

We Grieve Because We Love

Coping with Loss



ENLOE
MEDICAL CENTER



www.enloe.org

“Grieving is as natural as crying when you are hurt, sleeping when you are tired, eating when you are hungry or sneezing when your nose itches. It is nature’s way of healing a broken heart.”

– *Doug Manning, Don't Take My Grief Away From Me*



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UNDERSTANDING GRIEF

Grief is a natural response when we lose someone we love. At first, we might feel shock and confusion, then denial. Dealing with the obligations and details following the death of a loved one gives us a short distraction, but when life settles, the symptoms of intense grief can take hold of us.



Grief never goes away entirely, but its intensity does lessen over time as you work through the process. To prepare for this journey, keep in mind there is no right — or wrong — way to grieve, and there is no set time for how long your grief will last.

Grief is an individual process specific to you and your loss. It can take many forms, including:

- Lack of appetite or increased appetite
- Feeling restless, unfocused and forgetful
- Denial and disbelief of death
- The sense of a loved one's presence and wanting to talk to that person
- Difficulty sleeping or feelings of exhaustion
- Intense preoccupation with the life of the loved one you lost
- Disturbing dreams or less dreaming
- Anger and guilt about past events that happened or didn't happen in your relationship
- Feelings of anger toward your loved one for dying and leaving you
- Ruminating thoughts or loss of memory of the last weeks, days, or hours of the death
- Taking care of others who are uncomfortable by not talking about your own grief
- Telling and retelling stories of the relationship and loss
- Unexpected mood changes and tears
- Trying to stay constantly active
- Difficulty making decisions

Notice your symptoms of grief and be assured that they are a normal response to loss.

COPING IN HEALTHY WAYS

Working through the grieving process may be one of the hardest things you will ever do, but it is the key to healing. Here are some tips that may help:

- Allow yourself to cry, be angry or sad. Set aside time to process feelings—it can help you manage feelings at other times when you want to “hold it together.”
- Be with someone who can be present with you in your grief. Talking about your loss is therapeutic. Find people who can “hold” your grief by simply listening.
- Friends and family process grief differently. Some may be unsure of what to say, changing the subject or telling you to move on. Be prepared for this in case you do not get the support you desire.
- If you feel guilt or blame, talk about these feelings — whether they are real or imagined. Allow yourself to accept that you did the best you could in the situation.
- Journal about your feelings to process your thoughts and emotions. Or express yourself in other ways such as movement, music, or painting.
- Write a letter to your loved one to share how you feel.
- Allow yourself permission to have tough days or days that require more rest.
- Avoid making major decisions (like changing jobs, selling property or moving).
- Clean out your loved one’s belongings when the time feels right. Don’t force this action too early.
- Find a bereavement support group. It will provide you emotional support, and you will provide support to others.
- Consider counseling. A professional can help you learn ways to cope. Most insurance plans cover a certain amount of counseling services.
- Seek out joy; it is OK! Socialize with friends and family, engage in community activities, watch uplifting or funny movies. Healthy forms of distraction can provide much-needed breaks from grieving.



COPING WITH SUDDEN LOSS

The sudden or violent death of a loved one may be one of life's most painful experiences. Initially, you may feel:

- Disbelief and shock
- Extreme sadness
- Anger at the situation, at the loved one who died and at yourself
- Guilt or regret for outliving your loved one, or what you did or didn't say to your loved one

You may also experience physical reactions such as:

- Uncontrolled screaming
- Fainting
- Body aches and pains
- Vomiting or shaking

If you have a sudden loss, breathe and reach out to your support system or spirituality. Take life one day, one hour or one minute at a time. You will be overwhelmed and fatigued as you process what has happened. Allow all your emotions to come to the surface. Do not suppress them.

Seek out support. You will need it. Finally, be patient with yourself during this difficult time.

Helping Someone with Sudden Death

It can be hard to know what to do when someone experiences a sudden loss. However, you can be an important presence during this time. Here are some ways to help:

- Be present. Just being with the person can be incredibly helpful.
- Say something. Simply saying, "I am sorry this is happening" or "I don't know what to say" is completely appropriate. Then listen.
- Give the person space. Some people need to be left alone initially, or they may just need a private space to cry or scream. Follow their lead.
- Don't say you understand — you don't, even if you've been through something similar.
- Don't offer advice. Your loved one may be in shock and will not hear you.
- Understand the person's life will never be the same. Be sensitive and offer support.
- Offer practical help such as meal prep, running errands and child care.
- If you have personal or similar experiences, offer them after asking permission. It may be very hard to hear others' experiences even if they are similar.

FEELING GRIEF WHEN THERE WAS ABUSE IN THE RELATIONSHIP

Grief can be complex when you have mixed feelings about the person who died. People are often surprised when they feel grief at the death of an abusive partner or parent. Grief when the loss is related to drug abuse or alcohol can also be complicated. You might feel blindsided by the intense sadness of grief when the person who is gone caused you so much pain. Your friends and family might also be uncertain how to respond. They might not understand your grief because they think you are better off. It helps to acknowledge that even when there has been abuse, there is still loss:

“When somebody says, ‘My son died,’ the natural follow-up question almost universally is ‘What happened?’ — and the answer is, ‘My son died of a heroin overdose.’ Well, all of the oxygen can go right out of the room. People can react very badly to that even if it’s silently.”
Franklin Cook, Peer Grief Helper.

- Loss of the good aspects of the person. Seldom is a person 100% bad all the time.
- Loss of time. You may become acutely aware of how much of your life was lost dealing with the relationship.
- Loss of ever being able to understand why the abuse happened.
- Loss of hope and any chance for future healing.

Tips for dealing with grief when there was abuse are:

- Acknowledge that it is okay to feel relief, sadness, guilt and anger.
- Challenge inaccurate thinking that causes you pain.
- Do grief work to unravel the complexity of emotions.

The death of an abuser or addicted loved one does not necessarily end the suffering they caused. Use the death to motivate you to address issues that you continue to experience. A professional counselor can help you deal with the troublesome thoughts and strong feelings that are a natural part of losing someone who caused you pain.

“For every individual, grieving loss can look and feel different given the nature of the relationship. Death can act as a trigger of the trauma someone has endured,” says Verna Griffin-Tabor, CEO and executive director of the Center for Community Solutions, a California-based organization with a mission to stop violence against women.



CHILDREN & GRIEF

Children cope with grief differently. They feel many of the same emotions, but they express these feelings in a different way. It's not unusual for children to cry one minute and play the next.

While it can be tough to tell a child about a loved one's death, it is important to tell them the truth. Not doing so or giving inaccurate or incomplete information can cause imaginations to fill in the blanks, making what they don't know scarier than the loss of a loved one.



Explain the death in a natural, conversational style, since death is a natural part of life. Provide as much honest information about death, or the death of their loved one as a child can handle or process. The more a child is taught early on about death and its part of the natural life cycle, the less the child will fear death. By shielding a child from death or the rituals of mourning and grief, children perceive death as taboo, shrouded in mystery and fear.

Teach the child that “dead” means not moving, breathing, seeing or feeling. Very small children might grasp the term “all gone” or “no more.”

Be prepared for questions. Children absorb concepts slowly, so expect to repeat many of the same responses. And know children grieve for short amounts of time, but they return to the process again and again. They cannot sustain prolonged periods of grief that an adult can tolerate.

Just because children don't talk about the death of their loved one doesn't always mean they are handling the death inappropriately. Encouraging a child to speak or ask questions about the death is OK. Every child will handle grief differently.

Death can bring up basic fears of abandonment for children. Assure children you will be there to support and love them. It's also helpful to distinguish the differences between common illness and serious disease to help them better understand death.

When it comes to saying goodbye to a loved one, allow children to do this in a way that feels right to them. Let them decide if they will attend the funeral or memorial by offering information and encouragement. If they choose to attend, prepare them for what they will experience by giving simple, concrete examples. Pair the child with an adult he or she is familiar with in case the child needs to leave early or take a break from the event. Snacks, paper and crayons, and other small activities can help children greatly during occasions like funerals.

You can also help children cope with grief by:

- Sharing your own feelings
- Encouraging tears
- Responding to the child's feelings honestly and gently
- Allowing time for children to mourn and listening to their words
- Allowing children to be involved in family rituals of bereavement
- Letting kids help fulfill the needs of the surrounding adults
- Discussing the details of the funeral service (where it will be, what it will look like, etc.)

Do not:

- Attempt to hide your feelings and emotions
- Fail to recognize behavior problems as they may be transferred emotions
- Tell half-truths or lies about death
- Preach a theological sermon
- Imply that death is a temporary situation with words like "sleeping" or "gone away"
- Blame God
- Leave explanations incomplete by saying something like, "He was sick"

Source: Beyond Loss Bereavement, Rev. Alice Parsons Zulli, FT, BCPC

Mourner's Bill of Rights

As a grieving person, you have the right to:

- Experience your own unique grief
- Talk about your grief
- Feel a multitude of emotions
- Be tolerant of your physical and emotional limits
- Experience "grief-bursts"
- Make use of ritual
- Embrace your spirituality
- Search for meaning
- Treasure your memories
- Move toward your grief and healing

– *Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.*



ANNIVERSARIES & HOLIDAYS

Anniversaries and holidays can be especially difficult when you lose a loved one. Being prepared can help you better navigate the emotions that often come up during these important days.

PREPARING FOR ANNIVERSARIES

“I can’t see you now, but I can feel the wonder of you in my heart. A whole year has gone by since you died.

I have managed somehow to let the days advance without you. Some have been long, bleak and seemed endless. There have been nights without sleep, lying numb trying not to feel my pain.

Friends, family, co-workers, and the clergy have offered help and advice, but they don’t know how I feel. I can’t tell them how angry I was at you when you died. There were so many things left unsaid, undone.”



This is part of a letter a wife wrote on the anniversary of her husband’s death. The one-year anniversary of a loved one’s death is not a magic number for grief to disappear. We often put expectations on timeframes and think we should be better by that date. Sometimes we even scold ourselves because we are still struggling. Don’t do it.

Grief is untamed and does not behave as we expect it.

Just because a year has passed, doesn’t mean you should stop the grieving — and healing process. Continue connecting with the people and activities that are helping you. Giving yourself permission to be a survivor doesn’t diminish the loss of a loved one. Be gentle with yourself and try to avoid feeling guilty for finding comfort in things you enjoy.

It’s important to take time to rest and honor your feelings. A good diet, a long walk, reading, listening to music — these and other activities might be part of your self-care to keep you balanced. They should continue long after a year has passed.

A new normal during the holidays

The holidays — traditionally times of joy, sharing and gift-giving — can bring a wealth of mixed emotions when you lose a loved one. This might include feelings of loneliness, the wish to carry on and being overwhelmed by multiple demands. You may also feel a sense of disappointment that holidays are not as happy as society promises. To help yourself through these times of year, come up with ways to take care of yourself during this vulnerable time as the holidays approach.

Recognize there is no right or wrong way to grieve. We are all individuals. Another person cannot know the depth of our feelings and cannot make judgments. Whatever emotions emerge for you are OK.

Once we acknowledge our pain, healing begins, and eventually, the dips of sadness lessen, and the number of high spots exceeds the low ones. You will regain life's usual activities while adding new ones. But keep in mind that the hills and valleys of grief are normal. And just like you will feel better, don't be surprised if a hollow feeling arises at unexpected times. Above all, be kind to yourself.

This checklist can also help you:

- Holiday memories are complex and may hold a mix of laughs and tears. Make room for both during the holiday season.
- Delete the word “should” from your vocabulary. Honor your heart by choosing activities that are meaningful and supportive to you.
- Consider what traditions to continue and which to set aside for the year.
- Ask what aspect or tradition makes each holiday meaningful and build holiday plans to include these “special” considerations.
- Remember that holidays are really found in the heart. Listen to your own heart to determine what may bring you comfort, calm or a sense of reassurance that life is good.
- Choose activities that bring you peace and joy — not strain and chaos.
- Do a few things rather than many, so you can take your time.
- Consider adding a new ritual to connect old traditions to your new reality.

Source: Grief: Climb Toward Understanding, Phyllis Davies

SELF-CARE WHILE GRIEVING

Finding ways to take care of yourself is an important process of grieving. Some people choose very active methods, like exercise. Others lean toward more emotional, reflective activities. Whatever you choose, the important thing is to find tools that are useful for you and your loved ones. Try these tips:

- **Eat healthy meals.** Food is energy. A healthy diet will help propel you forward.
- **Find a private place.** Spend time alone to restore your body, mind and soul. Take a walk by the creek, find a shady tree in the park or designate a special place in your home.
- **Talk it out.** This can be one of the most healing actions you can take. Share your grief with those you trust: a counselor, friend, religious adviser or within a support group.
- **Help others.** Become a “wounded healer.” Helping others in pain helps you feel better and helps heal your own pain.
- **Learn to laugh again.** It is not disloyal to laugh and enjoy yourself. Rediscovering your sense of humor makes you feel alive again and connects you to yourself. Rent a funny movie, treat yourself to a matinee or read a humorous book.
- **Be gentle with yourself.** We are often our own worst critic and expect more from ourselves than we do from others. Remember, going through the grieving process and time are what will heal you.
- **Find restorative activities.** Do something you enjoy. Garden, read, go for a swim, play basketball or participate in a long-forgotten hobby.
- **Cry it out.** This is both a pain reliever and a stress reducer. Let the tears flow to cleanse away some of your pain.

When a loved one dies, your life changes. But that does not mean life can't be meaningful again.

“Tears are like rain. They loosen up our soil, so we can grow in different directions.”

–Virginia Casey



RESOURCES

Want more information on grief and coping? These resources can help:

Enloe Regional Cancer Center Library

The Enloe Regional Cancer Center Library offers a number of materials related to grieving, dying and explaining death to children, including these:

- “Bearing the Unbearable: Love, Loss, and the Heartbreaking Path of Grief” by Joanne Cacciatore
- “The Grief Recovery Handbook” by John W. James and Russell Friedman
- “When Men Grieve: Why Men Grieve Differently & How You Can Help” by Elizabeth Levang, Ph.D.

The library also has materials for teens and children, including “Healing Your Grieving Heart for Kids: 100 Practical Ideas” by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., and “Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss” by Pat Schwiebert and Chuck DeKlyen.

Enloe Bereavement Resource Sheet

Ask for this resource sheet or get it online at www.enloe.org/support, under Bereavement Support.

Survivor’s Checklist

Ask your Enloe case manager or social worker for a copy of this helpful list of tasks to do when someone dies. Includes lists of people and public offices that should be informed of the death, important documents to complete, and other tasks to manage.

Websites

- Grief.com | www.grief.com/group-resources
- The Dougy Center | www.dougy.org
- Hospice Foundation of America | www.hospicefoundation.org
- Dying Matters | www.dyingmatters.org/page/resources-coping-bereavement



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