



Coping with Grief and Loss

The grieving process is a normal and natural process that every person goes through when someone they love has died. Recovery is a slow and emotionally painful one. The grieving process can be less painful if you try to understand that loss and grief is a natural part of life. Learn to accept your loss and believe in yourself. Believe that you can cope with tragic happenings. Let your experience be a psychological growth process that will help you to deal with future stressful events.

You may experience some of the symptoms below - this is normal.

- **Shock / Disbelief:** This is the numbing, disorienting sense that the death has not really happened, not really occurred. This reaction can be intensified and complicated if the death is sudden, violent, or unanticipated. Your mind may be telling you "there must be some mistake," or "this can't be true." These symptoms typically last from several hours to several days.
- **Anger:** You may be confused at feeling anger. Your anger may be targeted at a number of sources. You may feel waves of anger at the doctors who treated your loved one, anger at your family members for not rallying together, anger at God over what seems senseless or unjust, even anger at yourself or the person who died and "left" you.
- **Guilt:** You may blame yourself for not doing more, not being there enough, or not being there when the death happened. You may feel regret over "unfinished business" -- conflicts you and the deceased never resolved, or feelings between the two of you that were never fully discussed or shared.
- **Sadness:** You may experience a deep sense of loss. There may be moments when you find yourself at a loss for words, weeping, or bursting uncontrollably into tears.
- **Fear:** There may be anxiety or panic; fears about carrying on, fears about the future. If the person who died was an adult (partner, sibling, parent), it may bring up fears about your own sense of mortality or sense of being left behind.
- **Depression:** You may go through periods of melancholy, or "blueness," where you feel inclined to withdraw or isolate yourself. You may lose interest in your usual activities, or feel helpless or hopeless.

What You Need During Grief

Grieving the death of someone does not have a particular timetable. Mourning your loss may take weeks, months, or even years. For many individuals, the death of their loved one is carried with them throughout their lives. Although there is no "cure" for grief, here are several ways to help you cope with your loss, and begin to ease the pain.

- **Time:** Take time alone and time with others whom you trust and who will listen when you need to talk.
- **Caring:** Try to allow yourself to accept the expressions of caring from others even though they may be awkward. Helping

a friend or relative suffering the same loss may bring a feeling of closeness with that person.

- **Rest, Relaxation, Exercise, Diversion:** You may need to give yourself extra amounts of things that nourish and replenish you. Hot baths, afternoon naps, a short trip, a project helping others -- any of these may give you a lift. Grief can be an emotionally and physically exhausting process.
- **Goals:** For a while, it will seem that much of life is without meaning. At times like these, small goals are helpful. Something to look forward to -- like lunch with a friend that day, a movie the next week, a trip next month -- helps you get through the time in the immediate future. Sometimes living moment by moment, or one day at a time, is the rule of thumb. As time passes, you may want to work on longer range goals to give yourself some structure and direction to your life.
- **Security:** Try to reduce or find help for financial and other stresses in your life. Allow yourself to be close and open up to those you trust. Developing or getting back into a routine helps. Focus on doing things at your own pace.
- **Permission to Backslide:** Sometimes after a period of feeling better, you find yourself back in the old feelings of extreme sadness, despair, or anger. This is the nature of grief -- one moment you're up, and next, you're down. Sometimes when you backslide, you are simply remembering, re-experiencing the trauma or enormity of your loss which starts to flood back and overwhelm you.
- **Hope:** You may find hope and comfort from those who have experienced a similar loss. Knowing what helped them, and realizing that over time they have recovered, may give you the hope and strength to envision that you, too, will eventually heal from your grief.
- **Small Pleasures:** Do not underestimate the healing power of small pleasures. Sunsets, massage, a walk near the ocean, a favorite food -- all are small steps toward giving to yourself and regaining your pleasure in life itself.
- **Be Aware of Drug and Alcohol Use:** The use of drugs, alcohol, and even prescription medications may prolong and delay the necessary process of grieving. You cannot prevent or cure grief. The only way out is through the grief process.
- **Permission to Change your Mind:** Grieving can shake you up inside. You may have difficulty concentrating; or find yourself constantly reevaluating your priorities. You may be unsure or uncertain what you want in numerous aspects of your life. When you make commitments or plans, be sure to let people know you may need room to cancel or change your mind.
- **Be Prepared around Holidays and Anniversaries:** For many people, holidays, birthdays, or the anniversary of their loved one's death can bring up painful memories or revive feelings of longing and sadness over their loss -- even for those who believe they have "finished" their grieving and moved on. This "anniversary" reaction is a common part of the grieving process, but you may be still be surprised by the flood of emotions that may be reactivated during this period. You might want to be especially aware and gentle with yourself around this time. You may also want to allow more private time for yourself, or arrange to spend more time around family and others close to you.

Ways to Help a Bereaved Student or Friend

- Be supportive. Show that you care. Listen attentively and show interest in what the grieving student has to say about his/her feelings and beliefs. Share your feelings and talk about any similar experience you may have had. Avoid using the phrase "I know just how you feel" or trying to give encouragement and reassurance.
- Talk openly and honestly about the situation unless the student does not want to.
- Use an appropriate, caring conversational tone of voice.
- If symptoms of depression are very severe or persistent and the grieving student is not coping with day to day activities encourage that student to **make an appointment** with Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) or another mental health professional.

When grief does not go away

It's normal to feel sad, numb, or angry following a loss. But as time passes, these emotions should become less intense as you accept the loss and start to move forward. If you aren't feeling better over time, or your grief is getting worse, it may be a sign

that your grief has developed into a more serious problem, such as complicated grief or major depression. Please **make an appointment** with CAPS or another mental health professional if you feel stuck, or if you or anyone you know begins to feel like life isn't worth living or wishes for death.

Adapted from [UC Berkeley Grief and Loss](#) and [Helpguide.org: Coping with Grief and Loss](#)