

Coping with Grief and Loss

There is no right or wrong way to grieve, but there are healthy ways to deal with the grieving process. These tips can help.



What is grief?

Grief is a natural response to loss. It's the emotional suffering you feel when something or someone you love is taken away. Often, the pain of loss can feel overwhelming. You may experience all kinds of difficult and unexpected emotions, from shock or anger to disbelief, guilt, and profound sadness. The pain of grief can also disrupt your physical health, making it difficult to sleep, eat, or even think straight. These are normal reactions to loss—and the more significant the loss, the more intense your grief will be. Coping with the loss of someone or something you love is one of life's biggest challenges. You may associate grieving with the death of a loved one—which is often the cause of the most intense type of grief—but any loss can cause grief, including:

- Divorce or relationship breakup
- Loss of health
- Losing a job
- Loss of financial stability
- Retirement
- Death of a pet
- Loss of a cherished dream
- A loved one's serious illness
- Loss of a friendship
- Loss of safety after a trauma
- Selling the family home or moving
- The inability to socialize due to "social distancing"

Even subtle losses in life can trigger a sense of grief. For example, you might grieve after graduating from high school, moving away from home, or changing jobs. Whatever your loss, it's personal to you, so don't feel ashamed about how you feel, or believe that it's somehow only appropriate to grieve for certain things. If the person, animal, relationship, or situation was significant to you, it's normal to grieve the loss you're experiencing. Whatever the cause of your grief, though, there are healthy ways to cope with the pain that, in time, can ease your sadness and help you come to terms with your loss, find new meaning, and eventually move on with your life.

[The grieving process](#)

Grieving is a highly individual experience; there's no right or wrong way to grieve. How you grieve depends on many factors, including your personality and coping style, your life experience, your faith, and how significant the loss was to you.

Inevitably, the grieving process takes time. Healing happens gradually; it can't be forced or hurried—and **there is no "normal" timetable for grieving**. Some people start to feel better in weeks or months. For others, the grieving process is measured in years. Whatever your grief experience, it's important to be patient with yourself and allow the process to naturally unfold.

[How to deal with the grieving process](#)

While grieving a loss is an inevitable part of life, there are ways to help cope with the pain, come to terms with your grief, and eventually, find a way to pick up the pieces and move on with your life.

- Acknowledge your pain.
- Accept that grief can trigger many different and unexpected emotions.
- Understand that your grieving process will be unique to you.
- Seek out support from people who care about you.
- Support yourself emotionally by taking care of yourself physically.

Symptoms of grief

While loss affects people in different ways, many of us experience the following symptoms when we're grieving. Just remember that almost anything that you experience in the early stages of grief is normal—including feeling like you're going crazy, feeling like you're in a bad dream, or questioning your religious or spiritual beliefs.

Emotional symptoms of grief

Shock and disbelief: Right after a loss, it can be hard to accept what happened. You may feel numb, have trouble believing that the loss really happened, or even deny the truth. If someone you love has died, you may keep expecting them to show up, even though you know they're gone.

Sadness: Profound sadness is probably the most universally experienced symptom of grief. You may have feelings of emptiness, despair, yearning, or deep loneliness. You may also cry a lot or feel emotionally unstable.

Guilt: You may regret or feel guilty about things you did or didn't say or do. You may also feel guilty about certain feelings (e.g. feeling relieved when the person died after a long, difficult illness). After a death, you may even feel guilty for not doing something to prevent the death, even if there was nothing more you could have done.

Anger: Even if the loss was nobody's fault, you may feel angry and resentful. If you lost a loved one, you may be angry with yourself, God, the doctors, or even the person who died for abandoning you. You may feel the need to blame someone for the injustice that was done to you.

Fear: A significant loss can trigger a host of worries and fears. You may feel anxious, helpless, or insecure. You may even have panic attacks. The death of a loved one can trigger fears about your own mortality, of facing life without that person, or the responsibilities you now face alone.

Physical symptoms of grief

We often think of grief as a strictly emotional process, but grief often involves physical problems, including:

Fatigue

Nausea

Lowered immunity

Weight loss or weight gain

Aches and pains

Insomnia

Seek support for grief and loss

The pain of grief can often cause you to want to withdraw from others and retreat into your shell. But having the support of other people is vital to healing from loss. **Turn to friends and family members.** Now is the time to lean on the people who care about you, even if you take pride in being strong and self-sufficient. Rather than avoiding

them, draw friends and loved ones close, spend time together, and accept the assistance that's offered. Often, people want to help but don't know how, so tell them what you need—whether it's a shoulder to cry on, help with funeral arrangements, or just someone to hang out with. If you don't feel you have anyone you can regularly connect with in person, it's never too late to build new relationships.

Accept that many people feel awkward when trying to comfort someone who's grieving. Grief can be a confusing, sometimes frightening emotion for many people, especially if they haven't experienced a similar loss themselves. They may feel unsure about how to comfort you and end up saying or doing the wrong things. But don't use that as an excuse to retreat into your shell and avoid social contact. If a friend or loved one reaches out to you, it's because they care.

Draw comfort from your faith. If you follow a religious tradition, embrace the comfort its mourning rituals can provide. Spiritual activities that are meaningful to you—such as praying, meditating, or going to church—can offer solace. If you're questioning your faith in the wake of the loss, talk to a clergy member, a rabbi, or others in your religious community.

Join a support group. Grief can feel very lonely, even when you have loved ones around. Sharing your sorrow with others who have experienced similar losses can help. To find a bereavement support group in your area, contact local hospitals, hospices, funeral homes, and counseling centers.

Talk to a therapist or grief counselor. If your grief feels like too much to bear, find a mental health professional with experience in grief counseling. An experienced therapist can help you work through intense emotions and overcome obstacles to your grieving.

Take care of yourself as you grieve

When you're grieving, it's more important than ever to take care of yourself. The stress of a major loss can quickly deplete your energy and emotional reserves. Looking after your physical and emotional needs will help you get through this difficult time.

- **Face your feelings.** You can try to suppress your grief, but you can't avoid it forever. In order to heal, you have to acknowledge the pain. Trying to avoid feelings of sadness and loss only prolongs the grieving process. Unresolved grief can also lead to complications such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and health problems.
- **Express your feelings in a tangible or creative way.** Write about your loss in a journal. If you've lost a loved one, write a letter saying the things you never got to say; make a scrapbook or photo album celebrating the person's life; or get involved in a cause or organization that was important to your loved one.
- **Try to maintain your hobbies and interests.** There's comfort in routine and getting back to the activities that bring you joy and connect you closer to others can help you come to terms with your loss and aid the grieving process.
- **Don't let anyone tell you how to feel, and don't tell yourself how to feel either.** Your grief is your own, and no one else can tell you when it's time to "move on" or "get over it." Let yourself feel whatever you feel without embarrassment or judgment. It's okay to be angry, to yell at the heavens, to cry

or not to cry. It's also okay to laugh, to find moments of joy, and to let go when you're ready.

- **Plan ahead for grief “triggers.”** Anniversaries, holidays, and milestones can reawaken memories and feelings. Be prepared for an emotional wallop, and know that it's completely normal. If you're sharing a holiday or lifecycle event with other relatives, talk to them ahead of time about their expectations and agree on strategies to honor the person you loved.
- **Look after your physical health.** The mind and body are connected. When you feel healthy physically, you'll be better able to cope emotionally. Combat stress and fatigue by getting enough sleep, eating right, and exercising. **Don't use alcohol or drugs to numb the pain of grief or lift your mood artificially.**

When to seek professional help for grief

If you're experiencing symptoms of complicated grief or clinical depression, talk to a professional mental health provider right away. Left untreated, complicated grief and depression can lead to significant emotional damage, life-threatening health problems, and even suicide. But treatment can help you get better.

Contact a grief counselor or professional therapist if you:

- Feel like life isn't worth living
- Wish you had died with your loved one
- Blame yourself for the loss or for failing to prevent it
- Feel numb and disconnected from others for more than a few weeks
- Are having difficulty trusting others since your loss
- Are unable to perform your normal daily activities

Therapy can help you with any sort of loss. Therapy is an opportunity to explore your feelings, your experience, and memories without judgment. No loss is too big or too small to warrant support. You do not have to endure your grief alone.

Myths and Facts about Grief and Grieving

Myth: The pain will go away faster if you ignore it.

Fact: Trying to ignore your pain or keep it from surfacing will only make it worse in the long run. For real healing, it is necessary to face your grief and actively deal with it.

Myth: It's important to "be strong" in the face of loss.

Fact: Feeling sad, frightened, or lonely is a normal reaction to loss. Crying doesn't mean you are weak. You don't need to "protect" your family or friends by putting on a brave front. Showing your true feelings can help them and you.

Myth: If you don't cry, it means you aren't sorry about the loss.

Fact: Crying is a normal response to sadness, but it's not the only one. Those who don't cry may feel the pain just as deeply as others. They may simply have other ways of showing it.

Myth: Grieving should last about a year.

Fact: There is no specific time frame for grieving. How long it takes differs from person to person.

Myth: Moving on with your life means forgetting about your loss.

Fact: Moving on means you've accepted your loss—but that's not the same as forgetting. You can move on with your life and keep the memory of someone or something you lost as an important part of you. In fact, as we move through life, these memories can become more and more integral to defining the people we are.