



Working through Grief



University of Findlay

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Grief is personal and individual, and every person experiences its nuances differently. Your personality, your support system, your natural coping mechanisms and many other things will determine how loss will affect you. There are no rules, no timetables, and no linear progression. Some people feel better after a few weeks or months, and for others it may take years. And in the midst of recovery there may be setbacks — this nonlinear process can't be controlled. It's critical that you treat yourself with patience and compassion and allow the process to unfold.

Grief is often described in stages, though each stage may last for a different period of time — for some people, the stages may be briefer or longer than for others, and some people may not experience all of them. But acknowledging that you may experience some or all of these stages will help you understand what may be happening. And you should not pass judgment on yourself or allow others to — you have the right to grieve and to fully experience your grief. Your feelings are normal, and it's important to remember that at some point, it will get better. You may not get over your loss, but you will survive it.

Myths and facts about grief

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 “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: Grief should last about a year.

Fact: There is no right or wrong timeframe for grieving. How long it takes can differ from person to person.

Grief indicators, the common signs and symptoms of grief

Shock and disbelief: It's hard to accept a death. You may feel numb and question whether the loss really happened — this isn't unusual. Some have noted their initial reluctance to even notify others of a loss in case it turned out to be untrue. This is a normal reaction, as is still expecting someone to call or write or show up, even if intellectually you have accepted their death.

Sadness: Profound sadness is a universal experience, and can often lead to a feeling of aloneness or isolation. We sometimes believe that no one can understand the depth of our grief, which drives us deeper into sorrow.

Guilt: You may feel guilt over things you said or did — or those you didn't and felt you should have. In cases of suicide, many people question whether they could have changed the outcome somehow. Yet there is nothing that can stand in the way of death or a final decision made by someone else, and over time we have to acknowledge and accept that. Still, it's difficult to do in the early days or months of grieving.

Anger: Regardless of how someone we loved died, anger often comes into play. You may be angry with the person for not being here anymore, or with caregivers for not doing more. You may blame God or others. Or you may not be able to direct your anger against a specific source, but find that everyday, small injustices seem much bigger than they might have in the past. This is normal, and no one should tell you that you have to stop or let go of your anger — that will happen eventually as part of your process, on your own timeline.

Fear: A loss can trigger fear on many levels — fear of your own mortality, of losing those you love, of facing life without the person who has died. It can include fear of the future and the uncertainty you may now feel about your life’s plans, knowing that someone close to you has died.

Physical pain: We often think of grief as emotional, but it can manifest physically as well. Symptoms can include nausea, fatigue, lowered immunity, weight loss or gain, insomnia, aches and pains and more. Although it can be quite difficult, it’s important to do what you can to maintain your health during grief.

Types of Loss

Suffering after the death of a loved one is the most obvious form of mourning. But actually, people can mourn the loss of many things beyond a loved one's passing:

- The end of a long-term relationship
- The loss of a job or planned career path
- Deterioration in our health or the onset of a threatening medical diagnosis
- The loss of something valued, such as a home via natural disaster or financial problems
- Unexpected changes in our families or lives
- The prolonged absence of a loved one

Adult Grief

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT

REFERENCE: THERESE RANDO, PHD

Grief: You can expect that...

- your grief will take longer than most people think.
- your grief will take more energy than what you would have imagined.
- your grief will depend on how you perceive the loss.
- your grief will entail mourning not only for the actual person who died, but also for all the hopes, dreams and unfulfilled expectations you had with that person. You will also grieve for those needs that go unmet because of the death.
- you will grieve for what you have already lost and what you have lost for the future.
- you will grieve for many things symbolic and tangible, not just the death alone.
- your grief will resurrect old issues, emotions and unresolved conflicts from the past.
- your grief will create some identity confusion as a result of your major loss.
- your grief may cause you to begin a search for meaning and you may find yourself questioning your faith and/or philosophy of life.

You may...

- feel as though the loss isn't real, that it actually didn't occur.
- become obsessed with the death and experience an intense preoccupation with the deceased.
- have a need to recount things about your loved one and retell the events and experiences surrounding the death.
- feel a tightness in your throat or heaviness in your chest.
- have an empty feeling in your stomach and either lose your appetite or begin eating more.
- have difficulty sleeping and dream of your loved one frequently.
- feel as though you need to take care of the other people who are uncomfortable around you by politely not talking about your feelings of loss.
- sense the loved one's presence. You may find yourself expecting the person to walk in the door and the usual time, hear his/her voice or even see his/her face.
- experience grief spasms. These acute feelings of grief that occur suddenly with no warning. You may find you cry at unexpected times.
- have a combination of feelings ~ anger, guilt, frustration, irritability, annoyance, or intolerance with yourself and others.
- feel guilty or angry over things that happened or didn't happen in the relationship with the deceased.
- feel restless and look for activity, but find it difficult to concentrate.
- wander aimlessly around the house. You may find yourself disorganized, starting but not finishing tasks.
- feel your mood change over the slightest thing. You may wonder if you're going "crazy"?! (...You're not!)
- assume mannerisms or traits of your loved one.
- alternate between periods of seeking the company of others and withdrawing, preferring to be alone.

The Grieving Process



Grief: The natural emotional response resulting from a significant loss—especially the death of a loved one.

Everyone deals with grief differently. People cry, laugh, busy themselves with work, throw up, or even feel numb. Some recover quickly, while others take their time. Grief is a natural healing process, and there's no "right" way to do it.

For some people, grief can become *too* painful. It can grow into something totally different, like depression or anxiety. Other times, grief might last far too long, and take over a person's life for years on end. This is called **complicated grief**.



"Normal" grief varies greatly between cultures, people, and situations.



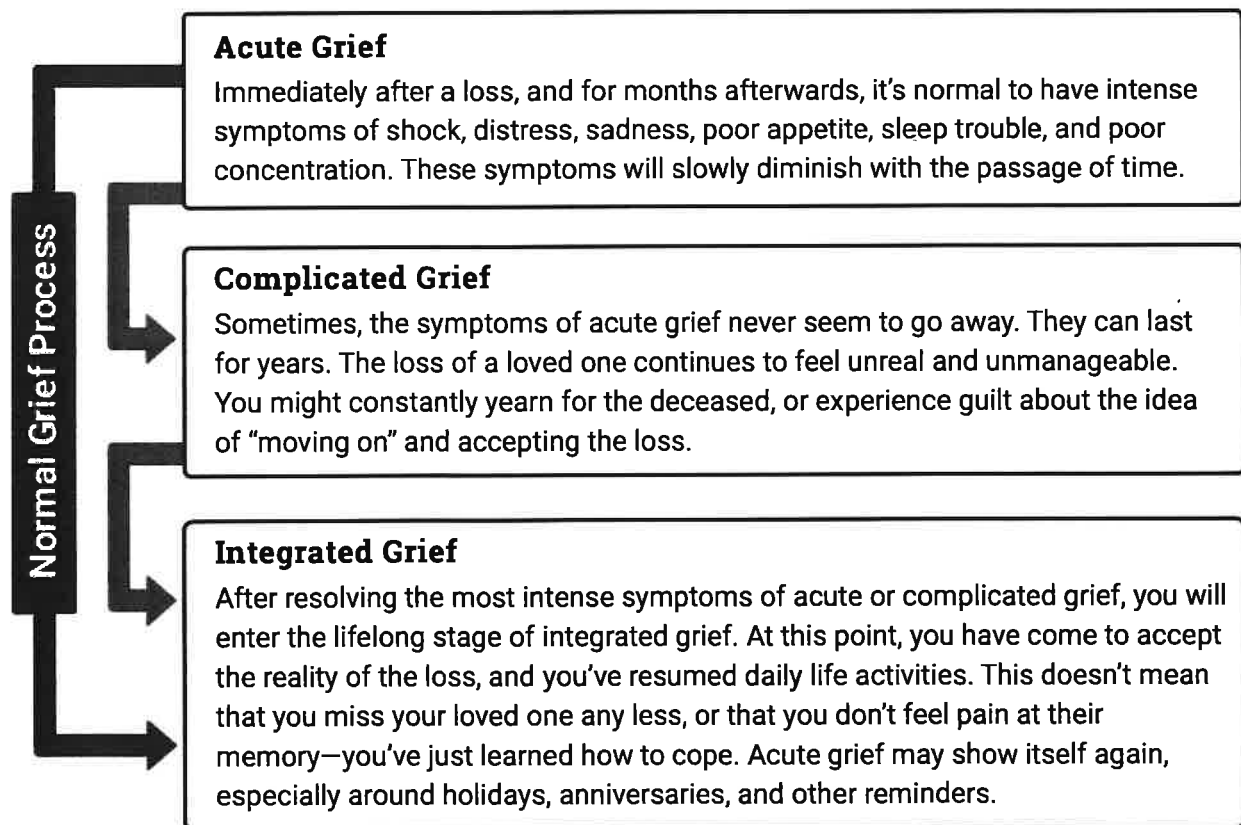
Grief is a natural process, and does not always require treatment.



About 10% of people develop complicated grief after a loss.



Complicated grief can be treated with psychotherapy.



The Stages of Grief

The Kübler-Ross model of grief (the five stages of grief) describes five primary responses to loss. These stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Someone who is grieving may go through these stages in any order, and they may return to previous stages.

Denial: "This can't be happening."

Individuals may refuse to accept the fact that a loss has occurred. They may minimize or outright deny the situation. It is suggested that loved ones and professionals be forward and honest about losses to not prolong the denial stage.

Anger: "Why is this happening to me?"

When an individual realizes that a loss has occurred, they may become angry at themselves or others. They may argue that the situation is unfair and try to place blame.

Bargaining: "I will do anything to change this."

In bargaining, the individual may try to change or delay their loss. For example, they may try to convince a partner to return after a breakup, or search for unlikely cures in the case of a terminal illness.

Depression: "What's the point of going on after this loss?"

At the stage of depression the individual has come to recognize that a loss has occurred or will occur. The individual may isolate themselves and spend time crying and grieving. Depression is a precursor to acceptance because the individual has come to recognize their loss.

Acceptance: "It's going to be okay."

Finally, the individual will come to accept their loss. They understand the situation logically, and they have come to terms emotionally with the situation.

COPING WITH GRIEF AND LOSS

Far from being a sign of weakness, grieving is a healthy and naturally healing process. While certain emotional responses are common, each person's grief is also individual, and may be experienced differently. Grief, with its many ups and downs, may last longer than most people expect or realize.

The best way to deal with a loss is to recognize it, face and accept your feelings and reactions, and get support during the grieving process.

Tips for Coping with Grief

- **Take your time and limit "shoulds". Don't judge your reactions.**
- **Talk. Share your feelings and the meaning this loss has for you.**
- **Pay attention to what your body needs. Exercise, adequate rest & sleep, and balanced nutrition are essential.**
- **Participate in meaningful rituals and ceremonies.**
- **Surround yourself with friends and family who love and support you. Don't isolate yourself.**
- **Be patient with yourself. Tears may come unexpectedly, even when you thought you were finished grieving.**
- **Consistently take time to grieve, as well as giving yourself breaks from the grieving process.**
- **Strive to find a balanced way of dealing with the demands of daily life.**
- **Whenever possible, put off major decisions (e.g., changing jobs, partners, or residences).**
- **Pray, meditate, reflect, and connect with your religious and spiritual convictions and community.**
- **Be sensitive to and flexible with your new needs and changes in lifestyle.**

Common Grief Reactions

Denial, shock, numbness, confusion

Fear, despair, helplessness, relief

Anger and guilt (which may be misdirected)

Sadness, loneliness, tearfulness, depression, regret

Diminished feelings of safety; increased feelings of vulnerability

Disturbances in normal patterns of sleeping and eating

Fatigue, apathy, social withdrawal

Feelings of physical pain (e.g., chest pain)

Feelings of unfinished business or survivor's guilt

NOT having a strong emotional reaction

Both positive and grief-related memories and feelings

Beginning of re-engagement with life

Continuing adjustment to life changes

Gradual lessening of feelings of grief and acceptance of the reality of one's loss

Here are some basic self-care, when grief bubbles up, practices that you can do every day:

- **Feed yourself at least 3 times a day.** We need to fuel our bodies and brains so they work to their full potential. They may not always be the healthiest meals – but we can keep working on it! Let's start by caring enough to nourish ourselves.
- **Take a shower** – Morning, noon, or night. Whatever works for you! Let's get rid of the toxins, stress, and whatever else seems to be holding on. It's amazing what a little soap and a lot of water can do for our mood.
- **Stretch!** Do you know how much tension you hold in your body? The answer is LOTS! Stretching doesn't just have to be a post-workout routine. Try gentle stretching even at work, during class, or in bed.
- **Just Breathe** – Taking a few minutes at different times throughout the day to focus on taking a few deep breaths can help to reset your system and get the oxygen flowing again. Breathe in slowly while counting to ten, then exhale slowly to the count of ten. Do this three or four times. Feel your body relax and your system recharge.
- **Water yourself** – Did you know that water makes up 55-60% of our bodies? Cool, right? But this water is easy to lose through stress, activity, or just being. Our brains and bodies function better when we stay hydrated throughout the day so stop at that water fountain or fill up that bottle!
- **Connect with a friend or family member.** Thanks to technology, connection is literally right at our fingertips. Take a moment to call, text, Snap, etc. someone important to you. Let them know you are thinking about them, share a funny meme, or just say a quick hello. Or, set up a visit with a friend, share a meal, or take a walk together and enjoy one another's company. Humans are built for connection with others (even our furry 4-legged friends) and it can be too easy to isolate ourselves during stressful times.

Feeling ambitious? Let's up our game by adding some activities you can do here and there:

- **Spend time outside.** Whether you take a walk, a hike, a swim, join a community garden, or just take some time to sit outdoors – you'll gain the benefits of some natural vitamin D, fresh air, and so much more!
- **Try something new.** Have you ever had your eye on a new hobby? Did you know that our brains are still actively growing until around age 25? There's always time to learn something new and fun. Take the plunge and try that art class, rock that climbing wall, or crush those ukulele lessons! Don't want to do it alone? Ask a friend to go with you. Sharing experiences with those around us helps us to step outside our comfort zone and can provide some good laughs along the way!
- **Host a Netflix marathon.** Let's face it, there are times when staying in pajamas, cozying in with our favorite blanket, and tuning out for a while is just what we need! Whether this

is some much needed alone time or you invite some fellow movie lovers, taking some time to “binge” on your favorite shows can be a good thing!

- **Get your hands dirty.** Ever try gardening? Baking or cooking? Art? Building? There are so many ways to work with your hands that have nothing to do with technology (*hint: we are asking you to unplug yourself for a while*). Working with our hands has been shown to help reduce stress. Do something you already love or delve into something new that could become a fun new skill!
- **It's time to play!** So many of us believe that play is reserved for kids. Other than being a source of fun, do you know what else play does? It helps our brains process the tough stuff. It's time to remember that the term adult really just means, “big kid” and play in your own way! Are you a creative player? A team player? Or do you need to re-learn how to play? Don't worry ... it's just like riding a bike!
- **Get active.** Sometimes we feel like our grief brain can slow us down. One of the best things you can do for yourself is to learn that it's ok to slow down, but strive to keep Actively Moving Forward® at whatever speed is right for you. What kinds of things did you like to do before your person died? Here are some ideas to kick it off: kayaking, workout classes, swimming, walking, biking, hiking ... now it's your turn!
- **Helping others, helps us.** Once again, the trusty old research shows us that volunteering is shown to increase all of those feel-good chemicals in our brains to help us feel happier! So pick a cause that really matters to you and find out how to get involved. This is like a BOGO (buy one, get one) deal for your brain!
- **Pamper yourself.** This means different things to different people. Maybe you go get a haircut or it can be as simple as taking the time to shave. Try a nice face mask, paint your nails, or learn how to do some simple reflexology on yourself. Have you tried just laying a face towel soaked in warm water on your face? It sounds weird, but it's pretty relaxing! When you feel great, you look great.
- **Life is better with books.** Do you remember the last time you read a book for fun? If so, good for you! If not, you are not alone. It can be hard to find time to read for pleasure. Choose a book that piques your interest and find little opportunities to read it throughout the week. Ever think of replacing your before-bed screen time with a little old fashioned page time? Perk: reigniting our imagination while reducing harmful blue light, just in time to sleep a little better.
- **Express yourself.** This is something so many of us would benefit from doing on a regular basis, but it does take time to incorporate it into our routine. There are so many different ways we can express ourselves. Have you tried music, writing, art, movement, or talking? These are just some of the ways we can let our thoughts be heard. Expressing ourselves doesn't just have a brain benefit, it also has a body benefit. When we keep things bottled up, it can affect how our bodies function. So do yourself a favor – find an outlet that's right for you ... and then use it.