



*Grief
Support*

Everyone grieves differently.

How you grieve may depend on many factors. These include:

The circumstances of the loss

Every loss is hard. But grief may be especially intense, complex or lengthy if you lost someone very close to you, or if the cause of death is unknown or unusual. For example, grief may be especially hard when the loss is:

- the death of a child, parent, spouse or life partner
- a sudden or violent death
- a death due to suicide.

(See page 26 for more about the loss of a child, a sudden or violent death, and suicide.)



Things about yourself

Personal factors can also affect your grief. These include your:

- **Gender** -- In general, males and females have been taught different ways to handle stress and emotions. As a result, they often choose different ways to acknowledge and express their grief.
- **Age and life experiences** -- These can affect your understanding of death and your sense of self when you experience a loss.
- **Culture and faith** -- These may influence your beliefs about death and your responses, such as your choice of rituals for honoring someone who has died.
- **Personality** -- Different personality traits (such as being outgoing, shy, expressive or thoughtful) often lead to different ways of coping with loss.



Myth: Grief should last about a year.

Fact: There is no right time frame for grieving. How long it takes to recover from loss can differ widely from person to person.

Myth: Moving on with your life means you're forgetting the one you lost.

Fact: Moving on means you've accepted your loved one's death. That's not the same as forgetting. You can adjust to a new life while always keeping your loved one's memory a part of you.

Myth: Friends can help the mourner by not bringing up the subject of his or her loss.

Fact: People who are grieving usually want and need to talk about their loss -- often over and over. Bringing up the topic can give a mourner an opening for talking. But if he or she doesn't seem to want to talk, don't pry or force conversation.

Myth: A good way to express sympathy is to say "I know how you feel."

Fact: Everyone feels grief in a different way. It's probably not possible for anyone to know exactly what another person's going through after a loss. Saying "I know how you feel" can make a mourner feel like you're making light of his or her pain. (See page 29 for tips on supporting someone in grief.)

Think about your beliefs.

What are some of your beliefs about coping with loss? What "rules" for handling stress or strong emotions did you grow up with? It may help to write them here:

Consider sharing what you wrote with others (such as a friend who has experienced a loss, a grief counselor or members of a support group). You can talk about whether these beliefs might help or hurt your healing process.

Anger or resentment

This is common, even if there is no one to blame for the death. You may:

- feel like a great injustice has been done
- be angry at doctors, relatives and others
- be angry at God
- resent your loved one for dying and leaving you alone.

Other reactions you had or are having:

Guilt

It's normal to regret things you did or didn't say, do or feel. Some people may regret or feel guilty for:

- not doing something (or not doing more) to prevent the death
- not being there to say goodbye
- being relieved that the person died (in the case of death after a long illness)
- having arguments with their loved one while he or she was alive.

Other reactions you had or are having:

Fear

A loved one's death can cause you to feel worried, panicky or helpless. You may:

- feel unable to handle new responsibilities
- worry that you're losing your mind
- have fears about your own death
- be afraid to face life without your loved one.

Other reactions you had or are having:

Deep sadness

Sadness may be a constant presence or hit you all of a sudden. It's common to feel:

- lonely
- like there's a hole in the center of your life
- a deep yearning
- like you're reliving all the other sadnesses you've had in your life.

Other reactions you had or are having:

Let yourself grieve

in a way that feels natural for you. It's OK to take a longer or shorter time than others to work through your pain. And it's OK to grieve more or less intensely than others.



Allow any feelings and thoughts to come forth.

There's no right or wrong way to feel or think about your loss. Don't be pressured by others' ideas of how you "should" or "have to" be.

Try to express your feelings and thoughts.

For example, you can do this by talking, crying, writing or doing physical activity.

Reach out to people you trust.

This is the time to lean on friends and other supportive people. Look for people who accept your feelings and thoughts, no matter what they are.

You may want to make a list of people with whom you can comfortably share feelings and thoughts:

Often, people want to help but don't know how. Try simply telling them what you need.

Acknowledging your reactions and giving them an outlet are important to your healing process.

Try to choose rituals that have meaning for you and your loved one.

For example, consider your beliefs when deciding whether the funeral and other rituals should be religious.

Take an active part if you feel up to it.

Taking an active role in funerals, memorial ceremonies and related rites can give you a greater sense of comfort and control. You can:

- help plan the funeral or other ceremony
- say a few words about your loved one or read a poem or prayer
- choose or perform some music for the ceremony
- make a display of photos, favorite belongings or other things that were meaningful to your loved one.

Let children take part in rituals, if appropriate. (See page 30 for more on children and grief.)

Be aware of all funeral expenses.

Choose a licensed, reputable funeral director. Know what goods and services you're paying for ahead of time. For example, discuss options and costs for:

- 1 embalming and other care of the body
- 1 the casket (or urn, in the case of cremation)
- 1 the grave liner or vault
- 1 use of motor vehicles in the funeral procession
- 1 the burial or cremation.

Ask the funeral director about other expenses.

Consider other rituals.

These can be things you do alone or with others. They can be common rituals or unique acts you create yourself. For example, you may find it comforting to:

- Light a candle.
- Visit the grave.
- Plant a tree or bush in a place that was special to you and your loved one.
- Have a gathering of your loved one's closest family and friends.

List other rituals, ceremonies or symbolic acts that you think would be comforting:



Think about continuing a project your loved one started.

For example, consider completing something your loved one was building, continuing his or her volunteer work, even carrying on his or her business if appropriate. This can help put to rest any feelings of things left "unfinished."

Look to your faith.

You may find comfort in religious ceremonies, prayer, meditation or activities at your place of worship. Seek guidance from a clergy member if your loss is making you question your faith.

It's also OK to take a break from worship or other faith activities for a while if that's what you need. You can always return to them later.

Consider joining a support group when you're ready.

In a support group, people who are grieving help each other by sharing their experiences. To find a support group, check your phone book or ask for referrals from:

- local hospices and funeral homes
- clergy members
- your friends.

When you find a group, write its meeting time, location and contact phone number on the inside front cover of this handbook.

Try to put off major decisions.

Wait a while before making changes such as moving, remarrying or changing jobs. You need time to adjust before knowing whether these changes will be good for you.

Think about helping others.

You can give your time or money to a cause or charity that would be meaningful to your loved one. This may be:

- a hospital or hospice program
- a children's organization
- an organization that works to prevent a disease or educate people about it.

What are other ways you might want to help others?

Allow yourself to move on.

In time, you may find yourself ready for new interests and relationships. (Remember, moving on with your life does not mean you're forgetting your loved one.)

Write down hobbies, skills, friendships, etc., that you would like to explore:

It's OK to take time for yourself – to laugh or do something you enjoy.



You can write how you feel right now.
Finish the sentence and add details. If you get stuck, read over
what you've written. Then write the next thing that comes to mind.

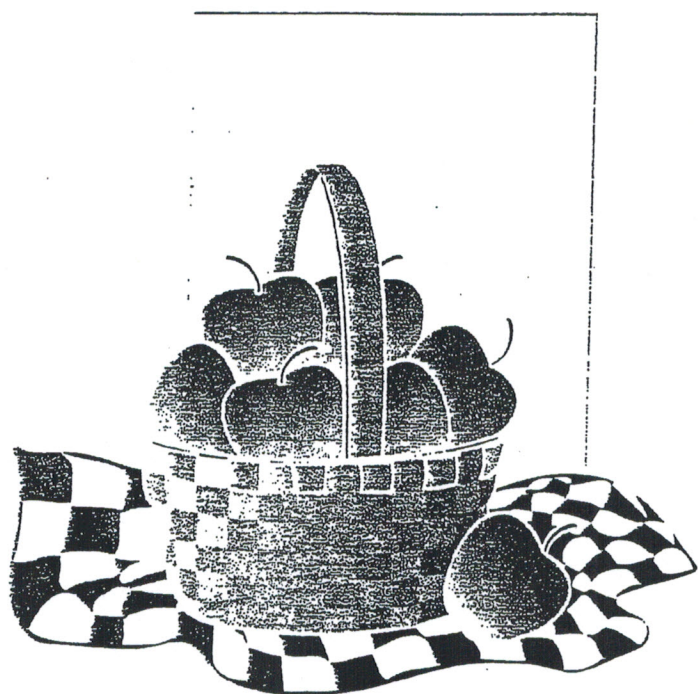
Right now I feel _____

Continue in your own notebook if you want to write more.

Take care of your health.

Grief can put a lot of stress on your body. You need to take extra care during this time to keep yourself healthy.

You may not feel like you have the energy for this. But even small steps can make a difference to your health.



Here are some tips for:

Getting good nutrition and regular exercise

- Choose a variety of healthy foods. Eat nutritious snacks (especially fruits and vegetables).
- Make plans to have friends join you for walks, favorite sports, etc. This can help you stick to exercising. (Talk to a health-care provider before starting an exercise program.)

Getting good sleep

- Do something relaxing before bed (take a bath, listen to music, read, etc.).
- Avoid alcohol, tobacco and caffeine. These can keep you from getting restful sleep.
- Try to go to bed and get up at the same time every day.

Ask your health-care provider for more advice if sleep problems continue.

Managing stress

- 1 Try to lighten your schedule while you're grieving. Consider reducing your work hours for a while or try to take some time off, if necessary.
- 1 Set aside quiet time for yourself.
- 1 Learn relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, picturing peaceful scenes and meditation. (Talk to your health-care provider to learn more.)

Don't rely on alcohol or other drugs to cope with your pain. They will only make things worse.

Here are some other tips:

Stray from tradition if it would help.

Nothing says you have to observe events the way you always have. For example:

- Eat out or change the menu if you don't feel like making the traditional meal.
- Go somewhere else if your usual place of celebration will be upsetting.
- Invite new people (especially supportive people) to join you for the observance.

Remember, you can always return to your traditions later.

Do something special to remember your loved one.

You may want to:

- Make or buy a decoration in memory of your loved one.
- Ask that a service, reading or song be dedicated to him or her at your place of worship.
- Take a trip to a place that was special to you and your loved one.
- Help others. For example, spend the day volunteering for a community project.

Is a holiday or other special time coming up? Write it here:

What traditions or expectations surrounding this time might be stressful?

What can you do to make it less stressful?

What can you do to remember your loved one?

Are you at risk?

Some factors that can put a person at risk for complicated grief are listed below. Check any that apply to you.

Having a risk factor does not automatically mean you have a problem. It means you should be extra alert and get professional help if you have any questions about your healing process.

The circumstances of the death

- The death was violent or sudden.
- The death followed a very lengthy illness.
- You lost a child.
- You feel that the death was preventable.

(See page 26 to learn more.)

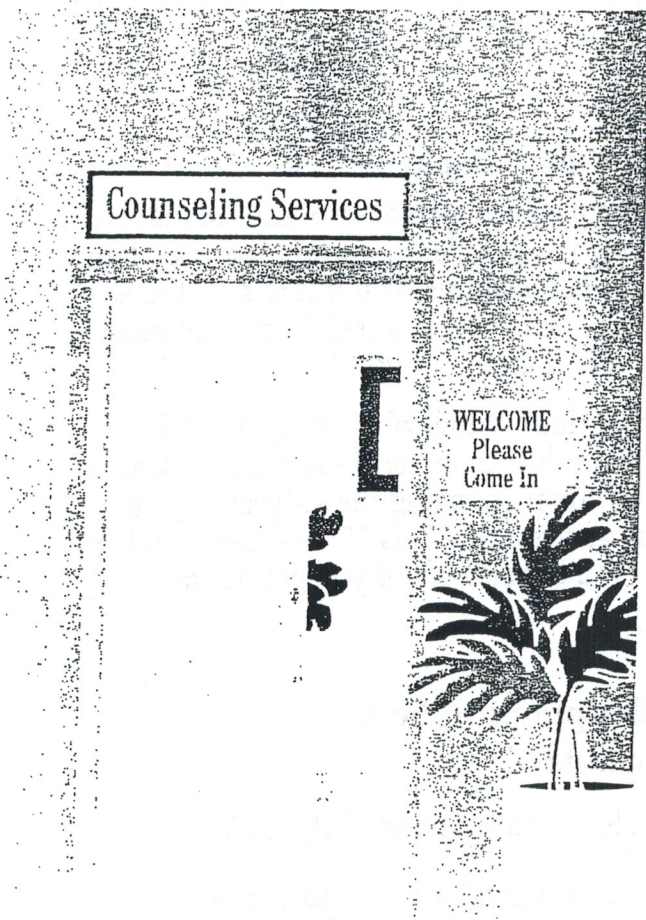
Other factors

- You had a difficult relationship with the person you lost.
- You have other major losses or stresses in your life.
- You have a history of unmanaged stress, depression or other mental health problems.
- You feel that you don't have the support you need.

See page 27 for information about getting professional help.

Getting professional help is smart.

It's not a sign of weakness. It's a sign that you're taking responsibility for your recovery.



Know when to get help.

Get help if:

- you want to make sure your grief responses are normal
- your grief feels like it's too much to bear
- your grief is causing problems at work, in a relationship or in other areas of your life
- there's a question, idea or feeling that you can't work through
- you have had any signs of depression for 2 months or more (see page 10)
- you show any signs of complicated grief (see pages 24-25)
- you have physical symptoms (aches, stomach problems, sleep problems, etc.)
- you use -- or feel an urge to use -- alcohol or other drugs to cope with your pain
- you engage in other risky behavior to cope with your grief
- you have any thoughts of suicide. (Call 9-1-1 or a crisis hotline right away.)

Many sources of help are available.

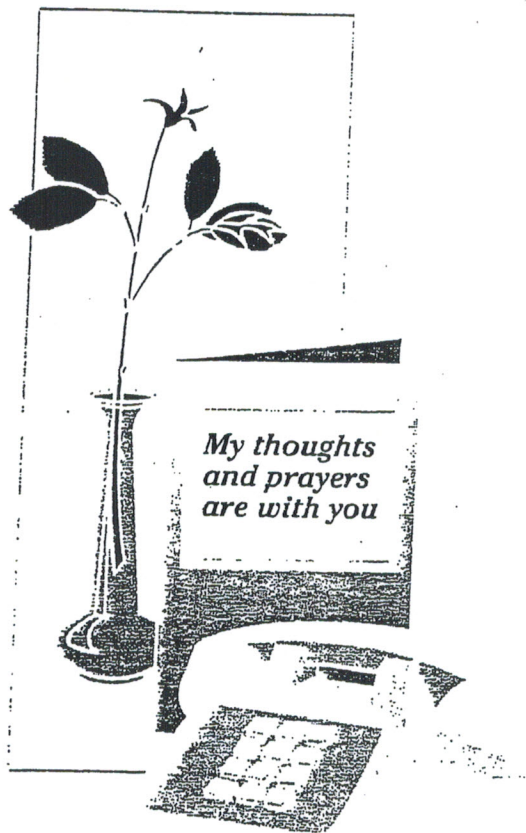
You can contact:

- a grief counselor
- other mental health professionals
- your health-care provider
- your employee assistance program (EAP)
- a clergy member

Contact the organizations on page 31 to find these sources. You can also ask your funeral director, your support group, a local hospital or a local clinic for referrals.

Helping someone else who is grieving

If someone you know has recently experienced a loss, you can do a lot to help.



Call or send a card.

Attend the funeral or visit the person if possible and appropriate. These small acts can mean a lot to someone who is grieving. Be there for the person in the months after the funeral, too.

The anniversary of the loss can be especially hard for a mourner. Be sure to call, send a card or flowers, or do something else supportive around that date.

Be a good listener.

Encourage the person to share feelings and thoughts. Simple expressions of care often help. For example, you might say "I'm so sorry," "How do you feel?" or "That must be very difficult for you."

If you don't know what to say, it's OK to sit with the person and say nothing. This is better than changing the subject or giving easy answers, such as "Don't take it so hard" or "You'll feel better if you get out more."

Offer practical help.

You might offer to:

- Help notify people of the death.
- Cook, shop for food, do chores or run errands.
- Help care for children.
- Help clean out the home of the person who died or sort through his or her belongings.

When offering to help, be specific. Say when you're available and suggest something you can do (shop for groceries, baby-sit, etc.).

If you don't know what to do, try asking the person what would help.



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The Mourner's Bill of Rights

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Though you should reach out to others as you do the work of mourning, you should not feel obligated to accept the unhelpful responses you may receive from some people. You are the one who is grieving, and as such, you have certain "rights" no one should try to take away from you.

The following list is intended both to empower you to heal and to decide how others can and cannot help. This is not to discourage you from reaching out to others for help, but rather to assist you in distinguishing useful responses from hurtful ones.

1. *You have the right to experience your own unique grief.*

No one else will grieve in exactly the same way you do. So, when you turn to others for help, don't allow them to tell what you should or should not be feeling.

2. *You have the right to talk about your grief.*

Talking about your grief will help you heal. Seek out others who will allow you to talk as much as you want, as often as you want, about your grief. If at times you don't feel like talking, you also have the right to be silent.

3. *You have the right to feel a multitude of emotions.*

Confusion, disorientation, fear, guilt and relief are just a few of the emotions you might feel as part of your grief journey. Others may try to tell you that feeling angry, for example, is wrong. Don't take these judgmental responses to heart. Instead, find listeners who will accept your feelings without condition.

4. *You have the right to be tolerant of your physical and emotional limits.*

Your feelings of loss and sadness will probably leave you feeling fatigued. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. Get daily rest. Eat balanced meals. And don't allow others to push you into doing things you don't feel ready to do.

5. *You have the right to experience "griefbursts."*

Sometimes, out of nowhere, a powerful surge of grief may overcome you. This can be frightening, but is normal and natural. Find someone who understands and will let you talk it out.

6. *You have the right to make use of ritual.*

The funeral ritual does more than acknowledge the death of someone loved. It helps provide you with the support of caring people. More importantly, the funeral is a way for you to mourn. If others tell you the funeral or other healing rituals such as these are silly or unnecessary, don't listen.

7. *You have the right to embrace your spirituality.*

If faith is a part of your life, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you.

Allow yourself to be around people who understand and support your religious beliefs. If you feel angry at God, find someone to talk with who won't be critical of your feelings of hurt and abandonment.

8. *You have the right to search for meaning.*

You may find yourself asking, "Why did he or she die? Why this way? Why now?" Some of your questions may have answers, but some may not. And watch out for the clichéd responses some people may give you. Comments like, "It was God's will" or "Think of what you have to be thankful for" are not helpful and you do not have to accept them.

9. *You have the right to treasure your memories.*

Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after the death of someone loved. You will always remember. Instead of ignoring your memories, find others with whom you can share them.

10. *You have the right to move toward your grief and heal.*

Reconciling your grief will not happen quickly. Remember, grief is a process, not an event. Be patient and tolerant with yourself and avoid people who are impatient and intolerant with you. Neither you nor those around you must forget that the death of someone loved changes your life forever.

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