



# Understanding and Coping with Grief



**40%**  
**of Grievers**  
meet the criteria for  
**Major Depression**  
one month after a loss

**5%** of children  
in the U.S have lost  
**One or Both Parents**  
by age 15.



# Understanding Grief

Grief is a normal, albeit painful, response to losing a loved one, friend, or pet through death, divorce, misunderstandings, and relocations. We also experience grief when we suffer a significant change, such as physical/terminal illness or injury, change of job, etc. Many people experience a combination of physical and emotional symptoms while grieving, including, but not limited to: decreased appetite, difficulty sleeping, frequent tearfulness, difficulty concentrating, anger, and/or a sense of isolation. While those symptoms are common, it is important to remember that grief is a highly personalized experience and no two people grieve in exactly the same way. Even though there are models of grief, nothing is linear. Feelings come and go; they vary in intensity, and the triggers for those experiences are different. Overall, there is no “right” way to grieve. The following are important components of allowing yourself to move through the grieving process.

**Make time work for you.** Time passes without regard to what we do or how we use it. In the process of grief, it is important to acknowledge your experience: your thoughts, feelings, and changes in behavior over time. Anniversary dates and milestone events in our lives will often trigger grief from a loss sustained. When this happens, it is helpful to recognize and talk about it.

**Balance your time and ask for help.** Solitude can be an important element of grief for many people. Nonetheless, it is essential that we balance the desire to retreat with community and socialization. Return to, and maintain, as much of your routine as possible. In addition to your usual contacts, ask friends and family to call you at scheduled intervals (three months, six months, and a year after the loss (or on any important date that you can anticipate an increase in your feelings of grief).

**Attend to your physical needs and appearance.** It is important that your body has rest and nourishment during this time. While restful sleep and normal appetite take some time to return, eating small meals and sleeping at night while maintaining daily hygiene helps to ground us while grieving.



## Understanding Grief

**Ask for practical support.** Most people want to be helpful, but it is not always easy to know what to do in response to loss. Ask for help with childcare, grocery shopping, laundry, housekeeping, and other tasks, particularly in the early stages of grief.

**Avoid numbing your pain.** Do not use drugs or alcohol to avoid difficult thoughts or feelings. While a drink or two may seem to take the edge off and help you cope, it will actually lower your ability to feel, process the loss, and inhibit good decision making. Numbing your pain will only prolong the grief process.

**Avoid making life-changing decisions.** Give yourself some time to adjust to your loss before you make other significant changes.

**Maintain hope.** While it rarely happens as quickly as we wish, we do progress through grief. Having done so, we may be changed in unpredictable but meaningful ways that contribute to our own or another's growth.





# Stages of Grief

Grief is the outward expression of the loss you have experienced. Mourning is the process you go through when working to accept this loss. **Grief can be broken down into 5 stages - Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance.** By naming what we are feeling, we can identify a framework for healing. Keep in mind, that grief is not linear, and as people move from one stage to another, they can move back and forth, skip some stages, return back to one they may have experienced, etc. These stages are simply reactions to feelings, to processing something that feels unimaginable, and people enter and exit each stage as appropriate to their individual process of grief and mourning. As such, these 5 stages are not meant to be followed in order, nor does it mean unsuccessful coping or healing if a stage is missed. Instead, this framework is offered to help people feel better equipped to cope with their life after loss.

## Denial



The first of the five stages is Denial. **At its core, denial is a survival mechanism, designed to help you survive a loss.** Numbness, shock, overwhelming feelings of being ungrounded, and having difficulty finding meaning in the world all prompt questions about whether or not it is possible to go on. The truth is that our brains draw from this sense of denial to simply cope and survive each day. By slowing down access to grief, denial only exposes the brain and heart to small amounts of grief at a time and allows the body to pace itself as it can tolerate. Slowly but surely, the denial starts to fade, the feelings that were hidden away begin to bubble to the surface, and you begin to accept the reality of the loss. Thus, the healing process begins.

## Anger



Anger is the second stage in the restorative process. **Anger can be a red hot, all-encompassing emotional experience, but it is crucial in the healing process.** Yes, it sounds contradictory, as we often discuss anger as an emotion that covers up deeper feelings. However, anger is an emotion with which you are accustomed to dealing. In time, you will access the feelings of pain, sadness, and loss which lie underneath it. By allowing yourself to feel the anger, it will start to abate and you will continue to heal.



## Bargaining



When preparing for a loss, many people seem to barter, to do anything and everything if only your loved one would remain safe and alive. Yet, after the loss occurs, **Bargaining takes over, This is when we start trying to form a bridge, to create an arrangement that if you promise to do something, your loved one will come back, or you will wake up from this nightmare.** We desperately hope that life will resume as it was prior to the loss - begging to go back in time and stop the incident or illness from occurring. We play the “what if” game, which fosters a strong sense of guilt - what did I do wrong, what could I have done differently, how could I have saved them? The pain of this loss is so difficult to bear that we will do almost anything to avoid the pain. This is why we get stuck in the what ifs, trying to find a compromise (a bargain) to exit the hurt.

## Depression



Depression begins to present itself after the bargaining phase. **This is the moment where we realize that no amount of begging or deal making will allow us to return to a point in time and stop the loss from occurring. Dark, empty feelings arise, and we enter a deeper level of grief.** So deep, that it feels it may never end. Crucial to remember during this phase is that depression does not mean you have developed a life long, mental illness. Instead, it is an appropriate response to a terrible loss that was suffered. During this phase, it is common to wonder if the heavy sadness will ever lift. Perhaps you are questioning if life is worth living, or if there is truly a point to going on without this person by your side. As noted, depression is a normative element of the healing process, and it too will end as you flow from one stage into another, and begin to accept that life will go on.

## Acceptance



Acceptance does not mean that everything is okay and that you have completed your healing. Truly, most people are never “okay” with losing their loved one. Instead, **acceptance means that you understand the reality that this loved one is lost, and that you recognize there is a new reality, a new way of walking through the world without them.** It is hard to learn to live in a world without that person, while something perpetually feels lost. Over time, you learn to live within this new reality, accept that the past cannot be the present, and that you must readjust. You identify a new normal and begin to have more good days than bad ones. While we can never replace who and what was lost, we can form new relationships, build different connections, and start to listen to our own needs. We grow, we change, we evolve and we learn to live again.



# Coping with Grief



## Nurturing Yourself



**Be gentle with yourself.** It's important to practice self-compassion. Try not to judge how you grieve and/or how long it takes you. Everyone grieves in their own ways, in their own time.

**Get enough sleep** so your body and mind can recharge while you rest. Practice good sleep habits and get a bit of sunlight in the morning.

**Eat nutritious meals and snacks.** Avoid not eating, even if your appetite is lower. Good nutrition is important to keep your body well. Drink plenty of water to keep your body hydrated.

**Move your body for the health benefits** and to get out of your head for a bit. It's important to get regular exercise, even something small like taking a daily walk around the neighborhood. Even a little exercise keeps your body and mind healthy and can decrease stress levels.

**Don't neglect your regular routine** such as showering, taking your prescription medications, and going to your doctor appointments. Schedule a check up if you're highly stressed or you're getting sick more often.

**Spend time with family and friends.** Try not to isolate yourself. If you're struggling with keeping up with household chores, ask a family member or friend for help or hire someone to do some of your chores for you until you can get back on your feet.

**If you're struggling at work, talk to your supervisor.** They may be able to develop a temporary plan or allow reasonable accommodations while you grieve.

**Practice mindfulness** by staying present in the moment.

**Be in nature.** Spending a few minutes outdoors and seeing the greenery can help with healing. Sunlight can help with mood, and early morning sunlight can help you sleep better at night.

**Do something expressive or creative** such as journaling your thoughts and feelings, following journal prompts, listening to music, watching a movie, or doing something artistic.

If you begin to feel that you cannot cope with your grief or you're experiencing symptoms of clinical depression that go beyond grief, talk to your doctor or consider talking to a therapist. If you're experiencing any thoughts of death or suicide, call or text **The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988.**



# Strategies to Navigate Grief ∨

**Grief is a unique process impacting individuals in different manners.** Each person's experience will vary.

**Grief presents with an array of emotions** - give yourself permission to feel, expect mood/feelings to fluctuate. Be patient with yourself, take time for yourself and give yourself permission for both good and bad days.

**Loneliness may result** - Reach out to friends and family for support. You may need to receive support but may also provide support to another.

**Celebrating your loved one** - fond memories, events shared can offer comfort.

**Remain mindful of the need for your own self care** - taking care of your personal needs, exercise, sleep, daily routines remain important. Often keeping written track of daily activities as you may be consumed with grief some days and this will serve as a reminder.

**Seek professional help if feeling overwhelmed** - support comes in many different forms. Both medical/psychological/spiritual support can be supportive.

**Grief is a process and there is no particular order of the stages** - denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. You may go through a stage and then a few weeks later be facing that stage again. Although you may process the stage differently as you have grown with your experiences.

**From allowing ourselves to feel we can make new connections and meaningful relationships** to begin the acceptance.





# The Best (and Worst) Things to Say to Someone Who is Grieving

## The Best

1. I am so sorry for your loss
2. I wish I had the right words, just know I care
3. I don't know how you feel, but I am here to help in any way I can
4. You and your loved one will be in my thoughts and prayers.
5. My favorite memory of your loved one is...
6. I am always just a phone call away
7. Give a hug instead of saying something
8. We all need help at times like this, I am here for you
9. I am usually up early or late, if you need anything
10. Saying nothing, just be with the person

## The Worst

1. At least she lived a long life, many people die young
2. He is in a better place
3. She brought this on herself
4. There is a reason for everything
5. Aren't you over him yet, he has been dead for a while now?
6. You can have another child still
7. She was such a good person God wanted her to be with him
8. I know how you feel
9. She did what she came here to do and it was her time to go
10. Be strong





# Coping with Grief



## Children

One of the biggest things to remember when explaining grief or loss to a child is that children process grief much differently than adults. Given these differences, there are a few things to keep in mind to help children understand grief/loss in a developmentally appropriate way. Below discusses tips and resources for helping children understand situations commonly associated with grief or loss.

### **Death:**

Be prepared to explain the loss in age-appropriate terms. If discussing the death of a family member, friend, or pet, avoid using phrases like “went to sleep,” “gone away,” or “lost.” Using these ambiguous terms do not help the child understand and may cause additional fears (i.e., afraid to go to bed in case they sleep forever).

### **A few recommendations for explaining death to children appropriately:**

Dying is not like being sick or hurt - a person cannot get better and come back.

No one can live forever - eventually, everyone’s body will get tired and die.

Discussions of the afterlife as appropriate for individual religious/spiritual beliefs are ok, but be sure to stay away from ambiguous language as described above.

### **Book recommendations to explain death to children:**

*When Dinosaurs Die* by Laurie Krasny Brown

*Lifetimes* by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen

### **Incarceration:**

Explaining to a child that a loved one is being sent to prison can be difficult as most children have a fundamental understanding that you go to prison when you do something “bad.” Children may have conflicting emotions about loving someone “bad”.

Explaining to a child that it is ok to love and miss a person who may have made bad decisions or struggles with other issues like drug abuse or mental illness.

### **Book recommendation for explaining incarceration to children:**

*Far Apart, Close in Heart* by Becky Birtha





# Coping with Grief: Children

## Separation from Caregiver:

Ensure that the child understands that the caregiver no longer being present is not their fault. Children may internalize those types of situations, feeling that they were “bad” in some way, which caused them to be taken away from their caregiver or made their caregiver decide to leave.

Using language from the incarceration section may be helpful so children know that it is ok to love a caregiver while being angry at them for leaving or their behavior.

It may be helpful to discuss why the caregiver is no longer present.

## Resources to help explain some of the reasons why a parent may no longer be in a child's life:

### Parental Drug Abuse

*I Wish Daddy Didn't Drink so Much* by *Judith Vigna*

*Think of Wind* by *Catherine Mercury*

Sesame Street has a series of videos on YouTube about parental addiction.

*An Elephant in the Living Room* by *Jill Hastings and Marion Typpo*

*Tall Tales* by *Karen Day*

### Parental Mental Illness

*Wishing Wellness: A Workbook for Children of Parents with Mental Illness* by *Lisa Anne Clarke*

*Sometimes I'm Afraid* by *Wendy Cuskey*

### Parental Abuse/Neglect

*A Terrible Thing Happened* by *Margaret Holmes*

*Healing Days: A Guide for Kids who have Experienced Trauma* by *Susan Farber Straus*

*It's Okay to Tell* by *S. Bishop*





# Know When to Get Help!

Know when it is time to seek help. **Do not wait until symptoms of grief depression, anxiety, stress, or trauma become overwhelming.** Talk about your concerns with a mental health therapist. They will help you develop coping skills and improve your mood and well-being.

**If you are interested in learning more about CHE's therapy and/or medication management services, please visit us at [www.cheservices.com](http://www.cheservices.com).** You can book a session and meet with one of our compassionate and expert therapists online. Alternatively, you may call and speak to a live customer support and scheduling agent at **888-515-3834**.



## CONSIDER JOINING A GRIEF SUPPORT GROUP

It may sound counterintuitive to join a group focused on grief and reliving your loss. However, grief support groups allow people who have recently lost someone, or something, important to them, to come together. Connecting with others who are experiencing similar emotions and experiences can be validating and healing. There are different kinds of grief groups (sometimes entitled Bereavement Groups). Some groups focus on specific themes, such as those who have lost a child, or loss by a particular disease or age bracket, and some are more general with the common thread being the loss of someone close to them. A few such groups are listed here, however, Mental Health America and National Alliance on Mental Health have additional resources available on their respective sites.

**Young Adult Support Groups:** [Actively Moving Forward](#); [Hope Again](#)

**Loss of a pet:** [Grief Healing Discussion Groups for Pet Loss](#)

**Pregnancy and infant loss:** [First Candle](#)

**Specific Grief Groups via Social Media:** [Online Grief Support](#)



## WHAT TO DO IN A CRISIS

If you or a loved one are considering harming yourself or themselves, tell someone right away. **Call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or text the Crisis Text Line at 741741.** Both services are free and available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. All calls are confidential.



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# Additional Resources



## Podcasts:

[Grief Outloud](#)

[Griefcast: Funny People Talking About Death](#)

[Death, Love, Grief and Hope](#)

[What's Your Grief](#)

[Faith and Grief](#)

[Terrible, Thanks for Asking -](#)

[The Art of Dying Well](#)

[Help to Make Sense - Targeted for young adults](#)

[Sisters in Loss - Focused on pregnancy, infancy, miscarriage and loss](#)

[Healing Pet Loss](#)

## Books:

### Children

[Invisible String - Patrice Karst](#)

[When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death](#)  
by *Larene Krasny Brown & Marc Brown*

[One Wave At A Time - Holly Thompson](#)

[When Someone Very Special Dies](#) by *Marge Heegaard*

[Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to](#)

[Children](#) by *Bryan Mellonie & Robert Ingpen*

### Adults

[It's OK That You're Not OK - Megan Devine](#)

[How to Carry What Can't Be Fixed - Megan Devine](#)

[On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief](#)  
[Through the Five Stages of Loss - Elisabeth](#)

[Kübler-Ross and David Kessler](#)

[Sweet Sorrow: Finding Enduring Wholeness After Loss](#)  
[and Grief - Cormier, Rowman & Littlefield](#)

[Grief Isn't Something To Get Over - Mary Lamia](#)

## Web Links:

[AARP's Grief and Loss](#)

[Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#)

[Compassionate Friends](#)

[www.grief.com](#)

[HOPE for Bereaved, Inc.](#)

[https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/mental-health-resources/](#)

[https://mhanational.org](#)

