions to try and protect one another.

The loss of one person in a family means that roles in the family will change. Family members will need to talk about the effects of this change and work out the shift in responsibilities. This time of change is stressful for everyone. This is a time to be even more gentle and patient with each other.

Helping someone who is grieving

It's common to feel awkward when trying to comfort someone who is grieving. Many people don't know what to say or do. Use the following tips as a guide.

What to say

- Acknowledge the situation. Example: "I heard that your _____ died." Use the word "died."
This shows that you are more open to talk about how the person really feels.
- Express your concern. Example: "I'm sorry to hear that this happened to you."
- Be genuine and don't hide your feelings. Example: "I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care."
- Offer your support. Example: "Tell me what I can do for you."
- Ask how the bereaved person feels and listen to the answer. Don't assume you know how they will feel on any given day.

What to do

- Be there. Even if you don't know what to say, just having someone near can be very comforting.
- Listen and give support. But don't try to force someone if they're not ready to talk.
- Be a good listener. Accept whatever feelings the person expresses. Even if you can't imagine feeling like they do, never tell them how they should or shouldn't feel.
- Give reassurance without minimizing the loss. Try to have empathy with the person without assuming you know how they feel.
- Offer to help with errands, shopping, housework, cooking, driving, or yard work. Sometimes people want help and sometimes they don't. They may not take you up on your offer, so remember they're not rejecting you or your friendship.
- Avoid telling the person "You're so strong." This puts pressure on the person to hold in feelings and keep acting "strong."
- Continue to offer support even after the first shock wears off. Recovery takes a long time.
- It may help to check in with the bereaved on anniversaries of the death, marriage, and birthday of the deceased, since those can be especially difficult.

If the grieving person begins to abuse alcohol or drugs, neglects personal hygiene, develops physical problems, or talks about suicide, it may be a sign of complicated grief or depression. Talk to them about getting professional help.

If you believe someone is thinking about suicide, don't leave them alone. Try to get the person to get help from their doctor or the nearest hospital emergency room right away. If that's not possible, call 911. If you can safely do so, remove firearms and other tools for suicide.

Grief in children

It's a very common myth that children cannot understand the meaning of death. How old a child is at the time of the death is important because a child's understanding of death changes with age. Preschool children usually think death is short term and reversible. Between the ages of 5 and 9, they understand that the person is gone, but see it more as a separation. After about ages 9 or 10, they begin to understand that death is final.

Children grieve. They just don't have all the ways to cope that adults do. They often have feelings like sadness, anger, guilt, insecurity, and anxiety, even though they might need help naming these feelings. Children sometimes show anger toward surviving family members. They may start having behavior or discipline problems. They may think the death is their fault, especially if they had once "wished" the person dead or if they were ever angry at the person. Or they may start having nightmares or acting younger than their age. Sometimes they may seem unaffected by the loss and then express grief at unexpected moments.

Talking with children about death

It's hard to comfort others when you are deep in your own grief. Parents may not want to talk to their children about death because they don't want to upset them. Or they may not want to worsen their own pain. But talking about death will help children deal with their fears.

Children's responses to death often look very different from adults'. Sometimes a child's feelings or questions about death may seem inappropriate or upsetting. But it's important to recognize that they are also trying to understand and accept what has happened. You can help them by listening and showing interest in what they have to say.

Answer whatever questions they may have as openly and honestly as you can. Telling children that someone "went away" or is "sleeping" can lead to confusion and fear. If you tell a small child that sickness caused the death, it's important to explain that only serious sicknesses cause death. With small children, it may be helpful to talk about dead flowers, insects, or birds, as a way to explain death.

You may want to use the following tips when talking to a child about death:

- Explain what happened in a way they can understand. Children know when you are hiding something, so be honest.
- Encourage them to talk. Listen and accept their feelings no matter how hard it may be.
- Answer their questions in brief and simple terms. Telling them they are too young to understand only avoids dealing with the problem and might upset them even more. It's OK not to have all the answers.
- Reassure them that they will still be loved and taken care of. They may need very specific information, such as where they will live and who will care for them, to feel safe.
- Show affection, support, and consistency. Let them know that you will be there to help as much as possible. Be sure they have people in their lives they can count on.
- Tell them how you feel, using words they'll understand and in a way that won't be overwhelming. For example, it's OK to let them know that you hurt too. If you try to hide your feelings, they may think they shouldn't share theirs.

Children and funerals

Years ago, people believed that children should not go to funerals because it would be too hard for them, they were too young to understand, or they would be frightened by other people's distress. Since then, it's been learned that this is not true. Often, children have later said they felt betrayed when they couldn't say good-bye to someone they loved. They felt that their relationship with the person who died was not valued; that death was not a natural part of life, but instead something too frightening to confront; and that other people thought they were emotionally unable to cope.

Attending the funeral helps children understand that death is final. Explain to children that a funeral is the way we say good-bye to the people we love. Depending on their age, attention span, and how much adult supervision they need, children may take part in all of the ritual or only some of it.

If children will be at the funeral, they should be prepared for what they will see and hear. Tell them what to expect. If there will be a viewing with an open casket, the child needs to know that. Depending on how young they are, it might be useful to talk about what it means to be dead. Explain that people will come to visit with the family and offer their sympathy. Also explain any other routines or rituals that will be followed. If there's a religious service, describe what will happen there. Tell them if there will be a trip to a cemetery where the casket will be placed in the ground and covered up. They should know that they may see people cry, and that it's OK. They will see the normal expressions of how people feel when they lose someone important to them. Seeing this gives children permission to express their own emotions.

Whatever social ritual may happen afterward should also be explained. Children sometimes have a hard time understanding what looks like a party after services where people looked pretty sad. Explain that people can't be sad all the time and there will be other times when the sadness will come back. Children also should expect that the sadness we feel when someone has died can last a while, but eases as time goes on.

Children usually want to take part in this ritual with their family. If they seem frightened by what they imagine a funeral to be, they probably have a false impression or misunderstanding about it. It's a rare child who does not want to take part in something that the whole family is doing, but if they don't, try to find out any mistaken beliefs the child may have. For example, the child may not fully understand the transition from life to death and worry that the person is still alive when they are put into the ground. Remind them again what being dead means and that the person as you knew them is no longer here.

Losing a child

Facing the death of a child may be the hardest thing a parent ever has to do. People who have lost a child have stronger grief reactions. They often have more anger, guilt, physical symptoms, greater depression, and a loss of meaning and purpose in life. A loss is tragic at any age, but the sense of unfairness of a life unfulfilled magnifies the anger and rage felt by parents.

A longer and slower bereavement and recovery should be expected when someone loses a child. The grief may get worse with time as the parents see others going through the milestones they expected to pass with their child.

Getting support

Bereaved parents especially may be helped by a grief support group. These groups may be available in the local community. You can ask your child's cancer care team for referral to counseling or local groups.

You can also contact Compassionate Friends, a nationwide self-help organization offering support to families who have experienced the death of a child, of any age, from any cause. It publishes a newsletter and other materials on parent and sibling bereavement. Compassionate Friends also refers people to more than 600 meeting locations around the country. Online support groups, such as those at GriefNet can be another way to connect with others. See the "To learn more" section for contact information on both of these organizations.

To learn more

Here is more information you might find helpful. You also can order free copies of our documents from our toll-free number, 1-800-227-2345, or read them on our Web site, www.cancer.org.

Anxiety, Fear, and Depression

Helping Children When a Family Member Has Cancer: Dealing with a Parent's Terminal Illness

Helping Children When a Family Member Has Cancer: When a Child Has Lost a Parent

Resources for Parents and Families Who Have Lost a Child to Cancer

Financial Guidance for Families: Coping Financially With the Loss of a Loved One

National organizations and Web sites*

Along with the American Cancer Society, other sources of information and support include:

The Centering Corporation

Toll-free number: 1-866-218-0101

Web site: www.centering.org

Information and resources for grieving adults, children who have lost parents, and more

The Compassionate Friends

Toll-free number: 1-877-969-0010

Web site: www.compassionatefriends.org

For those coping with the death of a child

The Dougy Center

Toll-free number: 1-866-775-5683

Web site: www.dougy.org

Information on grieving, and referrals to local programs that serve grieving children, teens, and their families

GriefNet

Web site for adults: www.griefnet.org

Web site for children: <http://kidsaid.com>

Offers online groups for grief support, with a special sub-site for children

Hospice Net

Web site: www.hospicenet.org

Information for bereaved, caregivers, family, and people with terminal illnesses

American Childhood Cancer Organization

Toll-free number: 1-800-366-2223

Web site: www.acco.org

Information on childhood cancer, and links to online support, such as groups for parents who have lost a child to cancer

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

Mental Health Information Center

Web site: <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/>

Has different types of help and support for mental health issues; see below:

National Mental Health Information Center

Toll-free number: 1-800-789-2647

TTY: 1-866-889-2647

Suicide Prevention Hotline:

Toll-free number: 1 800 273 8255 (800-273-TALK)

National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA)

Toll-free number: 1-800-228-6332

Web site: www.nfda.org/grief-resources.html

Grief resources and funeral planning information

You may also want to contact your local hospice or hospital for bereavement support groups in your area.

**Inclusion on this list does not imply endorsement by the American Cancer Society*

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Beyond Grief: A Guide for Recovering from the Death of a Loved One by Carol Staudacher. Published by New Harbinger Publications, 1987.

Grieving: How to Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies by Theresa A. Rando. Published by Lexington Books, 1995.

Living With Death and Dying by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. Published by MacMillan, 1997.

Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss by Hope Edelman. Published by Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1994.

On Death and Dying by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. Published by Collier Books, 1997.

Surviving the Death of a Sibling: Living through Grief When an Adult Brother or Sister Dies by T.J. Wray. Published by Three Rivers Press, 2003.

Books for parents

After the Death of a Child: Living With Loss Through the Years by Ann K. Finkbeiner. Published by Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Bereaved Children and Teens: A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals by Earl A. Grollman. Published by Beacon Press, 1996.

The Bereaved Parent by Harriet Sarnoff Schiff. Published by Penguin, 1977.

Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies by J. William Worden. Published by Guilford Press, 1996.

Grieving: How to Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies by Theresa A. Rando. Published by Lexington Books, 1995.

35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child, by the Dougy Center Staff. Published by The Dougy Center, 1999.

When the Bough Breaks: Forever After the Death of a Son or Daughter by Judith R. Bernstein. Published by Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1998.

Books for children

And Still They Bloom: A Family's Journey of Loss and Healing by Amy Rovere and Joel Spector. Published by the American Cancer Society, 2012. Ages 9 and up.

Daddy's Promise by Cindy Klein Cohen, John T. Heiney, & Michael J. Gordon. Published by Promise Publications, 1997. Ages 4-8

The Dying and Bereaved Teenager by John D. Morgan, editor. Published by The Charles Press, 1998. Ages 12 and up.

Everett Anderson's Goodbye by Lucille Clifton. Published by Henry Holt & Co., 1988. Ages 4-8.

The Fall of Freddie the Leaf: A Story of Life for All Ages by Leo Buscaglia. Published by Henry Holt & Co, 1982. Ages 4-8.

How it Feels When a Parent Dies by Jill Krementz. Published by Knopf, 1988. Ages 7 to 17.

The Tenth Good Thing About Barney by Judith Viorst. Published by MacMillan Publishing, 1987. Ages 4 and up.

When Your Grandparent Dies: A Child's Guide to Good Grief (Elf-Help Books for Kids) by Victoria Ryan and Robert W. Alley. Published by Abbey Press, 2002. Ages 4 to 8.

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No matter who you are, we can help. Contact us anytime, day or night, for information and support. Call us at **1-800-227-2345** or visit www.cancer.org.

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