



Death and Grief

People React Emotionally and Physically

When coping with a death, you may go through all kinds of emotions. You may be sad, worried, or scared. You might be shocked, unprepared, or confused. You might be feeling angry, cheated, relieved, guilty, exhausted, or just plain empty. Your emotions might be stronger or deeper than usual or mixed together in ways you've never experienced before.

Some people find they have trouble concentrating, studying, sleeping, or eating when they're coping with a death. Others lose interest in activities they used to enjoy. Some people lose themselves in playing computer games or eat or drink to excess. And some people feel numb, as if nothing has happened.

All of these are normal ways to react to a death.

What Is Grief?

When we have emotional, physical, and spiritual reactions in response to a death or loss, it's known as grief or grieving. People who are grieving might:

- feel strong emotions, such as sadness and anger
- have physical reactions, such as not sleeping or even waves of nausea
- have spiritual reactions to a death — for example, some people find themselves questioning their beliefs and feeling disappointed in their religion while others find that they feel more strongly than ever about their faith

The grieving process takes time and healing usually happens gradually. The intensity of grief may be related to how sudden or predictable the loss was and how you felt about the person who died.

Some people write about grief happening in stages, but usually it feels more like "waves" or cycles of grief that come and go depending on what you are doing and if there are triggers for remembering the person who has died.

Different Ways of Grieving

If you've lost someone in your immediate family, such as a parent, brother, or sister, you may feel cheated out of time you wanted to have with that person. It can also feel hard to express your own grief when other family members are grieving, too.

Some people may hold back their own grief or avoid talking about the person who died because they worry that it may make a parent or other family member sad. It's also natural to feel some guilt over a past argument or a difficult relationship with the person who died.

We don't always grieve over the death of another person. The death of a beloved pet can trigger strong feelings of grief. People may be surprised by how painful this loss can be. But the loving bonds we share with pets are real, and so are the feelings of loss and grief when they die.

All of these feelings and reactions are OK — but what can people do to get through them? How long does grief last? Will things ever get back to normal? And how will you go on without the person who has died?

Coping With Grief

Just as people feel grief in many different ways, they handle it differently, too.

Some people reach out for support from others and find comfort in good memories. Others become very busy to take their minds off the loss. Some people become depressed and withdraw from their peers or go out of the way to avoid the places or situations that remind them of the person who has died.

For some people, it can help to talk about the loss with others. Some do this naturally and easily with friends and family, while others talk to a professional therapist.

Some people may not feel like talking about it much at all because it's hard to find the words to express such deep and personal emotion or they wonder whether talking will make them feel the hurt more. This is fine, as long as you find other ways to deal with your pain.

People sometimes deal with their sorrow by engaging in dangerous or self-destructive activities. Doing things like drinking, drugs, or cutting yourself to escape from the reality of a loss may seem to numb the pain, but the feeling is only temporary. This isn't really dealing with the pain, only masking it, which makes all those feelings build up inside and only prolongs the grief.

If your pain just seems to get worse, or if you feel like hurting yourself or have suicidal thoughts, tell someone you trust about how you feel.

What to Expect

It may feel like it might be impossible to recover after losing someone you love. But grief does get gradually better and become less intense as time goes by. To help get through the pain, it can help to know some of the things you might expect during the grieving process.

The first few days after someone dies can be intense, with people expressing strong emotions, perhaps crying, comforting each other, and gathering to express their support and condolences to the ones most affected by the loss. It is common to feel as if you are "going crazy" and feel extremes of anxiety, panic, sadness, and helplessness. Some people describe feeling "unreal," as if they're looking at the world from a faraway place. Others feel moody, irritable, and resentful.

Family and friends often participate in rituals that may be part of their religious, cultural, community, or family traditions, such as memorial services, wakes, or funerals. These activities can help people get through the first days after a death and honor the person who died. People might spend time together talking and sharing memories about their loved one. This may continue for days or weeks following the loss as friends and family bring food, send cards, or stop by to visit.

Many times, people show their emotions during this time. But sometimes a person can be so shocked or overwhelmed by the death that he or she doesn't show any emotion right away — even though the loss is very hard. And it's not uncommon to see people smiling and talking with others at a funeral, as if something sad had not happened. But being among other mourners can be a comfort, reminding us that some things will stay the same.

Sometimes, when the rituals associated with grieving end, people might feel like they should be "over it" because everything seems to have gone back to normal. When those who are grieving first go back to their normal activities, it might be hard to put their hearts into everyday things. Many people go back to doing regular things after a few days or a week. But although they may not talk about their loss as much, the grieving process continues.

It's natural to continue to have feelings and questions for a while after someone dies. It's also natural to begin to feel somewhat better. A lot depends on how your loss affects your life. It's OK to feel grief for days, weeks, or even longer, depending on how close you were to the person who died.

No matter how you choose to grieve, there's no one right way to do it. The grieving process is a gradual one that lasts longer for some people than others. There may be times when you worry that you'll never enjoy life the same way again, but this is a natural reaction after a loss.

Caring for Yourself

The loss of someone close to you can be stressful. It can help you to cope if you take care of yourself in certain small but important ways. Here are some that might help:

Remember that grief is a normal emotion. Know that you can (and will) heal over time.

Participate in rituals. Memorial services, funerals, and other traditions help people get through the first few days and honor the person who died.

Be with others. Even informal gatherings of family and friends bring a sense of support and help people not to feel so isolated in the first days and weeks of their grief.

Talk about it when you can. Some people find it helpful to tell the story of their loss or talk about their feelings. Sometimes a person doesn't feel like talking, and that's OK, too. No one should feel pressured to talk.

Express yourself. Even if you don't feel like talking, find ways to express your emotions and thoughts. Start writing in a journal about the memories you have of the person you lost and how you're feeling since the loss. Or write a song, poem, or tribute about your loved one. You can do this privately or share it with others.

Exercise. Exercise can help your mood. It may be hard to get motivated, so modify your usual routine if you need to.

Eat right. You may feel like skipping meals or you may not feel hungry, but your body still needs nutritious foods.

Join a support group. If you think you may be interested in attending a support group, ask an adult or school counselor about how to become involved. The thing to remember is that you don't have to be alone with your feelings or your pain.

Let your emotions be expressed and released. Don't stop yourself from having a good cry if you feel one coming on. Don't worry if listening to particular songs or doing other activities is painful because it brings back memories of the person that you lost; this is common. After a while, it becomes less painful.

Create a memorial or tribute. Plant a tree or garden, or memorialize the person in some fitting way, such as running in a charity run or walk (a breast cancer race, for example) in honor of the lost loved one.

Getting Help for Intense Grief

If your grief isn't letting up for a while after the death of your loved one, you may want to reach out for help. If grief has turned into depression, it's very important to tell someone.

How do you know if your grief has been going on too long? Here are some signs:

- You've been grieving for 4 months or more and you aren't feeling any better.
- You feel depressed.
- Your grief is so intense that you feel you can't go on with your normal activities.
- Your grief is affecting your ability to concentrate, sleep, eat, or socialize as you normally do.
- You feel you can't go on living after the loss or you think about suicide, dying, or hurting yourself.

It's natural for loss to cause people to think about death to some degree. But if a loss has caused you to think about suicide or hurting yourself in some way, or if you feel that you can't go on living, it's important that you tell someone right away.

Counseling with a professional therapist can help because it allows you to talk about your loss and express strong feelings. Many counselors specialize in working with teens who are struggling with loss and depression. If you'd like to talk to a therapist and you're not sure where to begin, ask an adult or school counselor. Your doctor may also be able to recommend someone.

Will I Ever Get Over This?

Well-meaning friends and family might tell a grieving person they need to "move on" after a loss. Unfortunately, that type of advice can sometimes make people hesitate to talk about their loss, or make people think they're grieving wrong or too long, or that they're not normal. It can help to remember that the grieving process is very personal and individual — there's no right or wrong way to grieve. We all take our own time to heal.

It's important for grieving people to not drop out of life, though. If you don't like the idea of moving on, maybe the idea of "keeping on" seems like a better fit. Sometimes it helps to remind yourself to just keep on doing the best you can for now. If you feel sad, let yourself have your feelings and try not to run away from your emotions. But also keep on doing things you normally would such as being with friends, caring for your pet, working out, or doing your schoolwork.

Going forward and healing from grief doesn't mean forgetting about the person you lost. Getting back to enjoying your life doesn't mean you no longer miss the person. And how long it takes until you start to feel better isn't a measure of how much you loved the person. With time, the loving support of family and friends, and your own positive actions, you can find ways to cope with even the deepest loss.



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