

## Coping with Grief and Loss

Understanding the Grieving Process and Learning to Heal



Coping with the loss of someone or something you love is one of life's biggest challenges. Often, the pain of loss can feel overwhelming. You may experience all kinds of difficult and unexpected emotions, from shock or anger to disbelief, guilt, and profound sadness. The pain of grief can also disrupt your physical health, making it difficult to sleep, eat, or even think straight. These are normal reactions to significant loss. But while there is no right or wrong way to grieve, there are healthy ways to cope with the pain that, in time, can ease your sadness and help you come to terms with your loss, find new meaning, and move on with your life.

### What is grief?

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Grief is a natural response to loss. It's the emotional suffering you feel when something or someone you love is taken away. The more significant the loss, the more intense your grief will be. You may associate grieving with the death of a loved one—which is often the cause of the most intense type of grief—but any loss can cause grief, including:

1. [Divorce or relationship breakup](/articles/grief/dealing-with-a-breakup-or-divorce.htm) (/articles/grief/dealing-with-a-breakup-or-divorce.htm)
2. Loss of health
3. [Losing a job](/articles/stress/job-loss-and-unemployment-stress.htm) (/articles/stress/job-loss-and-unemployment-stress.htm)
4. Loss of financial stability

5. A miscarriage
6. Retirement
7. [Death of a pet \(/articles/grief/coping-with-losing-a-pet.htm\)](/articles/grief/coping-with-losing-a-pet.htm)
8. Loss of a cherished dream
9. A loved one's serious illness
10. Loss of a friendship
11. [Loss of safety after a trauma \(/articles/ptsd-trauma/traumatic-stress.htm\)](/articles/ptsd-trauma/traumatic-stress.htm)
12. Selling the family home

Even subtle losses in life can trigger a sense of grief. For example, you might grieve after moving away from home, graduating from college, or changing jobs. Whatever your loss, it's personal to you, so don't feel ashamed about how you feel, or believe that it's somehow only appropriate to grieve for certain things. If the person, animal, relationship, or situation was significant to you, it's normal to grieve the loss you're experiencing.

### How to cope with grief

While experiencing 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. Recognize the difference between grief and depression.

## The grieving process

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Grieving is a highly individual experience; there's 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't 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's important to be patient with yourself and allow the process to naturally unfold.

## 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 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 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've accepted your loss—but that's 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.

## 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'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 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’ll heal in time. However, not everyone who grieves goes through all of these stages—and that’s 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 won’t experience them in a neat, sequential order, so don’t worry about what you “should” be feeling or which stage you’re 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’re grieving. Just remember that almost anything that you experience in the early stages of grief is normal—including feeling like you’re going crazy, feeling like you’re 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're 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 didn't 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](/articles/sleep/insomnia-causes-and-cures.htm) (/articles/sleep/insomnia-causes-and-cures.htm)

## Seek support for grief and loss

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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're not comfortable talking about your feelings under normal circumstances, it's important to express them when you're grieving. While sharing your loss can make the burden of grief easier to carry, that doesn't 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.

### Finding support after a loss

**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's offered. Often, people want to help but don't know how, so tell them what you need—whether it's a shoulder to cry on, help with funeral arrangements, or just someone to hang out with. If you don't feel you have anyone you can regularly connect with in person, it's never too late to [build new friendships](/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm) (/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm).

**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're 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 counseling centers, or see the Resources section below.



(/articles/mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm)

[Finding a Therapist Who Can Help You Heal: \(/articles/mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm\)](/articles/mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm) How to Choose

**Talk to a therapist or grief counselor** – If your grief feels like too much to bear, [find a mental health professional](/articles/mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm) (/articles/mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm) with experience in grief counseling. An experienced therapist can help you work through intense emotions and overcome obstacles to your grieving.

### Using social media for grief support

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Memorial pages on Facebook and other social media sites have become popular ways to inform a wide audience of a loved one's passing and to reach out for support. As well as allowing you to impart practical information, such as funeral plans, these pages allow friends and loved ones to post their own tributes or condolences. Reading such messages can often provide some comfort for those grieving the loss.

Of course, posting sensitive content on social media has its risks as well. Memorial pages are often open to anyone with a Facebook account. This may encourage people who hardly knew the deceased to post well-meaning but inappropriate comments or advice. Worse, memorial pages can also attract Internet trolls. There have been many well-publicized cases of strangers posting cruel or abusive messages on memorial pages.

To gain some protection, you can opt to create a closed group on Facebook rather than a public page, which means people have to be approved by a group member before they can access the memorial. It's also important to remember that while social media can be a useful tool for reaching out to others, it can't replace the face-to-face connection and support you need at this time.

### Take care of yourself as you grieve

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When you're grieving, it's 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't 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](/articles/anxiety/anxiety-disorders-and-anxiety-attacks.htm) (/articles/anxiety/anxiety-disorders-and-anxiety-attacks.htm), substance abuse, and health problems.



**Express your feelings in a tangible or creative way.** Write about your loss in a journal. If you've 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](#) (/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm) or organization that was important to your loved one.

**Try to maintain your hobbies and interests.** There's 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.

**Don't let anyone 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." Let yourself feel whatever you feel without embarrassment or judgment. It's okay to be angry, to yell at the heavens, to cry or not to cry. It's also okay to laugh, to find moments of joy, and to let go when you're 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'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.



(/articles/healthy-living/how-to-start-exercising-and-stick-to-it.htm)

[How to Start Exercising and Stick to It:](#) (/articles/healthy-living/how-to-start-exercising-and-stick-to-it.htm) Creating an Enjoyable Exercise Routine

**Look after your physical health.** The mind and body are connected. When you feel healthy physically, you'll be better able to cope emotionally. Combat stress and fatigue by getting enough sleep, eating right, and [exercising](#) (/articles/healthy-living/how-to-start-exercising-and-stick-to-it.htm). Don't use alcohol or drugs to numb the pain of grief or lift your mood artificially.



For help facing up to and managing distressing emotions like grief...

Use HelpGuide's free [Emotional Intelligence Toolkit](/emotional-intelligence-toolkit/index.htm) (/emotional-intelligence-toolkit/index.htm).

## When grief doesn't go away

As time passes following a significant loss, such as the death of a loved one, it's normal for feelings of sadness, numbness, or anger to gradually ease. These and other difficult emotions become less intense as you begin to accept the loss and start to move forward with your life. However, if you aren't feeling better over time, or your grief is getting worse, it may be a sign that your grief has developed into a more serious problem, such as complicated grief or major depression.

### Complicated grief

The sadness of losing someone you love never goes away completely, but it shouldn't remain center stage. If the pain of the loss is so constant and severe that it keeps you from resuming your life, you may be suffering from a condition known as *complicated grief*. Complicated grief is like being stuck in an intense state of mourning. You may have trouble accepting the death long after it has occurred or be so preoccupied with the person who died that it disrupts your daily routine and undermines your other relationships.

Symptoms of complicated grief include:

- ▶ Intense longing and yearning for your deceased loved one
- ▶ Intrusive thoughts or images of your loved one
- ▶ Denial of the death or sense of disbelief
- ▶ Imagining that your loved one is alive
- ▶ Searching for your deceased loved one in familiar places
- ▶ Avoiding things that remind you of your loved one
- ▶ Extreme anger or bitterness over your loss
- ▶ Feeling that life is empty or meaningless

## The difference between grief and depression

Distinguishing between grief and [clinical depression](#) (/articles/depression/depression-symptoms-and-warning-signs.htm) isn't always easy as they share many symptoms, but there are ways to tell the difference. Remember, grief can be a roller coaster. It involves a wide variety of emotions and a mix of good and bad days. Even when you're in the middle of the grieving process, you will still have moments of pleasure or happiness. With depression, on the other hand, the feelings of emptiness and despair are constant.

Other symptoms that suggest depression, not just grief, include:

- ▶ Intense, pervasive sense of guilt
- ▶ Thoughts of suicide or a preoccupation with dying
- ▶ Feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness
- ▶ Slow speech and body movements
- ▶ Inability to function at home, work, and/or school
- ▶ Seeing or hearing things that aren't there

### Can antidepressants help grief?

As a general rule, normal grief does not warrant the use of [antidepressants](#) (/articles/depression/antidepressant-medication.htm). While medication may relieve 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 to seek professional help for grief

If you recognize any of the above symptoms of complicated grief or clinical depression, [talk to a mental health professional](#) (../mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm) right away. Left untreated, complicated grief and depression can lead to significant emotional damage, life-threatening health problems, and even suicide. But treatment can help you get better.

Contact a grief counselor or professional therapist if you:

1. Feel like life isn't worth living
2. Wish you had died with your loved one

3. Blame yourself for the loss or for failing to prevent it
4. Feel numb and disconnected from others for more than a few weeks
5. Are having difficulty trusting others since your loss
6. Are unable to perform your normal daily activities

### If you're feeling suicidal...

Seek help immediately. Please read [Suicide Help](/articles/suicide-prevention/are-you-feeling-suicidal.htm) (/articles/suicide-prevention/are-you-feeling-suicidal.htm), talk to someone you trust, or call a suicide helpline:

- In the U.S., call 1-800-273-TALK(8255).
- In the UK, call 08457 90 90 90.
- In Australia, call 13 11 14.
- Or visit [IASP](http://www.iasp.info/resources/Crisis_Centres) ([http://www.iasp.info/resources/Crisis\\_Centres](http://www.iasp.info/resources/Crisis_Centres)) to find a helpline in your country.

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