

A guide to coping with grief and loss

There is no right or wrong way to grieve, but there are healthy ways to deal with the grieving process. Coping with the loss of someone or something you love is one of life's biggest challenges.

Grief is a natural response to loss. It is the emotional suffering you feel when something or someone you love is taken away. Often, the pain of loss can feel overwhelming. You may experience all kinds of difficult and unexpected emotions and physical effects, for example difficulty sleeping, eating or thinking straight. These are normal reactions to loss - and the more significant the loss, the more intense your grief will be.

Whatever the cause of your grief, there are healthy ways to cope with the pain. Try our Quick Read (if you are in a hurry) or Detailed Read (if you have more time) for more information.

If you are struggling to cope, we highly recommend that you seek professional advice. Please do not suffer in silence.

Grief can be caused by:

1. Divorce or relationship breakup
2. Loss of health
3. Losing a job
4. Loss of financial stability
5. A miscarriage
6. Retirement
7. [Death of a pet](#)
8. Loss of a cherished dream / Not realising a life-long goal
9. A loved one's serious illness
10. Loss of a friendship
11. Selling the family home

Quick read

Grieving is a personal experience and takes time. There is no timetable however, and the process is different for different people. Allow yourself to face your grief, to let yourself feel (and show) emotions. Understanding the process can help you, read our guide to help you cope.

Coping with the grieving process

- Acknowledge your pain
- Accept that grief can trigger different and unexpected emotions
- Understand that your grieving process will be unique to you
- Seek out face-to-face support from people who care about you
- Support yourself emotionally by taking care of yourself physically
- Recognize the difference between grief and depression.

- **The five stages of grief**

Everyone's experience of grief is different, but many people go through similar feelings during the process of healing. Not everyone experiences all of the stages, or experiences them in the order shown here. Whatever stages you go through, and whatever order, it is natural to feel these emotions. It might also be helpful to think of the process as a rollercoaster, with emotional ups and downs over time.

- **Denial:** "This can not be happening to me."
- **Anger:** "*Why* is this happening? Who is to blame?"
- **Bargaining:** "Make this not happen, and in return I will _____."
- **Depression:** "I am too sad to do anything."
- **Acceptance:** "I am at peace with what happened."

- **Emotional symptoms of grief**

You might feel:

- Shock and disbelief
- Sadness.
- Guilt
- Anger
- Fear

- **Physical symptoms of grief**

- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Lowered immunity
- Weight loss or weight gain
- Aches and pains
- Insomnia

- **Seek support**

Even if you do not usually talk about your feelings, it is an important part of the grieving process. Do not isolate yourself, talk to friends and family (face to face if you can) and accept any help they offer. If someone reaches out to you, it is because they care. You might also find support in a group, within your religious community or through bereavement counselling.

- **Take care of yourself**

- Face your feelings
 - Acknowledging your pain will help you heal. Unresolved grief can lead to mental and physical poor health. Do not let others tell you how to feel.
- Express your feelings in any way that works for you, this could be through writing, art or an activity.
- Keep up with your hobbies and interests
- Prepare for dates and events that might trigger your grief
- Look after your physical health through diet, exercise and sleep – keep the balance.

Detailed read

The grieving process

Grieving is a highly individual experience; there is no right or wrong way to grieve. How you grieve depends on many factors, including your personality and coping style, your life experience, your faith, and how significant the loss was to you.

Inevitably, the grieving process takes time. Healing happens gradually; it can not be forced or hurried—and **there is no “normal” timetable for grieving**. Some people start to feel better in weeks or months. For others, the grieving process is measured in years. Whatever your grief experience, it is important to be patient with yourself and allow the process to naturally unfold.

Myths and facts about grief and grieving

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 is important to “be strong” in the face of loss.

Fact: Feeling sad, frightened, or lonely is a normal reaction to loss. Crying does not mean you are weak. You do not 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 do not cry, it means you are not sorry about the loss.

Fact: Crying is a normal response to sadness, but it is not the only one. Those who do not cry may feel the pain just as deeply as others. They may simply have other ways of showing it.

Myth: Grieving should last about a year.

Fact: There is no specific time frame for grieving. How long it takes differs from person to person.

Myth: Moving on with your life means forgetting about your loss.

Fact: Moving on means you have accepted your loss—but that is not the same as forgetting. You can move on with your life and keep the memory of someone or something you lost as an important part of you. In fact, as we move through life, these memories can become more and more integral to defining the people we are.

How to deal with the grieving process

While grieving a loss is an inevitable part of life, there are ways to help cope with the pain, come to terms with your grief, and eventually, find a way to pick up the pieces and move on with your life.

1. Acknowledge your pain.
2. Accept that grief can trigger many different and unexpected emotions.
3. Understand that your grieving process will be unique to you.
4. Seek out face-to-face support from people who care about you.
5. Support yourself emotionally by taking care of yourself physically.
6. Recognise the difference between grief and depression.

The stages of grief

In 1969, psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross introduced what became known as the “five stages of grief.” These stages of grief were based on her studies of the feelings of patients facing terminal illness, but many people have generalized them to other types of negative life changes and losses, such as the death of a loved one or a break-up.

The five stages of grief

Denial: “This can not be happening to me.”

Anger: “*Why* is this happening? Who is to blame?”

Bargaining: “Make this not happen, and in return I will _____.”

Depression: “I am too sad to do anything.”

Acceptance: “I am at peace with what happened.”

If you are experiencing any of these emotions following a loss, it may help to know that your reaction is natural and that you will heal in time. However, not everyone who grieves goes through all of these stages—and that is okay. Contrary to popular belief, you do not have to go through each stage in order to heal. In fact, some people resolve their grief without going through *any* of these stages. And if you do go through these stages of grief, you probably will not experience them in a neat, sequential order, so do not worry about what you “should” be feeling or which stage you are supposed to be in.

Kübler-Ross herself never intended for these stages to be a rigid framework that applies to everyone who mourns. In her last book before her death in 2004, she said of the five stages of grief: “They were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is not a typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss. Our grieving is as individual as our lives.”

Grief can be a roller coaster

Instead of a series of stages, we might also think of the grieving process as a roller coaster, full of ups and downs, highs and lows. Like many roller coasters, the ride tends to be rougher in the beginning, the lows may be deeper and longer. The difficult periods should become less intense and shorter as time goes by, but it takes time to work through a loss. Even years after a loss, especially at special events such as a family wedding or the birth of a child, we may still experience a strong sense of grief.

Source: *Hospice Foundation of America*

Symptoms of grief

While loss affects people in different ways, many of us experience the following symptoms when we are grieving. Just remember that almost anything that you experience in the early stages of grief is normal—including feeling like you are going crazy, feeling like you are in a bad dream, or questioning your religious or spiritual beliefs.

Emotional symptoms of grief

Shock and disbelief. Right after a loss, it can be hard to accept what happened. You may feel numb, have trouble believing that the loss really happened, or even deny the truth. If someone you love has died, you may keep expecting them to show up, even though you know they are gone.

Sadness. Profound sadness is probably the most universally experienced symptom of grief. You may have feelings of emptiness, despair, yearning, or deep loneliness. You may also cry a lot or feel emotionally unstable.

Guilt. You may regret or feel guilty about things you did or did not say or do. You may also feel guilty about

certain feelings (e.g. feeling relieved when the person died after a long, difficult illness). After a death, you may even feel guilty for not doing something to prevent the death, even if there was nothing more you could have done.

Anger. Even if the loss was nobody's fault, you may feel angry and resentful. If you lost a loved one, you may be angry with yourself, God, the doctors, or even the person who died for abandoning you. You may feel the need to blame someone for the injustice that was done to you.

Fear. A significant loss can trigger a host of worries and fears. You may feel anxious, helpless, or insecure. You may even have panic attacks. The death of a loved one can trigger fears about your own mortality, of facing life without that person, or the responsibilities you now face alone.

Physical symptoms of grief

We often think of grief as a strictly emotional process, but grief often involves physical problems, including:

- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Lowered immunity
- Weight loss or weight gain
- Aches and pains
- Insomnia

Seek support for grief and loss

The pain of grief can often cause you to want to withdraw from others and retreat into your shell. But having the face-to-face support of other people is vital to healing from loss. Even if you are not comfortable talking about your feelings under normal circumstances, it is important to express them when you are grieving. While sharing your loss can make the burden of grief easier to carry, that does not mean that every time you interact with friends and family, you need to talk about your loss. Comfort can also come from just being around others who care about you. The key is not to isolate yourself.

Turn to friends and family members. Now is the time to lean on the people who care about you, even if you take pride in being strong and self-sufficient. Rather than avoiding them, draw friends and loved ones close, spend time together face to face, and accept the assistance that is offered. Often, people want to help but do not know how, so tell them what you need—whether it is a shoulder to cry on, help with funeral arrangements, or just someone to hang out with. If you do not feel you have anyone you can regularly connect with in person, it is never too late to build new friendships.

Accept that many people feel awkward when trying to comfort someone who is grieving. Grief can be a confusing, sometimes frightening emotion for many people, especially if they have not experienced a similar loss themselves. They may feel unsure about how to comfort you and end up saying or doing the wrong things. But do not use that as an excuse to retreat into your shell and avoid social contact. If a friend or loved one reaches out to you, it is because they care.

Draw comfort from your faith. If you follow a religious tradition, embrace the comfort its mourning rituals can provide. Spiritual activities that are meaningful to you—such as praying, meditating, or going to church—can offer solace. If you are questioning your faith in the wake of the loss, talk to a clergy member or others in your religious community.

Join a support group. Grief can feel very lonely, even when you have loved ones around. Sharing your sorrow with others who have experienced similar losses can help. To find a bereavement support group in your area, contact local hospitals, hospices, funeral homes, and counselling centres. If you belong to an Employee Assistance Programme, they may have contacts for support groups.

Talk to a therapist or grief counsellor. If your grief feels like too much to bear, find a mental health professional with experience in grief counselling. An experienced therapist can help you work through intense emotions and overcome obstacles to your grieving.

Take care of yourself as you grieve

When you are grieving, it is more important than ever to take care of yourself. The stress of a major loss can quickly deplete your energy and emotional reserves. Looking after your physical and emotional needs will help you get through this difficult time.

Face your feelings. You can try to suppress your grief, but you can not avoid it forever. In order to heal, you have to acknowledge the pain. Trying to avoid feelings of sadness and loss only prolongs the grieving process. Unresolved grief can also lead to complications such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and health problems.

Express your feelings in a tangible or creative way. Write about your loss in a journal. If you have lost a loved one, write a letter saying the things you never got to say; make a scrapbook or photo album celebrating the person's life; or get involved in a cause or organisation that was important to your loved one.

Try to maintain your hobbies and interests. There is comfort in routine and getting back to the activities that bring you joy and connect you closer to others can help you come to terms with your loss and aid the grieving process.

Do not let anyone tell you how to feel and do not tell yourself how to feel either. Your grief is your own, and no one else can tell you when it is time to "move on" or "get over it." Let yourself feel whatever you feel without embarrassment or judgment. It is okay to be angry, to yell at the heavens, to cry or not to cry. It is also okay to laugh, to find moments of joy, and to let go when you are ready.

Plan ahead for grief "triggers." Anniversaries, holidays, and milestones can reawaken memories and feelings. Be prepared for an emotional wallop and know that it is completely normal. If you are sharing a holiday or lifecycle event with other relatives, talk to them ahead of time about their expectations and agree on strategies to honour the person you loved.

Look after your physical health. The mind and body are connected. When you feel healthy physically, you will be better able to cope emotionally. Combat stress and fatigue by getting enough sleep, eating right, and exercising. Do not use alcohol or drugs to numb the pain of grief or lift your mood artificially.