

# How to support a grieving friend

Griefline is a national not-for-profit organisation that supports anyone experiencing grief.

We understand that whatever your loss is, it is personal to you. In addition to our national toll-free helpline, we also offer national bereavement support groups, online community forums, self-care information, education, and resources, as well as corporate and volunteer training programs.

## **GRIEFLINE MISSION**

We normalise grief by having courageous conversations and supporting communities to grow from loss.

As a service to our community, Griefline provides access to resources to support and inform help-seekers and their carers through their experience with grief and loss. Content we share is for educational purposes only and should not substitute direct medical advice from a GP or other qualified mental health clinician.

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## **Introducing our contributors, Sally and Imogen**

We're Sally and Imogen (aka Sal and Im) the co-hosts of Good Mourning, a chart-topping podcast that shines a light on what loss is really like through honesty, hope and humour. We understand how tough grief is, having both lost our mums suddenly in our early 30s. It's our purpose to make grief a topic that's easier to understand for all by talking candidly about it, to help those coping with loss feel less alone while also being a helpful resource for those supporting.



**Sal:** My lovely mum, Rose, died suddenly and unexpectedly from a seizure (otherwise known as SUDEP) in November 2019. She was otherwise healthy, so it was a massive and devastating shock for me. I didn't expect to lose my mum when I was 33, and my world turned upside down. My grief was overpowering, and I wasn't prepared for the intense range of emotions or how physically exhausting it is. Support from my friends and family, along with finding a friend in Imogen (who understood my grief), has played a huge role in helping me cope during one of the toughest times of my life.

**Im:** My mum, Vanessa, died by suicide in February 2020. It was completely unexpected and a huge shock for my family and me. I was consumed by grief – my mum was the last person I would ever expect to take her own life. The emotions I felt were intense, and I was overcome with anger, anxiety, and guilt. My daughter was only 9 months old when Mum died, and I was in such excruciating emotional and physical pain; the joy of motherhood was overshadowed by grief. I didn't know how I was going to survive, and it was the support from my friends and family that pulled me through.

## Why this guide

We all experience the loss of someone or something important to us. It's a universal experience that connects us all. And yet, we are often fearful about approaching a friend going through it. Instead, we sometimes leave them feeling isolated, even abandoned, just when they need us most.

The good news is that most people are surprisingly resilient after a profound loss and in time, can return to a state of equilibrium, especially when they have understanding friends and family to support them.

Together with our friends Sal and Im, we've designed this guide to better equip you to walk alongside someone as they navigate their grief journey.

Use it to support anyone you care about – a friend, family member, colleague or neighbour, whether they've experienced the death of someone significant or the loss of something important.

We hope it will give you clarity and confidence. Most of all, we thank you for your courage and compassion to reach out a steady hand and an open heart.

# Understanding grief

Having a sound knowledge of grief and loss is a good foundation for offering support. Let's start with some definitions of terms that are often used interchangeably and yet mean different things.

## **WHAT IS GRIEF?**

Grief is a normal and natural reaction to the experience of profound loss. It is a powerful, unpredictable and sometimes uncontrollable state of being that ebbs and flows with no set duration. It can affect us physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually, yet it is essential for adaptation to life after loss. Despite being a universal human experience, each person's grief response is unique, meaning there is no right or wrong way to grieve.

**How does it feel?** A grieving person will go through a rollercoaster of emotions and thoughts such as sadness, anger, confusion, guilt, avoidance, relief and acceptance.

## **WHAT IS MOURNING?**

Mourning is the outward expression of a person's private grief, usually informed by their religious, cultural, spiritual and societal beliefs and practices. It is a therapeutic process that pays tribute to the loss, symbolises the mourner's thoughts and feelings, and provides structure to their grief.

**How does it look?** Participation in rituals such as funerals, attending memorial sites, posting one's grief journey on social media, religious practices such as wearing black and set periods of mourning.

## **WHAT IS BEREAVEMENT?**

Bereavement refers to the period of grief and mourning following a death. It can feel like time is standing still for the bereaved person as they get caught up in memories of their loved one rather than looking to a future without them.



**How long does it take?** Grief has no time limit. Some people will bounce back within a few months, most will have adapted to the loss within a year, but others will struggle to integrate the loss for years to come... even a lifetime.

**“Grief changes in intensity as time goes by, but it can still pop up unexpectedly. We call this a ‘grief bomb’ because it’s like the intense emotions appear out of nowhere by surprise. Your friend may still experience moments of intense grief even years down the line. Simply showing that you understand grief has no timeline, and can pop up out of the blue, can help them feel more supported.”** – Sal & Im, Good Mourning

# Types of grief

Grief comes in many forms. It might take hold instantly or be delayed, feel intense or mild, be short or protracted. It all depends on a multitude of factors such as the griever's childhood and family background, previous life experiences, mental health, social and cultural influences, the type of loss and in the case of bereavement, the mode of death.

Let's look at some of the grief responses that are not widely understood yet affect many in our community.

## **ANTICIPATORY GRIEF**

Anticipatory grief is a response to impending loss marked by feelings of dread and anxiety. It often affects people facing the death of a loved one in palliative care or with an elderly relative or pet, those close to someone succumbing to dementia, or someone in a crumbling marriage.

## **AMBIGUOUS GRIEF**

A type of grief that occurs when the valued person is physically present but psychologically or emotionally absent or changed. Examples are loved ones in the grip of addiction, Alzheimer's, mental health disorders and acquired brain injuries.

## **DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF**

A loss that isn't acknowledged and validated by society, or is undisclosed for fear of judgement or criticism. Grief symptoms are often exacerbated due to a lack of public mourning and rituals. Examples are a child surrendered for adoption, rape, pregnancy termination and the death of an undisclosed lover.

## **PROLONGED GRIEF**

This ongoing and persistent form of intense grief affects about 1 in 10 of the grieving population. Prolonged grief can impair a person's daily functioning and poses significant risks to long-term physical and mental health. Examples of what may cause some people to experience more severe and long-term grief include the circumstances of the death such as suicide, sudden or violent death, a protracted illness or loss of a child.

# Understanding loss

A loss involves change and the realisation that a valued or cherished aspect of life has gone or is no longer the way we once knew it.

Whilst most Australians understand the link between the loss of a loved one and grief, they are less likely to connect grief to non-death losses. Yet both can cause a grief response of similar intensity.

When someone experiences a “living loss”, the thing that dies might be their hopes or dreams, a relationship, or an ability that has escaped them.

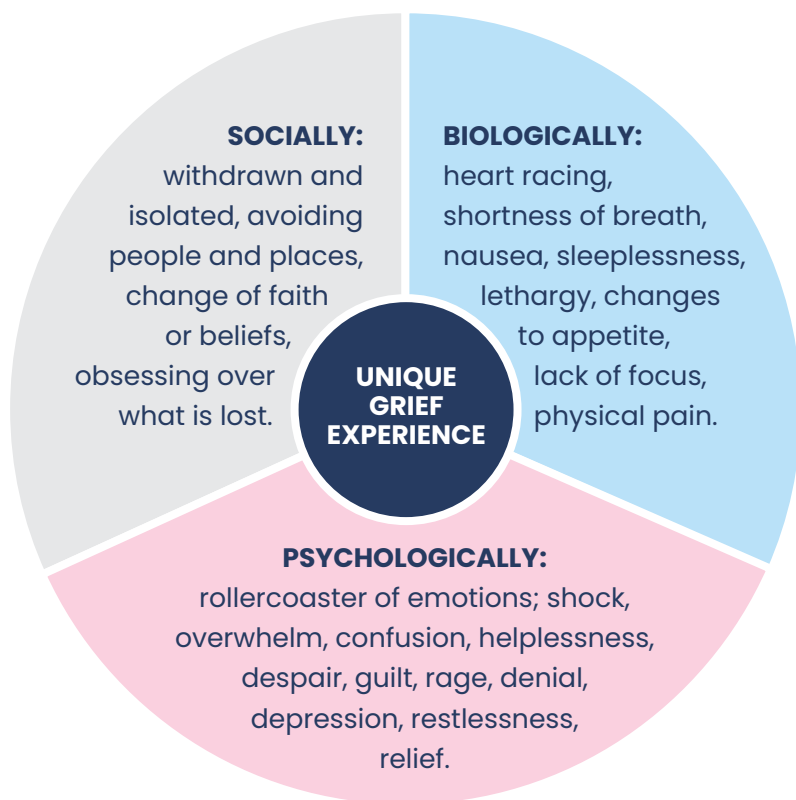
Symptoms for those grieving a living loss generally replicate those of the bereaved. The ongoing uncertainty and feeling unsettled can also lead to anxiety and fear for the future.

## TYPES OF LOSS

**Death  
of a loved  
one Serious  
illness of a loved  
one Breakdown of  
a marriage or family  
unit Relationship break-up  
Loss of a livelihood Death of a  
beloved pet Loss of identity Loss  
of friendship Death of a friend Loss  
of physical abilities A miscarriage  
Loss of a home or community Personal  
illness Retirement Emigration Loss of  
cognitive abilities Global pandemic Loss  
of safety and security after trauma Loss of  
predictability in life Unemployment Loss  
of abilities Life transitions Loss of a dream  
Estrangement Death of a hero Loss of  
faith in community Loss of hope due  
to climate change Loss of ability  
to have a child Addiction  
Leaving home**

# Common experiences of grief

Grief impacts people on multiple levels.



# The grief journey

People who have suffered a loss go through a constantly changing process of grief. While the heartache ebbs and flows for each person, there are some common responses at different stages of the journey.

## **EARLY GRIEF**

In the days and weeks immediately following the loss, the bereaved might be in a state of disbelief. For some, the grief is so overwhelming they are numb to it. But as the reality of their loss sets in, the pain can feel unbearable. They may find it challenging to regulate their emotions or keep up with daily routines, and they may start to withdraw from their family or social circle.



## **MIDDLE GRIEF**

After a while, the griever might struggle with a sense of emptiness and finality. They may develop a desperate need for the return of what was lost. This can cause them to become preoccupied with telling their story of loss or saying their loved one's name.

## **LATER GRIEF**

Later in the grieving process, your friend may start to adapt to their altered life, discovering new strengths and opportunities that weren't there before. Their life starts to have meaning again. They may even experience personal growth and a re-invention of who they once were.



**“A big way people supported me was to simply let me talk without trying to cheer me up. All I needed was someone with a willingness to listen and a non-judgemental, safe space to process my complicated thoughts and feelings.”**

**– Im, Good Mourning**

# Supporting your grieving friend

It is human nature to respond quickly to people who are in distress. However, we need to remind ourselves that nothing we do will fix the problem. We can't bring back their loved one nor restore what has been lost.

But, there are things that you can do to be there for a grieving friend in a supportive way.

Social support is recognised as the number one tool for coping with grief – we need our mates to get through tough times.

While your instinct may be to protect your friend from grief, we need to acknowledge grief as a process that must be worked through in order to adapt to the loss and find a new way of living. The best thing you can do is just be there for them. It's perfectly okay to let your friend feel their grief. In fact, it's healthy.

## BEFORE YOU START

Here are some things to consider before you reach out to someone who is experiencing grief.

This is about them, not you:

- Can they rely on you to be trustworthy and respectful of their privacy?
- Do they feel accepted, respected, and not judged by you?
- Will you be consistent and show up when they need you?

Are you willing to offer:

- Empathetic, emotional support that is gentle, considerate, and understanding
- Practical assistance to aid problem solving
- Conversational skills to help them clarify their thoughts

Put effort into preparation:

- Have a good understanding of your friend's situation
- Know when professional help should be sought
- Ensure you are personally supported and encouraged to offer this support

It's important to remember that we all cope with grief differently. Accept that not everyone will feel comfortable accepting your support and try not to take it personally. Do continue to check in though, as that's important.

**"One of the best things my friends did to support me was to keep checking in, even months after mum died. It wasn't anything grand, just a simple text. To know they were consistently there and that they cared, made me feel hugely supported."**

– Sal, Good Mourning

"Our friends and family were amazing supporters. But, like everyone, they didn't always know the best thing to do or say. Some were fearful of approaching the subject of grief or asking questions about our mums. Walking alongside someone grieving can be nerve-racking, but armed with the right tools, it doesn't need to be. Having a guide like this would've really helped our support team – we wish we had this back then!"

– Sal & Im, Good Mourning

# 01

## Pay attention to their grief

Try not to let your uncomfortable feelings get in the way of acknowledging their experience. While death brings into focus the fragility of our own lives (and our loved ones), now is your time to be lion-hearted.

People need their grief to be witnessed. Whether you make visits to your friend, phone them, or send a gift, your efforts will be appreciated. Not only does it symbolise your commitment to them but it also pays tribute to who or what was lost. So don't hesitate to get in contact, the longer you leave it the more uncomfortable you will both feel.

**“A thoughtful sympathy card can be an incredible source of comfort to the person who is grieving, even years after the loss. We both still read the ones we received, as they have such kind words and memories about our mums.”** – Sal & Im, Good Mourning



# 02

## Offer a steady hand of support

Show them you care by offering to do something useful. Consider setting up a meal train; grocery shopping; repairs around the house; help with the eulogy or planning the memorial.

**Suggestion:** The weeks and months after a loss can be overwhelmingly busy. Coupled with the intensity of grief, it can be hard to find the time (or headspace) to do everyday chores. Proactively offering your support can be a huge help, but it's important to be specific. Consider setting up a meal train; grocery shopping; dog walking; help with the eulogy or planning the memorial. Avoid asking 'Can I do anything?', which transfers the burden of decision-making to the bereaved.

**“When you offer practical help, be considerate of their personal space – don’t just take over without their consent. It’s important to ask first.”**

– Sal & Im, Good Mourning

# 03

## Create a 'heart-space'

Take the time to create a safe space where they can share. By this we mean suspend judgement, resist the pressure to offer advice and let go of any preconceived ideas about the right or wrong way to grieve.

Instead, establish a nurturing relationship in which you recognise their suffering and accept their unique grief experience.

Whether they want to talk or stay silent, be light-hearted or avoid the subject altogether. Let them take the lead and put your effort into being an active and compassionate listener. Your sensitivity and understanding will help them gain a sense of peace.

**Suggestion:** In the early days it is common for the bereaved to fixate on details of the event such as timelines and medical procedures. Focusing on the clinical aspects is a way to avoid the emotional, and that's OK. Understand that everyone copes with grief differently.

**“One of the best things you can do is give your friend the opportunity to share how they are feeling, by holding space for them. What this means is not trying to offer a solution or fix things, and just be present.”**

– Sal & Im, Good Mourning

# 04

## Start a courageous conversation

The purpose of courageous conversations is to validate your friend's grief experience, show them they are valued, and support them in developing coping abilities.

To start a conversation, you could say something like:

*"I know what's happened and I want to support you in any way I can. I know things will be overwhelming for you, but I am here. Can I come over at 6 pm tonight with dinner? If you're not up for visitors, I totally understand. Let me know, and I can leave dinner on your doorstep and text you when it's there."*

We often resort to platitudes to express our sympathy, but these statements can appear generic and make the griever feel like their pain is being minimised. Try replacing robotic statements with words that offer genuine support.

*"I know what you're going through"* is dismissive of a person's unique grief experience. Instead, say *"What you're going through right now is incredibly painful but I am here for you."*

*"I'm sorry for your loss"* can be repetitive and put distance between you and the bereaved. Instead, say *"My heart goes out to you."*

*"Time heals all wounds"* diminishes the person's loss. Instead, say *"I understand that things might never be the same."*

**"One of the best things you can do is be real in the language you use. Don't try and say anything poetic, just acknowledge how hard it must be for the person grieving and reassure them that they have your full support."**

– Sal & Im, Good Mourning

# 05

## Humanise their grief

Part of processing grief is expressing difficult emotions such as anger, despair, guilt and shame.

While this may be confronting for your friend to experience and for you to witness, these raw emotions are natural. Reassure your friend that it's ok to yell, cry, wail and sob without justification. If you feel the urge to cry too, go ahead. People want to see their emotions mirrored.

**Suggestion:** It's not unusual for adults to have difficulty understanding or verbally expressing their emotions. If this is your friend's experience, you could suggest art therapy as a way to express themselves without words.

**“Grief can be confusing, and journaling has been a helpful tool for me to process my grief. It’s a safe space to express emotions and let absolutely everything out. You could suggest to your friend that they start a journal, or even buy them one as a thoughtful gift.”**

**- Sal, Good Mourning**



# 06

## Steer clear of grief comparison

Take a leaf from our Griefline Volunteer handbook by showing unconditional positive regard for your friend.

Each person's grief response is based on a combination of unique internal and external influences so no one can truly understand what another person's grief feels like. That's why it's important to avoid questioning their experience, and to validate their grief no matter what the loss.

**Suggestion:** When we start comparing, we stop caring. Now is not the time to share your experiences, as no matter how well-meaning, it can come across as dismissive.

**“Remember there’s no unified response to grief – how one person experiences it will be completely different to the next. Even if you have experienced loss before, try not to compare.”**

– Sal & Im, Good Mourning

# 07

## Say their name

While death is profound, it doesn't mean the bond must be broken forever.

After some time has passed, help your friend cherish the memory of their loved one through reminiscence. Encourage them to say their name, tell stories, share photos or videos, wear a piece of jewellery or a much-loved item of clothing and play their favourite music. This is all part of 'continuing bonds', which is a proven grief recovery tool.

**"It's a small gesture, but what I appreciated was when my friends spoke about my mum. It showed me that they were remembering her, and they knew that keeping her memory alive was important to me."** – Im, Good Mourning

# 08

## Be mindful of anniversaries

Be aware of the anguish that comes with anniversaries. Mark the important dates in your calendar and check in with your friend in the lead-up, which is sometimes worse than the day itself.

Ask them what plans they have in place for getting through the day. Whether it's staying under the covers; having a picnic at their loved one's favourite spot; visiting the gravesite; or gathering the family to watch home videos. Having a plan will give the day structure, ensure they are surrounded by their chosen support network and help to pass the time. If you do make plans, be flexible and prepared for them to change their mind on the day.

**Suggestion:** Be respectful of your friend's wishes. They may prefer to be left alone but by giving them the option of you being there, they feel reassured of your support.

**“If you can’t be with your friend in person on significant dates, send them a card, give them a call, or send a text to let them know you are thinking of them. These things don’t take a huge amount of time but can make a massive difference to someone grieving.”**

**- Sal & Im, Good Mourning**

# 09

## Remain by their side

Many people fall into the trap of assuming their friend is doing ok just because they seemed fine at their last encounter.

However, this is often far from true. Grief is like a rollercoaster ride, they may be fine one day only to turn a corner and find themselves in freefall. Keep tabs on how your friend is faring, and reassure them that you're still there for them.

And remember there is no time limit on grief. Try not to push your friend through set steps and timelines as this can actually slow down the grieving process. Stick with them, it may be years afterwards that they need you most.

**Suggestion:** As time goes on you might find your check-ins don't need to focus on the grief itself. Later check-ins might be as simple as a text saying hi or an email to share a funny story.

# 10

## Hold on to hope for them

While your friend might appear to have lost all hope, they can find it again. It can take time, and while there's no "getting over" the loss, there are ways to live life around it.

Keep on showing up for your friend, and longer than you think is necessary. Making a symbolic commitment to be the custodian of their hope can bring a huge amount of comfort.

**“After our mums died, it was hard to see a future without them. Friends that reminded us that all we had to do was focus on the present and not look too far ahead helped us both navigate our grief step-by-step. By showing up and reminding us that we could get through one day at a time, their support helped rebuild our hope for the future.” – Sal & Im, Good Mourning**





Your own

# self-care

Supporting a friend who is experiencing extreme emotions can be draining and may also reawaken your own painful memories and feelings. So, it's important to also consider your own wellbeing.

Here are some self-care tips for staying resilient and reliable while supporting someone else.

**Be self-aware.** Check in with your emotions. Are you feeling sad, frustrated, disappointed or guilty? Understanding how your friend's grief experience is triggering you can help you set boundaries.

**Accept yourself.** Treat yourself as you would your grieving friend. Be kind and accepting of your response to them. Remember, self-compassion has incredible healing power.

**Make time for you.** Engage in your own rest and relaxation. Extending emotional support to someone else can be physically and mentally taxing. It's important to allocate time to soothe your body and mind in ways that work for you.

**Reach out.** Be ready to seek out your own emotional support from friends, family, a support service or professionals.

**Be realistic.** Recognise when you need to step away. Ask yourself whether your friend might be better supported by a professional counsellor during this difficult period.

Other

# resources

The information contained in this book is general in nature. Below is a list of third-party support resources covering specific grief and loss circumstances.

[Why is grief after suicide different?](#)

[SANDS Words Matter Guide for Family, Friends and Colleagues in Starting a Conversation about Pregnancy or Infant Loss](#)

[Seasons for Growth Young People & Grief](#)



[griefline.org.au](http://griefline.org.au)

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