

GRIEF & LOSS

WHOLISTIC THERAPEUTIC WORKSHOP

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Electronic Version

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Grief & Loss

Grief is a healthy and natural reaction to a major loss, often characterized by extreme mental anguish.

Though grief is important and leads to [emotional healing](#), it can be a prolonged and intensely painful experience, and can result in significant [emotional distress](#).

The grief reaction may last for months or years. People who are grieving may never stop missing a deceased person or regretting a loss, but the pain will eventually lessen.

- ✓ Any major loss can cause a grief reaction, especially the death of a loved one. Miscarriage and stillbirth, though not often recognized as major losses, can cause grief for the parents.
- ✓ A major lifestyle change, such as divorce, loss of a home, loss of a job, or loss of the ability to pursue a career (e.g., a physical injury ending an athletic career), may also result in grief.
- ✓ Grief responses may also occur following reminders of the loss, such as on anniversaries, holidays or other special days throughout the year.

Grieving is generally easy to recognize, and symptoms of grief are both physical and emotional.

Grieving people are often sad and may sigh, sob, cry out or yearn for what was lost.

Shock, disbelief and denial are common, especially immediately following the discovery of the loss.

People who are grieving may feel angry or guilty. They may tire easily or feel as though they are always tired. Disturbances in appetite and sleep often occur.

Most people who are grieving do not seek or require professional help. When help is needed, a [mental health](#) evaluation by a physician or a mental health professional may be used to rule out other conditions.

Although grief may progress into major depression in some cases, it should not be confused with this serious mood disorder.

It is not healthy to avoid grief or to deny a major loss for a long period of time. Avoidance of grief may lead to serious physical or emotional problems later in life.

The most important aspect for grieving people is learning to cope with the loss.

What I want to do in this work shop is provide you with some helpful tips to cope with the loss in your life. Not everything works for everyone. You will need to find what works for you and stick with it.

Individuals who are grieving need to speak with and explain their feelings to others. Most physical complications of grief can be eased by eating properly, exercising and getting plenty of rest.

When professional help is sought, interpersonal therapy is among the most commonly used forms of therapy to help people cope with grief. Group therapy can also be helpful.

This is why I encourage anyone who is having difficulty opening up concerning their grief in this workshop to see me after the work shop and I will talk with you in private.

Remember there are many trained staff right here in your community that can help you and I encourage you to find someone you feel comfortable with and talk to them.

About grief

- ✓ Grief is a natural, emotional response to a major loss, such as the death of a loved one. It is often characterized by extreme mental anguish.
- ✓ Other losses, such as divorce, miscarriage or the loss of a home or job, are also sources of grief.
- ✓ Grief is an important and necessary reaction that eventually leads to emotional healing.
- ✓ However, it can be a prolonged and intensely painful experience, and can result in significant **emotional distress**
- ✓ Social function and productivity at work or school may be impaired, although most people who are grieving continue to work and socialize.

People grieve for different periods of time. The grief reaction may last for months or years. Intense symptoms of emotional distress generally last between six and 12 months, with less intense grieving continuing for one to three years.

The grieving process may occur in several stages.

- ✓ Early stages may involve numbness or denial of the loss, followed by anger.
- ✓ Some people may then experience deep yearning followed by despair.
- ✓ The final stages include acceptance of the loss.

The stages of grief are not the same.

- ✓ **Some people go through the stages quickly or even skip some stages entirely.**
- ✓ **Other people seem to linger or return to certain stages after a period of feeling better. For example, a person who has been widowed may experience anger at the loss of the spouse soon after the spouse's death. The anger may diminish but return months later, when the surviving spouse is confronted with a chore formerly performed by the deceased person (e.g., handling finances).**

People grieve differently at different ages.

- ✓ Children may not understand the concept of death and may take more time to grieve.
- ✓ Preschool-aged children typically view death as temporary and may need to have it explained repeatedly.
- ✓ Children between the ages of 5 and 9 years generally begin to understand death better. They comprehend that the dead person is not returning and may ask questions or invent games about dying.
- ✓ Adolescents understand death as adults do, but may grieve differently. They often seek help within their own peer groups and may engage in more impulsive or risk-taking behaviors, such as drug or alcohol use or impulsive sexual behavior.

Different types of grief include:

- *Normal grief.* Also called *uncomplicated grief*. The normal, healthy response to a major loss.
- *Anticipatory grief.* Grief that begins before (in anticipation of) the loss, such as the initiation of divorce proceedings or when a loved one is diagnosed with a terminal illness.
- *Anniversary reactions.* Grief responses that occur following reminders of the loss, such as on anniversaries, holidays or other special days throughout the year. These can last for days or weeks, and are not necessarily a setback in the grieving process.

- *Complicated grief.* Also called *traumatic grief.* Occurs when grief becomes chronic, disabling and more intense. This is often seen as a progression of grief into major depression, with some features of post-traumatic stress disorder, such as nightmares and flashbacks. about 10 percent to 20 percent of people grieving the loss of a loved one experience complicated grief.

Potential causes of grief

Any major loss can cause a grief reaction. Common losses that cause grief include:

- **Death of a loved one.** Grieving for the death of a loved one is a natural reaction, even when the death was anticipated (e.g., elderly parent or grandparent). The death of a child may instill a sense of injustice due to lost potential and the concept that children are not supposed to die. The death of a spouse is traumatic due to the loss of a life partner. This can be even worse in the elderly, whose grief may be complicated by the death of close friends. However, this is not always the case as many elderly individuals report accepting death as a normal part of life and finding comfort in the memories of their loved one.

Death by suicide can be particularly difficult. Guilt, anger and shame may be much worse and the stigma of suicide may lead to isolation and suicidal ideation (thoughts of suicide) among some survivors. Other traumatic deaths, such as by homicide or natural disaster, can also worsen grief.

- **Miscarriage, stillbirth and infertility** Though not often recognized as major losses, miscarriages and stillbirth can elicit a full grief reaction among the parents. Couples undergoing treatment for infertility may experience grief after failed attempts to achieve a pregnancy.
- **Pet loss.** Many people have their first experience of grief with the death of a beloved pet.
- **Major lifestyle change.** Major life changes, such as divorce, the loss of a home or possessions, or loss of a career or ability to pursue a career (e.g., a physical injury putting an end to an athletic career) may cause grief.
- **Anticipation of a loss,** such as the diagnosis of a terminal illness in a loved one, can also cause grief.

Signs and symptoms of grief

Grieving is a personal process. Different people may grieve in different ways, and these may vary by families and culture. Some people may express their sorrow openly by crying, whereas others believe certain aspects of grieving should remain private.

The emotional and psychological symptoms of grief include:

- **Sadness and low mood.** Sorrow, regret and a sense of mental discomfort are common in grief. The grieving person may sigh, sob, cry out or yearn for what was lost. There may be a feeling of having a lump in the throat.
- **Shock, disbelief and confusion.** The first response to a major loss is often the denial that the loss has occurred. Individuals may not be able, or may refuse, to grasp the truth of the loss. When the actuality of the loss sets in, the grieving person may be confused and unable to comprehend how or why it has happened.
- **Anger and irritability.** After denial, anger may set in. Grieving people may be angry at themselves or others for allowing the loss to occur. They may lash out and seem enraged at the world.
- **Guilt.** Guilt generally follows anger in the grieving process. People who are grieving may feel as though they failed to prevent the loss. They may also experience a mild reduction in their feelings of self-worth, but any severe decline in **self esteem** may be a warning sign that major depression is developing.
- **Anhedonia.** Loss of interest or pleasure in activities. Many people who are grieving lose interest in daily activities.
- **Passive wish to “join the loved one.”** This should not be confused with actual suicidal ideation (thoughts of suicide) and does result in suicidal behavior or attempts. Actual suicidal behavior is a serious warning sign that grief has progressed into major depression and requires immediate treatment.
- **Anxiety.**
- **Obsession with what was lost.** **My separation from my wife**

Grief can negatively impact on physical health, as well. Existing medical conditions may worsen and new conditions may develop. Other physical symptoms of grief include:

- **Numbness and emptiness.** People who are grieving may experience emotional and physical numbness and hollow or empty feelings in the chest and abdomen.

- Fatigue. Grieving people may tire easily or feel as though they are always tired.
- Appetite and sleep disturbances. People who have experienced a major loss may eat too much or lose their appetite. They may sleep too little (**insomnia**) or too much (hypersomnia) and may have nightmares.
- Substance abuse. Grieving people may use alcohol or drugs in an attempt to deal with their grief.
- Aches and pains. Vague physical complaints such as stomachaches and headaches are common among grieving individuals.
- Trouble concentrating. Grief can often impair a person's concentration.

Children and adolescents may exhibit different signs and symptoms while grieving. Signs that a child may be grieving include:

- Withdrawal from friends
- Unrestrained, aggressive play
- Decline in school performance or refusal to attend school
- Asking questions about or imitating what was lost
- Playing games about dying
- Acting much younger or reverting to earlier behaviors (e.g., bedwetting, baby talk, thumb sucking)

Grieving adolescents may show signs of shock or anger for an extended period of time. Some teenagers may respond to grief by turning to alcohol, drugs or sexual activity. Some adolescents may have thoughts of suicide while grieving. In such cases, professional help should be sought immediately for the person.

When to seek help

- ✓ Grieving may follow any major loss and is generally easy to recognize.
- ✓ Most people who are grieving do not seek or require professional help.
- ✓ When help is needed, an evaluation by a physician or mental health professional may be used to rule out other conditions.
 - ✚ About 25 percent to 35 percent of people develop major depression after a major loss.
 - ✚ Although grief may progress into major depression, it should not be confused with this serious mood disorder.

- ✚ Grief is a healthy, adaptive process, whereas major depression is a pathological condition that needs to be treated.
- ✚ Depressed people tend to focus on themselves and their role in the loss. Grieving people tend to focus more on what was lost.

There are several symptoms of depression that do not typically occur in normal grief. When these are noted in people who have experienced a major loss, a psychiatric evaluation may be recommended. These include:

- **Suicidality.** Grieving people may have a passive wish to “join” the deceased loved one, but do not normally dwell on the concept of their own death or exhibit suicidal behavior.
- **Psychosis.** People who are grieving may see reminders of their loss in many places, but do not normally develop hallucinations or delusions involving the loss.
- **Severe loss of self-esteem or functionality.** Grief is often accompanied by some degree of functional impairment or feelings of reduced self-worth, but these are not normally severe.
- *Psychomotor retardation.* Significant slowing down of thought processes or physical activity do not tend to occur in normal grief.

Coping with grief

Grief is a healthy and necessary process. It is not healthy to avoid grief or to deny a loss for a long period of the time. Avoidance of grief may lead to serious physical or emotional problems later in life.

Most grieving people do not need psychological or psychiatric treatment. Typically, medications, such as antidepressants are required only when grief has progressed into major depression. When professional help is sought for grief, interpersonal therapy is among the most commonly used forms of therapy. This therapy focuses on grief, assessment of the relationship with the deceased, identifying and reviewing symptoms, and encouraging satisfying relationships and activities. Group therapy can also be helpful. It allows grieving people to meet and discuss their feelings with others who are grieving. Support groups, both in-person and on the Internet, can help grieving people, especially those who wish to receive more specialized support, such as parents who have lost a child.

The most important aspect for grieving people is learning to cope with their loss. People who are grieving may need to keep certain coping tips in mind, including:

- Avoid isolation. It is important for grieving people to talk to others and explain how they are feeling. They must not be afraid to ask for support.
- Take care of physical health. People who are grieving still need to see a physician when feeling unwell. Most physical complications of grief can be eased by eating properly, exercising and getting plenty of rest.
- Postpone major decisions when possible. Grief may interfere with judgment. Major decisions may need to be postponed.

**Individuals can take certain steps to help others cope with grief, including:
IF YOUR TRYING TO HELP SOMEONE WHO IS GRIEVING YOU MIGHT
WANT TO TRY THE FOLLOWING:**

- Listen. People who are grieving need to share their thoughts and feelings with others.
- Do not offer false comfort. Comments such as “He’s in a better place now” or “At least she’s not suffering anymore” often do not help and may make the grieving person feel even worse.
- Offer practical help. Grieving individuals may benefit from assistance with household chores or errands.

Tips to help children cope with grief include:

- Answer questions simply and honestly. Children’s questions should be answered truthfully in terms the children can understand. Adults who try to protect children from the truth about death may actually do more harm.
- Maintain regular routines as often as possible. Children need structure and routine. Though a loss may necessitate a change in structure, maintaining routines as much as possible can help children come to terms with the loss.

Parents and caregivers may also enroll children in programs, such as special day camps, which are designed to teach children about grief and help them learn to accept and cope with their loss.

Questions for your doctor or counselor regarding grief

Preparing questions in advance can help patients to have more meaningful discussions with their physicians or counselors regarding their conditions. Patients may wish to ask the following grief-related questions:

1. Are my physical symptoms related to grief or another condition?
2. What type of grief am I experiencing?
3. Do I need medication or other type of therapy?
4. Do you know of any support groups in the area that may be helpful to me?
5. Does my grief seem to be progressing towards major depression?
6. My feelings and symptoms are different from other times I have been bereaved. Is this normal?
7. For how long can I expect my grief to last?
8. How can I talk to my child about death?
9. How can I help my children cope with their grief?

Losing someone or something you love is very painful — and it's something that almost everyone will experience at some point in their lives. Loss that goes unacknowledged or unattended can result in disability. But grief that is expressed and experienced has a potential for healing that eventually can strengthen and enrich life. There is no right or wrong way to grieve — but there are ways to make your grieving more complete and more positive.

What is grief?

The definition of grief includes: emotions and sensations that accompany the loss of someone or something dear to you. The English word comes from the Old French *grève*, meaning a heavy burden. This makes sense when you consider that grief often weighs you down with sorrow and other emotions that can have both psychological and physical consequences.

When someone close to you dies, you don't just lose that person on the physical level, you also face the loss of what might have been. Your pain can involve missing that person's presence: sleeping in a bed that's half empty, craving a scent or an embrace. But knowing that your loved one will miss all of the milestones in your life often lasts longer than the pain of the physical absence. This may include the children that were never born, the trips not taken, colleges not attended, weddings not danced at — every life marker can be a reminder and an occasion for renewed grief.

How you respond to a particular loss

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| How the person died | Your response to an unanticipated death — a sudden heart attack, an accident, an act of violence — may be very different from the grief you feel when someone you love dies after a long illness. In the latter case, you may experience anticipatory grief , which occurs before the person's death. You're just as devastated when the death happens, but because you started grieving earlier, you may be able to recover sooner. |
| Your relationship with the person | The closeness of the relationship — spouse, parent, sibling, child — plays a role, of course. In the case of a blood relative, another factor is whether the person was a daily or regular presence in your life. Then there's the psychological nature of the relationship: was it smooth or rocky? If you had unfinished emotional business with the person you lost, if your last interaction was angry or otherwise fraught, that can intensify your experience of grief. |
| Your personality and coping style | If you're a normally resilient person, you may feel just as much pain over a loss as someone whose normal state is depressive or emotionally vulnerable, but you may find it easier to recover your equilibrium and to enjoy life again. People who have trouble coping with the setbacks of daily life will have a more difficult time recovering from a serious personal loss. |
| Your life experience | What you've learned about loss from other people and from your own experience can inform how you handle the loss of someone you love. |
| Support from others | As you'll see below, it's essential that you have people in your life who will help sustain you emotionally as you grieve. It's also important that your friends and family take your loss as seriously as you do. If you lose a cousin or friend who was more like a sibling, your grief shouldn't be dismissed as less important than that of an immediate relative. Many people downplay miscarriage, even if, to the parents, it represents the death of a baby. Nor does it matter how old the person was who died, or how sick. You lost someone you love, it hurts, and you need the support of people who care about you. |

Stages of grief?

“Five stages of grief.” While these stages represented the feelings of people who were themselves facing death, many people now apply them to experiencing other negative life changes (a break-up, loss of a job) and to people facing death or experiencing the death of loved ones.

- **Denial:** “This can’t 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’m too sad to do anything.”
- **Acceptance:** “I’m at peace with what is going to happen/has happened.”

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.”

There is no timetable for grieving. While the sense of loss and the intermittent sadness may never go away completely, people experience the cycle of grief differently. Some find that within a few weeks or months the period between waves of distress lengthens, and they are able to feel peace, renewed hope, and enjoy life more and more of the time. Others may face years of being hit with what feels like relentless waves of grief.

Mourning:

Mourning often involves a culturally appropriate process to help people pass through their grief. While many cultures mourn differently, the mourning processes usually have common ideals: acknowledging and accepting the death, saying farewell, grieving for a specific time period, and some means for continuing to honor the deceased. And finally, mourners are encouraged to move beyond their loss and form new attachments. Different cultures often define what appropriate behavior is for various family members, as well as the role of children during the mourning process.

Coping with grief and loss

The single most important factor in healing from loss is having the support of other people. Even if you aren’t comfortable talking about your feelings under normal circumstances, it is important to talk about them when you’re grieving. Knowing that others know and understand your grieving will make you feel better, less alone with your pain, and will help you heal.

Finding support after a loss

Friends

Let people who care about you take care of you, even if you take pride in being strong and self-sufficient. Especially when you live away from family, true friends can offer shoulders for you to cry on until you begin to recover.

Finding support after a loss

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| Family | The death of a relative can create a path for reunion, and even reconciliation, among surviving relatives. (It can also tear families apart, especially in the case of a sudden or violent death, so it's important to be sensitive to one another's approaches to grief and to refrain from accusation.) Sharing your loss can make the burden of grief easier to carry. Reminiscing about the person all of you lost may help everyone recover. If you've lost a friend or spouse, family members can form a caring community. |
| Your faith community | If you follow a religious tradition, embrace the comfort its mourning rituals can provide. Allow people within your religious community to give you emotional support. If you're estranged from your faith community or have none, this may be a good time to reconnect or to explore alternatives. |
| Support groups | There are many support groups for people who are grieving, including specialized groups (such as, people who have lost children, survivors of suicides). |
| Therapists and other professionals | Talking with a psychotherapist or grief counselor may be a good idea if the intensity of your grief doesn't diminish over time — that is, months go by and you still have physical symptoms, such as trouble with eating or sleeping; or your emotional state impairs your ability to go about your daily routine. |

Wherever the support comes from, accept it and do not grieve alone. One of the key elements of healthy grieving is allowing your emotions to surface in order to work through them. In the long run, trying to suppress your feelings in the hope that they'll fade with time won't work. Blocking the grieving process will delay or disable your ability to eventually recover.

If people don't know what they can do to help, tell them — whether it's going with you to a movie, cooking a meal for you, or just holding you as you cry. If someone is uncomfortable with your displays of emotion or your need to talk about the person you lost, gently let him or her know that talking out your grief is part of your healing process.

Helping yourself cope with grief and loss

- **Express your feelings in a tangible or creative way.** Write about your loved one in a journal, or write the person a letter saying the things you never got to say. Create a scrapbook or artwork about the person; create an appropriate memorial in his or her honor (for example, if the person loved flowers, plant or fund a garden); get involved in a cause or organization that was important to him or her.

- **Take care of yourself physically.** Get enough sleep, eat sensibly, and engage in regular exercise. Do not use alcohol or drugs to numb the pain of grief or lift your mood artificially. (That may even apply to antidepressants meant to ease the sadness of grief; because grief, unlike depression, is not a disorder, masking the pain with meds may be less productive than working through the sadness.) Healthy habits will help you with grieving, but substance use will impede recovery and can lead to long-term dependence
- **Don't let other people tell you how to feel, and don't tell yourself how to feel either.** Your grief is your own, and no one else can tell you when it's time to "move on" or "get over it." At the same time, it's okay to be angry at the person who died, to cry every day if you need to, and to yell at the heavens without being embarrassed. On the other hand, it's okay to laugh, too. If watching a show over and over again helps you heal, no one has the right to tell you it's inappropriate.
- **Plan ahead.** Anniversaries, holidays, and milestones in life can be particularly challenging. Be prepared for an emotional wallop, and know that it's completely normal. If you're sharing a holiday or lifecycle event with other relatives, talk to them ahead of time about their expectations and agree on strategies to honor the person you loved.

Grieving a Suicide

The suicide of a loved one raises painful questions, doubts and fears. Some cultures see it as shameful or an affront to God. Survivors ask themselves: Why wasn't my love enough to save this person? What could I have done? How did I fail? What will people think? Feelings of failure, shame and blame exacerbate the sorrow of loss.

It's important that, in addition to the healing strategies described above, you do the following if you lose someone you love to suicide:

- If you have religious concerns, try to find a gentle, nonjudgmental member of your faith, and be open when talking with that person about what happened, and about your feelings.
- Rather than being concerned about the stigma surrounding suicide, concentrate on your own healing and survival.

- Do something that will benefit others in your loved one's name.

Difference between grief and depression

If you are grieving, you may experience a number of depressive symptoms, such as frequent crying, profound sadness, and depressed mood. However, while major depression is categorized as a psychological disorder, grief is not. Grief is a normal and healthy response to bereavement, not an illness. Its symptoms are painful, but they serve an adaptive purpose.

As a general rule, normal grief does not warrant the use of antidepressants. While medication may alleviate some of the symptoms of grief, it cannot treat the cause, which is the loss itself. Furthermore, by numbing the pain that must be worked through eventually, antidepressants delay the mourning process. When grief continues to be a disruptive and debilitating presence, you may be suffering from depression. If you have a prior history of depression or lack social support, you are particularly at risk.

Symptoms that suggest a bereaved person is also depressed:

- Intense feelings of guilt.
- Thoughts of suicide or preoccupation with death.
- Feelings of worthlessness.
- Slow speech and body movements.
- Inability to function at work, home, and/or school.
- Finds no pleasure in previously-enjoyed activities.
- Hallucinations of the deceased.

If you develop major depression following the death of a loved one, you may benefit from professional treatment.

How trauma affects the grieving process

Grief tends to be mixed with trauma when a loss is sudden and unexpected — a fatal heart attack, an accident, a murder — or it's perceived as being outside the normal cycle of life, as in the death of a child. For example, someone who nurses a spouse through a long illness will grieve when the spouse is gone, but the person who witnesses the sudden death of a spouse in a car crash will likely be traumatized as well. A sudden loss can be even more difficult to deal with if you don't have a socially recognized outlet for mourning, as may be the case with a miscarriage or stillbirth.

While trauma always incorporates grief, the two states are very different in how you experience them and what effect they can have on you. Grief is a normal reaction to loss, with its symptoms diminishing over time. On the other hand, trauma is a disabling reaction that can block the grieving process, disrupt your life, and leave you psychologically vulnerable. If you are coping with a traumatic loss, you may want to think about turning to a counselor or other professional for help.