



# Coping With The Loss Of A Loved One

## Grief, mourning, and bereavement

When a person loses someone important to them, they go through a normal process called *grieving*. Grieving is natural and should be expected. Over time, it can allow the person to accept and understand their loss. Grieving involves feeling many different emotions over time, all of which help the person come to terms with the loss of a loved one.

*Bereavement* is what a person goes through when someone close to them dies. It is the state of having suffered a loss. *Mourning* is the outward expression of loss and grief. Mourning includes rituals and other actions that are specific to each person's culture, personality, and religion. Bereavement and mourning are both part of the grieving process.

## Phases of grief

Many people think of grief as a single instance or short time of pain or sadness in response to a loss -- like the tears shed at a loved one's funeral. But grieving is the entire emotional process of coping with a loss and can last a long time. Normal grieving allows us to let a loved one go and keep on living in a healthy way. Although grieving is painful, it is important that those who have suffered a loss be allowed to express their grief, and that they be supported throughout the process. The way each person grieves for a loved one will be different. The length and intensity of the emotions people go through will also vary from person to person.

It is normal for people to feel better for a while, only to become sad again. Sometimes, people wonder how long the grieving process will last for them, and when they can expect some relief. There is no one answer to this question, but some of the factors that affect the intensity and length of your grieving are:

- The kind of relationship you had with the person who died
- The circumstances of their death
- Your own life experiences

Researchers have studied grief to better understand the ways people work through a loss and over time come to accept it. They have identified phases, or emotional states, that people may go through while grieving. The first phase includes a period of shock or numbness. This phase begins to fade as the person sees how his or her life is affected by the loss and emotions start to surface. The early shock and numbness is often replaced by emotional upheaval, which can involve anger, loneliness, disbelief, or denial over a long period of time. The final phase of grief is the one in which people find a way to come to terms with and accept the loss.

## **The first phase of grief**

Often, a person's first reaction to a loss is one of shock, disbelief, and numbness. This can last anywhere from a few hours to days or weeks. During this time, the bereaved person may feel emotionally "shut off" from the world. Still, the numbness may be disturbed by waves of distress, which are often triggered by reminders of the deceased. At these times of distress, the person may feel agitated or weak, cry, engage in aimless activities, or be preoccupied with thoughts or images of the person they lost.

The rituals of mourning -- receiving friends, preparing for the funeral, and burial -- often structure this time for people. They are seldom left alone. Sometimes the sense of numbness lasts through these activities, leaving the person feeling as though they are just "going through the motions" of these rituals.

## **The second phase of grief**

At some point the reality of the loss starts to sink in, and the numbness wears off. This phase of grief, sometimes called confrontation, is when the feelings of loss are most intense and painful. It is during this phase that the person must face the loss and start to cope with the changes the loss causes in their lives.

People have many different ways of dealing with loss, so this phase can involve many different, equally intense emotions. During this time, grief tends to come in waves of distress. The person may seem disorganized. He or she may have trouble remembering, thinking, and doing day-to-day activities. This phase can vary in length, lasting for weeks to months. Some or all of the following may be seen in a person who is grieving. The person may:

- Withdraw socially
- Have trouble thinking and concentrating
- Become restless and anxious at times
- Not feel like eating
- Look sad
- Feel depressed
- Dream of the deceased (or even have hallucinations or "visions" in which the person briefly hears or sees the deceased)
- Lose weight
- Have trouble sleeping
- Feel tired or weak
- Become preoccupied with death or events surrounding death

- Search for reasons for the loss (sometimes with results that make no sense to others)
- Dwell on mistakes, real or imagined, that he or she made with the deceased
- Feel somehow guilty for the loss
- Feel all alone and distant from others
- Express anger or envy at seeing others with their loved ones

It is often during this time that a grieving person needs the most emotional support. Finding support can be the key to a person's recovery and acceptance of the loss. Sources of support can be family members, friends, support groups, community organizations, or mental health professionals (therapists or counselors).

### **The third phase of grief**

The first and second phases of grief help people come to terms with the death by recognizing what the loss means to them in day-to-day life and feeling the pain of grief. Usually, the person comes to accept the loss slowly over the months that follow it. The third phase of grief is acceptance. It includes adjusting to daily life without the deceased. Like the first and second phases, acceptance does not happen overnight. It is common for it to take as long as a year or more for someone to resolve the emotional and life changes that come with the death of a loved one. The pain may become less intense, but it is normal to feel emotionally involved with the deceased for many years after their death. In time, the person should be able to reclaim the emotional energy that was invested in the relationship with the deceased, and use it in other relationships.

### **Getting through the phases of grief**

The grieving process can be very painful and difficult for people who have lost someone close to them. Bereavement counseling is a special type of professional help. You may be able to find it through hospice services or a referral from a health care provider (doctor, nurse, or social worker). This type of counseling has been shown to reduce the level of distress that mourners go through after the death of their loved one. It can help them move more easily through the phases of grief. Bereavement counseling can also help them adjust to their new lives without the deceased.

Still, adjustment does not mean that all the pain is over for those who were very close to the deceased. Grieving for someone who was close to you includes losing the future you expected with that person. This must also be mourned. The sense of loss can last for decades. For example, years after a parent dies, the bereaved may be reminded of the parent's absence at an event he or she would have been expected to attend. This can bring back strong emotions, and may call for mourning yet another part of the loss.

## Grief after loss due to a long illness

The grief experience may be different when the loss occurs after a long illness rather than suddenly. When someone is terminally ill, family and friends often start to grieve before the death because they know that they will lose their loved one. This is called "anticipatory grief" and it is a normal response. It helps to prepare them for the actual loss.

Usually, the period just before the person's death is a time of physical and emotional preparation for those close to them. At this stage, loved ones may feel the urge to withdraw emotionally from the person who is ill.

Many people think they are prepared for the loss because death is expected. But when their loved one actually dies, it can still be a shock and bring about unexpected feelings of sadness and loss. For most people, the actual death starts the normal grieving process.

## Major depression and complicated grief

### Depression

It is common for people to have sadness, pain, anger, bouts of crying, and a depressed mood after a loved one dies. It is important to know about normal grief responses so that you can know if the bereaved person might be getting worse -- going into a major depression.

About 1 in 5 bereaved people will develop major depression (also called *clinical depression*). This condition can often be helped by therapy and medicines. People at highest risk for clinical depression include those who have been depressed before, those with no support system, those who have had problems with alcohol or drug abuse, or those who have other major life stresses. Symptoms of major depression not explained by normal bereavement may include:

*Constant thoughts of being worthless or hopeless*

*Ongoing thoughts of death or suicide (other than thoughts that they would be better off dead or should have died with their loved one)*

*Being unable to perform day-to-day activities*

*Intense guilt over things done or not done at the time of the loved one's death*

*Delusions (beliefs that are not true)*

*Hallucinations (hearing voices or seeing things that are not there), except for "visions" in which the person briefly hears or sees the deceased*

*Slower body responses and reactions*

*Extreme weight loss*

If symptoms like these last more than 2 months after the loss, the bereaved person is likely to benefit from professional help.

In some people, the grieving process can go on for a long time. This happens more often in those who were very close to the deceased. It is most often caused by attempts to deny or get away from the pain or trying to avoid letting go.

## Complicated grief

If normal mourning does not occur, or if the mourning goes on for a long time without any progress, it is called "complicated grief" or "unresolved grief." Symptoms of this may include:

- Continued disbelief in the death of the loved one
- Being unable to accept the death
- Flashbacks, nightmares, memories that keep intruding into thoughts over time
- Severe and prolonged grief symptoms: anger, sadness, or depression
- Keeping a fantasy relationship with the deceased with the feeling that he or she is always present and watching
- Continuous yearning and searching for the deceased
- Unusual symptoms that seem unrelated to the death (physical symptoms, strange or abnormal behavior)
- Breaking off all ties to social contact

For some people who are taking care of a loved one with a long-term illness, complicated grief can actually start while their loved one is still alive. Caregivers under severe stress, especially if the caregiver's outlook is bleak, may be at higher risk of having abnormal grief even before the death.

If you or anyone close to the deceased has any of the above symptoms of major depression or complicated grief, talk with a qualified health or mental health professional. Treatment is important, since people with complicated grief are at risk of their emotional illness getting worse, and are at higher risk of committing suicide.

## Coping with loss

Ideally, the bereaved person will work through the process of grieving. With time and support, they will accept and make sense of the loss, work through the pain, and adjust to a new life and identity.

If you or someone you know has lost a loved one, the following tips may help you cope with the loss:

- Let yourself feel the pain and all the other emotions, too. Don't tell yourself how to feel or let others tell you how you should feel.
- Be patient with the process. Don't pressure yourself with expectations. Accept that you need to experience your pain, your emotions, and your own way of healing -- all in your own time. Don't judge your emotions or compare yourself to others. Remember that no one else can tell you how you should mourn and when to stop.
- Express your feelings. Let yourself cry. Both are needed for healing.
- Get support. Talk about your loss, your memories, and your experience of the life and death of your loved one. Do not think you are protecting your family and friends by not expressing your sadness. Ask others for what you need. Find and talk to others who have lost a loved one.
- Try to maintain your normal lifestyle. Do not make any major life changes (for example, moving, changing jobs, changing important relationships) within the first year of bereavement. This will allow you to keep your roots and some sense of security.
- Take care of yourself. Eat well and exercise. Physical activity is a good way to release tension. Allow yourself small physical pleasures that help you renew yourself, like hot baths, naps, and favorite foods.
- Avoid drinking too much alcohol or using other drugs. This can harm your body as well as dull your emotions. It is likely to slow your recovery and may cause new problems.
- Forgive yourself for all the things you said or didn't say or do. Compassion and forgiveness for yourself and others is important in healing.
- Give yourself a break from grief. Although you must work through grief, you do not need to focus on it all the time. It is healthy to find distractions like going to a movie, dinner, or a ball game; reading a good book; listening to music; or getting a massage or manicure.
- Prepare for holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries knowing that strong feelings may come back. Decide if you want to keep certain traditions or create new ones. Plan in advance how you want to spend your time and with whom. Do something to honor the memory of your loved one.
- Join a bereavement support group. Other people can encourage, guide, and comfort you. They can also offer practical advice and information, and help you feel less alone. If you can't find a group near you, online groups may be helpful.

When you feel ready, do something creative. Some options include:

- Write a letter to the person who died to say everything you wish you could say to them
- Start keeping a journal

- Make a scrapbook
- Paint pictures
- Plant flowers or trees
- Involve yourself in a cause or activity that the deceased loved

## Family changes

When a loved one dies, it affects all their family members and loved ones. Each family finds its own ways of coping with death. A family's attitudes and reactions are shaped by cultural and spiritual values as well as by the relationships among family members. It will take time for a bereaved family to regain its balance.

The ability of each member to grieve with one another is important in helping the family cope. Each person will experience the loss differently and have different needs. As hard as it may be, it is important for family members to remain open and honest when talking with each other. This is not the time for family members to hide their grief to protect one another.

The loss of one person in a family means that roles in the family will change. Family members will need to discuss the effects of this change and the shift in responsibilities. This time of change is stressful for everyone. This is a time to be even more gentle and patient with each other.

## Helping someone who is grieving

It is common to feel awkward when trying to comfort someone who is grieving. Many people don't know what to say or do. Use the following tips as a guide.

### What to say

- Acknowledge the situation. Example: "I heard that your\_\_\_\_\_ died." Use the word "died." This shows that you are more open to talk about how the person really feels.
- Express your concern. Example: "I'm sorry to hear that this happened to you."
- Be genuine and don't hide your feelings. Example: "I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care."
- Offer your support. Example: "Tell me what I can do for you."
- Ask how the bereaved person feels and listen to the answer. Don't assume you know how they will feel on any given day.

## What to do

- Be there. Even if you don't know what to say, just having someone near can be very comforting.
- Listen and give support. But do not try to force someone if they are not ready to talk.
- Be a good listener. Accept whatever feelings the person expresses rather than telling them how they should cope with the loss. Never tell them how they should feel.
- Give reassurance without minimizing the loss. Try to have empathy with the person without assuming you know exactly how they feel.
- Offer to help with errands, shopping, housework, cooking, driving, or yard work. Sometimes people want help and sometimes they don't. Although they may not take you up on your offer, remember they are not rejecting you or your friendship.
- Avoid telling the person "You're so strong." This puts pressure on the person to hold in feelings and keep acting "strong."
- Continue to offer support even after the first shock wears off. Recovery takes a long time.
- It may help to check in with the bereaved on anniversaries of the death, marriage, and birthday of the deceased, since those can be especially difficult.

If the grieving person begins to abuse alcohol or drugs, neglects personal hygiene, develops physical problems, or talks about suicide, it may be a sign of complicated grief or depression. You or someone close to them should talk to them about getting professional help.

If you believe someone is thinking about suicide, do not leave him or her alone. Try to get the person to get help from their doctor or the nearest hospital emergency room right away. If that is not possible, call 911. If you can safely do so, remove firearms and other tools for suicide.

## Grief in children

It is a very common myth that children cannot understand the meaning of death. How old a child is at the time of the death is important because a child's understanding of death changes with age. Preschool children usually think death is short term and reversible. Between the ages of 5 and 9, they understand that the person is gone, but see it more as a separation. After about ages 9 or 10, they begin to understand that death is final.

Children grieve. They just don't have all the ways to cope that adults do. They often have feelings like sadness, anger, guilt, insecurity, and anxiety. Children sometimes show anger toward surviving family members. They may start having behavior or discipline problems. They may think the death is their fault, especially if they had once "wished" the person dead. Or they may start having nightmares or acting younger than their age.

Sometimes they may seem unaffected by the loss and then express grief at unexpected moments.

## Talking to children about death

It is hard to comfort others when you are deep in your own grief. Parents may not want to talk to their children about death because they don't want to upset them. Or they may not want to worsen their own pain. But talking about death will help children deal with their fears.

Children's responses to death are often very different from adults'. Sometimes a child's feelings or questions about death may seem inappropriate or upsetting. But it is important to recognize that they are also trying to understand and accept what has happened. You can help them by listening and showing interest in what they have to say. Answer whatever questions they may have as openly and honestly as you can. Telling children that someone "went away" or is "sleeping" can lead to confusion and fear. If you tell a small child that sickness caused the death, it is important to explain that only serious sicknesses cause death. With small children, it may be helpful to talk about dead flowers, insects, or birds, as a way to explain death.

You may want to use the following tips when talking to a child about death:

- Explain what happened in a way they can understand. Children know when you are hiding something, so be honest.
- Encourage them to talk. Listen and accept their feelings no matter how hard it may be.
- Answer their questions in brief and simple terms. Telling them they are too young to understand only avoids dealing with the problem and may be even more upsetting for them. It is OK not to have all the answers.
- Reassure them that they will still be loved and taken care of.
- Show affection, support, and consistency. Let them know that you will be there to help as much as possible.
- Tell them how you feel, using words they will understand and in a way that won't be overwhelming. For example, it is OK to let them know that you hurt too. If you try to hide your feelings, they may think they shouldn't share theirs.

## Children and funerals

Years ago, people believed that children should not go to funerals because it would be too hard for them, they were too young to understand, or they would be frightened by other people's distress. Since then, it has been learned that this is not true. Children have later said they often felt betrayed when they could not say good-bye to someone they loved. They felt that their relationship with the person who died was not valued; that death was

not a natural part of life, but instead something too frightening to confront; and that they were emotionally not able to cope.

Attending the funeral helps children understand that death is final. Explain to children that a funeral is the way we say good-bye to the people we love. Depending on their age, attention span, and how much adult supervision they need, children may take part in all of the ritual or only some of it.

If children will be at the funeral, they should be prepared for what they will see and hear. Tell them what to expect. If there will be a viewing with an open casket, the child needs to know that. Depending on how young they are, it might be useful to talk about what it means to be dead. Explain that people will come to the funeral home to visit with the family and offer their sympathy. Also explain any other routines or rituals that will be followed. If there is a religious service, describe what will happen there. Tell them if there will be a trip to a cemetery where the casket will be placed in the ground and covered up. They should know that they may see people cry, and that it is OK. They will see the normal expressions of how people feel when they lose someone important to them. Seeing this gives children permission to express their own emotions.

Whatever social ritual may happen afterward should also be explained. Children sometimes have a hard time understanding what looks like a party after services where people looked pretty sad. Explain that people can't be sad all the time and there will be other times when the sadness will come back. Children also should expect that the sadness we feel when someone has died can last a while, but eases as time goes on.

Children usually want to take part in this ritual with their family. If they seem frightened by what they imagine a funeral to be, they probably have a false impression or misunderstanding about it. It is a rare child who does not want to take part in something that the whole family is doing, but if they don't, try to find out any mistaken beliefs the child may have. For example, the child may not fully understand the transition from life to death and worry that the person is still alive when they are put into the ground. Remind them again what being dead means and that the person as you knew them is no longer here.

## **Losing a child**

Facing the death of a child may be the hardest thing a parent ever has to do. People who have lost a child have stronger grief reactions. They often have more anger, guilt, physical symptoms, greater depression, and a loss of meaning and purpose in life. A loss is tragic at any age, but the sense of unfairness of a life unfulfilled magnifies the anger and rage felt by parents.

A longer and slower bereavement and recovery should be expected when someone loses a child. The grief may get worse with time as the parents see others going through the milestones they expected to pass with their child.

## Getting support

Bereaved parents may especially be helped by a grief support group. These groups may be available in the local community. You can ask your child's cancer care team for referral to counseling or local groups. You can also contact Compassionate Friends, a nationwide self-help organization offering support to families who have experienced the death of a child, of any age, from any cause. It publishes a newsletter and other materials on parent and sibling bereavement. Compassionate Friends also refers people to more than 600 meeting locations around the country (see "Additional resources"). Online support groups, such as those at GriefNet (see the "Additional resources" section) can be another way to connect with others.

## Additional resources

### More information from your American Cancer Society

The following related information may also be helpful to you. These materials may be ordered from our toll-free number, 1-800-227-2345.

Helping Children When a Family Member Has Cancer: Dealing with a Parent's Terminal Illness

Helping Children When a Family Member Has Cancer: When a Child Has Lost a Parent  
Resources for Parents and Families Who Have Lost a Child to Cancer

Anxiety, Fear, and Depression

### National organizations and Web sites\*

Along with the American Cancer Society, other sources of information and support include:

#### **Candlelighters Childhood Cancer Foundation**

Toll-free number: 1-800-366-2223

Web site: [www.candlelighters.org](http://www.candlelighters.org)

Information on childhood cancer, and links to online support, such as a group for parents who have lost a child to cancer

#### **The Centering Corporation**

Toll-free number: 1-866-218-0101

Web site: [www.centering.org](http://www.centering.org)

Information and resources for grieving adults, children who have lost parents, and more

**The Compassionate Friends**

Toll-free number: 1-877-969-0010

Web site: [www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org)

For those coping with the death of a child

**The Dougy Center**

Toll-free number: 1-866-775-5683

Web site: [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)

Information on grieving, and referrals to local programs that serve grieving children, teens and their families

**GriefNet**

Web site for adults: [www.griefnet.org](http://www.griefnet.org)

Web site for children: <http://kidsaid.com>

Offers online groups for grief support, with a special sub-site for children

**Hospice Net**

Web site: [www.hospicenet.org](http://www.hospicenet.org)

Information for bereaved, caregivers, family, and people with terminal illnesses

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA)**

Mental Health Information Center

Web site: <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/>

Has different types of help and support for mental health issues; see below:

**National Mental Health Information Center Clearinghouse**

Toll-free number: 1-877-726-4727

TTY: 1-866-889-2647

**National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI)**

Toll-free number: 1-800-729-6686

TTY: 1-800-487-4889

Spanish toll-free number: 1-877-767-8432

International phone number: 1-240-221-4017

Suicide Prevention Hotline:

Toll-free number: 1-800-273-TALK

**National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA)**

Toll-free number: 1-800-228-6332

Web site: [www.nfda.org/consumerresources.php](http://www.nfda.org/consumerresources.php)

Grief resources and funeral planning information

You may also want to contact your local hospice or hospital for bereavement support groups in your area.

*\*Inclusion on this list does not imply endorsement by the American Cancer Society*

## Other publications\*

*A Grief Observed* by C. S. Lewis. Published by Bantam Books, 1983.

*Beyond Grief: A Guide for Recovering from the Death of a Loved One* by Carol Staudacher. Published by New Harbinger Publications, 1987.

*Grieving: How to Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies* by Theresa A. Rando. Published by Lexington Books, 1995.

*Living With Death and Dying* by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. Published by MacMillan, 1997.

*Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss*. Edelman, Published by Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1994.

*On Death and Dying* by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. Published by Collier Books, 1997.

### Books for parents

*After the Death of a Child: Living With Loss Through the Years* by Ann K. Finkbeiner. Published by Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

*Bereaved Children and Teens: A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals* by Earl A. Grollman. Published by Beacon Press, 1996.

*The Bereaved Parent* by Harriet Sarnoff Schiff. Published by Penguin, 1977..

*Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies* by William J. Worden. Published by Guilford Press, 1996

*Grieving: How to Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies* by Theresa A. Rando. Published by Lexington Books, 1995.

*On Children and Death: How Children and Their Parents Can and Do Cope With Death* by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. Published by Collier, 1997.

*35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child*, by the Dougy Center Staff. Published by The Dougy Center, 1999.

*When the Bough Breaks: Forever After the Death of a Son or Daughter* by Judith R. Bernstein. Published by Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1998.

### Books for children

*A Child's Book About Death* by Earl Grollman. Published by the Centering Corporation. 2001. Ages 6 and up.

Daddy's Promise by Cindy Klein Cohen, John T. Heiney, & Michael J. Gordon. Published by Promise Publications, 1997. Ages 4-8

*Don't Despair on Thursdays! The Children's Grief Management Book* by Adolph Moser and David Melton. Published by Landmark Editions, 1996. Ages: 9-12.

*The Dying and Bereaved Teenager* by John D. Morgan, editor. Published by The Charles Press, 1998. Ages 12 and up.

*Everett Anderson's Goodbye* by Lucille Clifton. Published by Henry Holt & Co., 1988. Ages 4-8.

*The Fall of Freddie the Leaf: A Story of Life for All Ages* by Leo Buscaglia. Published by Henry Holt & Co, 1982. Ages 4-8.

How it Feels When a Parent Dies by Jill Krementz. Published by Knopf, 1988. Ages 7 to 17.

A Quilt for Elizabeth by Bennette W Tiffault. Published by Centering Corporation, 1992. Ages 6-11.

*The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* by Judith Viorst. Published by MacMillan Publishing, 1987. Ages 4 and up.

When Your Grandparent Dies: A Child's Guide to Good Grief (Elf-Help Books for Kids) by Victoria Ryan and Robert W. Alley. Published by Abbey Press, 2002. Ages 4 to 8.

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No matter who you are, we can help. Contact us anytime, day or night, for information and support. Call us at **1-800-227-2345** or visit [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org).

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