

## Life after loss: Dealing with grief

Loss is an inevitable part of life, and grief is a natural part of the healing process. The reasons for grief are many, such as the loss of a loved one, the loss of health, or the letting go of a long-held dream. Dealing with a significant loss can be one of the most difficult times in a person's life.



## Different kinds of loss

Feelings of loss are very personal, and only you know what is significant to you. People commonly associate certain losses with strong feelings of grief. These can include:

- Loss of a close friend
- Death of a partner
- Death of a classmate or colleague
- Serious illness of a loved one
- Relationship breakup
- Death of a family member

Subtle or less obvious losses can also cause strong feelings of grief, even though those around you may not know the extent of your feelings. Some examples include:

- Leaving home
- Illness/loss of health
- Death of a pet
- Change of job
- Move to a new home
- Graduation from school
- Loss of a physical ability
- Loss of financial security

## Sudden versus predictable loss

Sudden or shocking losses due to events like crimes, accidents, or suicide can be traumatic. There is no way to prepare. They can challenge your sense of security and confidence in the predictability of life. You may experience symptoms such as sleep

disturbance, nightmares, distressing thoughts, depressed mood, social isolation, or severe anxiety.

Predictable losses, like those due to terminal illness, sometimes allow more time to prepare for the loss. However, they create two layers of grief: the grief related to the anticipation of the loss and the grief related to the loss itself.

## How long does grief last?

The length of the grief process is different for everyone. There is no predictable schedule for grief. Although it can be quite painful at times, the grief process should not be rushed. It is important to be patient with yourself as you experience your unique reactions to the loss. With time and support, things generally do get better. However, it is normal for significant dates, holidays, or other reminders to trigger feelings related to the loss. Taking care of yourself, seeking support, and acknowledging your feelings during these times are ways that can help you cope.

## Normal grief reactions

When experiencing grief, it is common to:

- Feel like you are "going crazy"
- Have difficulty concentrating
- Feel sad or depressed
- Be irritable or angry (at the deceased, oneself, others, higher powers)
- Feel frustrated or misunderstood
- Experience anxiety, nervousness, or fearfulness
- Feel like you want to "escape"
- Experience guilt or remorse
- Be ambivalent
- Feel numb
- Lack energy and motivation

## Grief as a process of healing

It is important to note that the grief process is not linear, but is more often experienced in cycles. Grief is sometimes compared to climbing a spiral staircase where things can

look and feel like you are just going in circles, yet you are actually making progress. Being patient with the process and allowing yourself to have any feelings about the loss can help. If you feel stuck in your grief, talking to a counselor or a supportive person may help you move forward in the healing process.



## Culture, rituals, and ceremonies

Your cultural background can affect how you understand and approach the grief process. Some cultures anticipate a time to grieve and have developed rituals to help people through the grief process. Grief rituals and ceremonies acknowledge the pain of loss while also offering social support and a reaffirmation of life.

You may not be aware of how your own cultural background affects your grief process. Talking with family, friends or clergy is one way to strengthen your awareness of possible cultural influences in your life. Friends and family may be able to help you generate ideas to create your own rituals. Some have found solace in creating their own unconventional ceremonies, such as a funeral or ceremony with personal friends in a private setting.

## Coping with grief

Each one of us has an individual style of coping with painful experiences. The list below may help you generate ideas about how to manage your feelings of grief.

- Talk to family or friends
- Seek counseling
- Read poetry or books
- Engage in social activities
- Exercise
- Eat healthy, good foods
- Seek spiritual support
- Take time to relax
- Join a support group
- Listen to music

- Be patient with yourself
- Let yourself feel grief

You may want to experiment with these ideas or create a list of your own. Talking to friends who have dealt with loss in the past can help you identify new ways of coping. Only you know what works best with your personality and lifestyle. One way to examine your own style of coping is to recall the ways you've dealt with painful times in the past. It's important to note that some ways of coping with grief are helpful, like talking to others or writing in a journal. Others may be hurtful or destructive to the healing process, like abusing substances or isolating yourself. Healthy coping skills are important in resolving a loss and helping you move forward in the healing process.

## Supporting others who are grieving

As the shock of the loss fades, there is a tendency on the part of the griever to feel more pain and sadness. Well-meaning friends may avoid discussing the subject due to their own discomfort with grief or their fear of making the person feel bad. As a result, people who are grieving often feel more isolated or lonely in their grief.

People who are grieving are likely to fluctuate between wanting some time to themselves and wanting closeness with others. They may want someone to talk to about their feelings. Below are some ways that you can help a friend experiencing loss.

- Be a good listener
- Ask about their feelings
- Just sit with them
- Share your feelings
- Ask about their loss
- Remember the loss
- Make telephone calls
- Acknowledge the pain
- Let them feel sad
- Be available when you can
- Do not minimize grief
- Talk about your own losses

