

About Grief

A photograph of a sandy beach with waves and footprints. The top left corner of the page features a blue circular graphic element.

'I'd never had a serious loss before and I thought grief was basically lots of crying which peaked at the funeral and then you 'got over it' and 'moved on'. I wasn't prepared for the utter emotional, physical, and mental chaos that it was. I wasn't prepared for all the other emotions that came with it – the guilt, the anger, the fear.' (Annie)

Grief is our response to loss. It is the normal, natural and inevitable response to loss, and it can affect every part of our life, including our thoughts, behaviours, beliefs, feelings, physical health and our relationships with others.

With the support of family and friends, many people adapt to loss well and may not experience intense and persistent feelings; however, for some, the experience of grief can be overwhelming and further support may be helpful.

Common grief responses

After a death, we may experience a range of intense feelings, such as sadness, anger, anxiety, disbelief, panic, relief, irritability or numbness. Grief can also affect our thinking. We may think we will never get over this, or that we are going crazy. Sometimes grief can also cause difficulty in sleeping and physical symptoms such as headaches, nausea, aches and pains. If physical symptoms persist, check with your GP to exclude other causes.

Grief is an individual experience

Everyone grieves in their own way. Your grief is unique to you, and as long as you are not causing harm to yourself or those around you, there are no 'right' or 'wrong' ways to grieve.

We do not always know how people are grieving simply by what we see. Some people are open and expressive with their grief, crying, and wanting to talk, whilst others are more private, may be reluctant to talk and prefer to keep busy. Other factors, such as culture, gender and belief systems can also influence the ways that people grieve. Grief is individual and personal, and it's important to respect each other's way of grieving, even if we don't necessarily understand it.

Life grows around grief

It is a common myth that people 'get over' grief. The reality is, a part of us will always grieve the loss of our loved one. With time, the pain will lessen, but the sorrow we feel will always be a part of us. When people grieve they are coming to terms with what has changed in their lives. There is no 'return to normal'; rather, we have to learn to live around a new kind of normal – re-learning the world and re-learning ourselves within it.

Grief doesn't have a timeline

Grief can be triggered at any time, and it's not unusual for grief to be felt over an extended period of time. It's okay to admit you are struggling with your grief, whether it be weeks, months, years or even decades after the death.

Looking after yourself

When grieving, or supporting someone who is grieving, it can be all too easy to neglect our own needs. Taking the time to look after yourself, however, can make a big difference in your ability to function on a day-to-day basis, especially in the longer term. Below are some suggestions about how to get through some of the difficult times.

Privately and personally

- Try to delay major decisions that cannot be reversed for 6–12 months, e.g. disposing of belongings.
- Keep a diary or journal.
- Create a memorial – do or make something to honour your loved one.
- Develop your own rituals, e.g. light a candle, listen to special music, make a special place to think.
- Allow yourself to express your thoughts and feelings privately. Write a letter or a poem, draw, collect photos, cry etc.
- Exercise – do something to use pent-up energy, e.g. walking, swimming, cycling, gardening.
- Draw on your religious or spiritual beliefs and practices.
- Explore other people's experiences through books, movies, articles, etc.
- Do things that are relaxing and soothing.
- Some holistic or self-care ideas that may assist include meditation, distractions, relaxation and massage.
- To help with sleeplessness: exercise, limit alcohol and caffeine and try to maintain a routine, especially around bedtime.

With other people

- Sharing with other people can reduce the sense of isolation and loneliness that comes with grief.
- Allow people to help you; don't be embarrassed to accept their help. You will be able to help someone else at another time. It is your turn now.
- Talk to family and friends; sharing memories and stories, thoughts and feelings can be comforting and strengthen your connection with your loved one.
- Consider joining a support group to share with others who have had similar experiences.
- Take opportunities to join in public ceremonies where you can be private, yet part of a larger group.
- Use rituals and customs that are meaningful to you.
- Talk with a counsellor to focus on your unique situation, to find support and comfort, and to find other ways to manage, especially when your life or your grief seems to be complicated and particularly difficult.

When to seek further help

Although grief can be very painful, most people (85–90%) find that with the support of their family and friends and their own resources, they gradually find ways to learn to live with their loss and do not need to seek professional help.

Sometimes however, the circumstances of the death may have been particularly distressing, such as a traumatic or sudden death, or there may be circumstances in your life which make your grief particularly acute or complicated. If you are finding it difficult to manage on a day-to-day basis, it may be helpful to see a counsellor or other health professional. It's okay to admit you are struggling with your grief. No-one will think any less of you if you ask for help along the way.