

# Grieving the Death of a Loved One



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- Some find it helps to *plan something to look forward to* each day, something that gives them a focus for the day.
- Sometimes *it helps to get involved*, in even a small way, in helping others. Working with others in a cause that is making a difference can bring renewed hope in life.
- Still others find a source of hope in their *spiritual beliefs, traditions and communities* in the midst of their grieving.

## One Final Word

Grieving is hard. Loss hurts. Healing takes time. In the midst of your grieving, be patient with yourself and others and do something kind for yourself each day. Be sure to ask for help when you need it. If you need assistance in finding help, we hope that you will call us. Call Allina Grief Resources at 651-628-1752.

## Resources

For information about grief support in the Twin Cities area, call the Allina Health Grief Resources Line at 651-628-1752. Or visit [allinahealth.org/griefresources](http://allinahealth.org/griefresources).

In other communities, call your local hospital or hospice to ask about grief support in your area.

The following book was cited as a source for this booklet:  
Coughlin, R. (1994) *Grieving: a love story*. New York: HarperCollins.

- Whatever you choose to do at these special times, remember you are grieving and therefore will not have the energy you have had in the past. Allow yourself to feel all your feelings. Share your memories of these special occasions with people who will listen.

### **Remember that grieving takes time**

Some things in life cannot be hurried if they are to be done effectively. Grief is one such process. As much as you might want the grief to be over now, it takes time. For many people, it can take as long as 2 or more years after the death to really feel like they are settling into their new life.

The legacy and memory of your loved one in your life will likely continue for a very long time. Because of this, there will be reminders that can create moments or periods of sadness long after the death. This does not mean that you did not grieve well at an earlier time. It just means that you will continue to have moments of sadness and a sense of loss. It is part of the human journey.

### **Rekindle hope**

Hope is a belief that the future holds the possibility of goodness. If it feels like you are in the midst of the barren winter of grief, it might be hard to believe there will ever again be a spring for you. Here are some things that other people have found helpful:

- For many people, *hope starts with small things*. It can begin by taking note of flowers, colors, sounds, tastes, letting even little experiences of joy and pleasure brighten one's day.
- For others, it is the *hope of other people that sustains them* until they begin to glimpse it for themselves. When they feel low, they surround themselves with hopeful people.

## **What is Grief?**

Grief is a whole-person response to loss. It involves our emotions, our thoughts, our bodies, our spirits, our whole selves.

How do people grieve? In every way imaginable!

- Some cry, others wail.
- Some ask questions, some want answers.
- Some scream or yell, others are quieter.
- Some want to be alone, others want friends and family close by.
- Some just want to keep busy, others find it hard to do much of anything.
- Some talk, others keep their thoughts and feelings inside.

Everyone grieves, but everyone does their grieving a little differently.

### **Some common responses to death**

#### **Shock**

Many people feel numb, or stunned, following a death. Others feel physically and emotionally agitated and find it hard to be still or to "think straight." Shock, in other words, takes many forms. Most people experience shock when someone close to them dies, even when the death has been expected.

#### **Anger**

It is common to feel anger, or even rage, after a death. Often, it is connected to sadness that a beloved person is dead. Anger might also be about specific things: words not said before the person died, or some which were said, about which we feel unfinished. There can be anger about the way in which the person died, even when the death occurred.

Sometimes people are angry at God or a universe in which such things happen. We might even be angry at the one who died for leaving us, or for leaving us with unresolved issues or decisions. Like shock, anger can arise for many reasons and in many forms.

### **Sadness**

Perhaps the most common response to a death is sadness. Someone's life is over. We miss them. We feel alone and lost, or we wanted more with and from them. Sorrow may seem to well up from deep inside and color every part of our lives in the days and weeks after the death of someone we love. Even months or years later, there can still be times of great sadness.

There are other feelings and thoughts that often arise when someone dies, including fear, guilt, denial, relief, and disbelief. It is very common to experience many emotions, not just one, or to feel differently on different days. At times, there may not be any strong emotion at all. We just feel numb!

### **Some suggestions**

#### ■ **Give yourself room to grieve.**

Remember that the amount of time that one person needs when dealing with any of these feelings and reactions will be different from the time another person needs.

#### ■ **Draw on the strengths and resources of others.**

When shock and other feelings are especially strong, it can be hard to make clear decisions. At moments like these, avoid quick decisions. Draw on the strengths and resources of others to help you make wise choices.

#### ■ **Be careful about cheering up too quickly.**

Be careful about believing that you need to cheer up too quickly. Wanting ourselves and others to feel better is natural, but trying to cheer up too quickly can get in the way of what you need to do, which is to grieve.

given us, for better or worse. It reminds us of those who have played important roles in our lives.

### **If people offer help, let them**

Support and care can take many forms. Some people are good at offering words of comfort. Others pick up pieces we overlook. Some are willing to drive us somewhere or run an errand for us. Allowing others to help can be useful to you and meaningful to those who offer assistance. Keep a list of things you need help with. When people ask what they can do, let them know. If it is too much to think of what people can do, you may want to ask someone else to organize helpers.

### **Plan ahead for holidays and special occasions**

Holidays and special occasions like birthdays and anniversaries can be especially hard for people who are grieving. They not only miss the person who died but also grieve the memories of past special times, as well as what will never be. The best way to care for yourself at these times is to plan ahead.

- Well ahead of the day or season, decide who you want to be with, where and what you want to do.
- At holiday times, shop early or use catalogues. Let go of unnecessary activities. Allow others to help you with holiday tasks. Pick carefully the social functions that you will attend. Choose to be with people who are good for you.
- Think about how you will honor the memory of your loved one at these times. Some people light a candle or donate money as a memorial for the one who died, or volunteer for a cause that was important to their loved one.

“Finally, I have found a place where I can talk without hesitation.” Grief support groups are offered regularly in many community settings, including several Allina Health hospitals.

**For more information, call the Allina Health Grief Resources Line at 651-628-1752.**

### **Consider using rituals of closure**

Rituals can help with changes and transitions in life. All cultures have rituals concerning death that are a part of their traditions. You may choose to practice the rituals of your culture or spiritual tradition, alter them in light of your own beliefs, or create new or additional ones. Along with the funeral ritual, you may want to consider other rituals in response to the death of your loved one. For example, when a father died, his ex-wife brought their children one last time to his home, along with some friends, to tell stories of things that had happened in that place. That was a ritual of closure.

Some people like to plant a tree, or make or give something in memory of the person who died. It’s a way of extending the memory of the person beyond their death. Others write letters or keep a journal.

Rituals, at their best, promote healing and help mark important life events. Consider including some rituals in your journey of grieving. If you need some help in creating or finding meaningful rituals, ask friends or spiritual leaders for assistance.

### **Keep some meaningful things**

Keeping some special items, often small things, can be a help in grieving. These things remind us of the person who died and their place in our lives. It is part of the legacy they have

## **Dealing With Decisions**

Some of the stress that is experienced after a death is caused by all the decisions that need to be made. Some decisions are personal; others involve family members, or services or businesses in the community. Making funeral plans, arranging memorials, deciding who will do what, what to do with possessions, and “How do I get on with my life?” are a few examples. We encourage you to think about the following suggestions as decisions are made:

- **Practice good self-care.**  
Take care of personal needs, like getting enough sleep and eating healthy foods. Maintain exercise and routines. Doing so will help your decision-making.
- **Take time.**  
Give yourself time for both grieving and decision-making. Remember that each can take time. Some decisions will best be made after some initial grieving. Many suggest waiting a year or so before making major decisions.
- **Explore the choices.**  
As you consider decisions, explore the choices, plan ahead and seek advice. Evaluate the choices in light of your personal values and the cultural or spiritual beliefs and traditions that are important to you.
- **Consider the wishes of the family.**  
A death can greatly test the strength and bonds of a family. Families are made up of people who have shared but varied histories, many opinions, and a mixture of life experiences. They might — or might not — share the same values. In other words, families are made up of people with both similarities and differences. When making decisions and plans, these differences can enrich the process because of the unique viewpoint each person brings. These differences can also make decision-making harder.

In general, it can help to consider the wishes of all members of the family. This includes everyone who can aid the process of grieving. Many families find that the wishes the person who died shared with them are important guides in decision-making. They ask themselves, “What will work best to honor the one who died AND serve the needs of the family?”

Allow each other space and time for the way each needs to cope. Listen to each other’s views. Decide what, for you, is more important, and what is less important.

If you need help, ask for the perspective of people you trust who might not be as emotionally involved, such as counselors, spiritual advisors or trusted friends.

■ **Avoid quick decisions about possessions.**

Whether or not a person owned a little or a lot, decisions will have to be made about their possessions: what to keep and what to do with what you choose not to keep. At this time, avoid making decisions too quickly. Many have found that they later yearned for items that they gave away in the early days and months of their grief. Take time to make important decisions about possessions.

■ **Seek respected counsel when needed.**

Seek respected counsel about financial and legal decisions if you are unsure of what to do. Be careful about signing any papers without the review of an advisor, an attorney or someone else whom you trust.

At the time of your loved one’s death, you might have received another booklet, *When a Loved One Dies*. It has information that may help with some of the immediate decisions, especially ones related to financial and legal matters. If you don’t yet have one, call the Allina Health Grief Resources Line at 651-628-1752 and one will be sent to you.

## **Complicated relationships**

When a relationship with the person who died was complicated, or when there was a great deal of conflict, grieving can be especially difficult. In particular, when relationships have had “secrets” or where there has been abuse, the survivors are often left with troublesome feelings and a belief that they can’t talk about them. This can have serious emotional — and physical — consequences. In such situations it will probably be important to get professional support and counsel in order for healing to happen. If you need such a referral, the hospital chaplains and social workers, your health care provider or spiritual advisor can help you find the resources you need.

## **What Can Help?**

### **Talking helps many people**

One of the most common ways of grieving is through story-telling. People tell stories about the person who died. They tell their story of how they were related to the person. Many people remember incidents or moments of joy, delight or pain. Whatever was true for you, find people with whom you can talk and tell your story.

In some cases, a family might have trouble talking with each other about a death. Often, family members think that by talking about it they will cause each other more pain. Other times, people just need a bit of space and time before they can talk.

What is important is to find people with whom you can talk; if not your family, then friends. Many people find support groups for people who are grieving to be very helpful. As one person said about a support group,



If you have any concerns or “what if” questions about the care that was given, or decisions that were made by you or others prior to your loved one’s death, **contact your health care provider, the hospital patient representative, or other hospital or hospice personnel** (unit manager, social worker, chaplain) so that your concerns can be addressed.

### **Guilt and blame**

Feelings of guilt are common when people are grieving. Nearly all relationships have a mixture of positive and negative feelings and experiences. It is natural after a death for people to feel regret over what was negative in a relationship. As a result, we can sometimes fail to remember the positive things. People also may feel guilty about the many emotions they experience in their grief, such as anger at the one who died for leaving them, jealousy of others who don’t seem affected by the loss, or relief that the death finally came after a long illness. We may even feel guilty because we could not protect our loved one from death or because they died instead of us.

Blame is closely connected to guilt, especially when our guilt results in blaming ourselves. It is not uncommon to feel a need to blame someone or something for the death, in particular if the person was young or died suddenly, or if we wonder if the death could have been prevented.

Guilt and blame are powerful emotions. If you are experiencing either or both, remind yourself that people usually do the best they can with the information and resources they have at the time. Find people you trust with whom you can honestly share your feelings without fear of judgment. If you find that feelings of guilt or blame are becoming especially troublesome in your grieving, it might be wise to talk with a counselor, spiritual advisor, or other professional in order to sort out the issues and take the necessary steps to resolve your concerns.

## **When Children Grieve**

Children grieve. Because of their age, development and life experiences they will likely grieve in different ways than adults grieve. Children do not have the resources that adults have, but they do grieve as deeply and need our support.

### **Needs of children when someone dies**

#### ■ **honest, clear and understandable information**

Children, especially those under the age of 12, are usually quite basic in their thinking and in their use of language. It is important to tell children of all ages the truth in language they can understand.

Do not say the person is “lost,” “has gone on a trip” or “is asleep.” Such language is likely to confuse and even disturb children. “Why would Grandma go on a trip and not call me?”

Be sure that the child understands what caused the death. Sometimes children can imagine that something they did or said (or even something that they thought or felt, such as jealousy or anger) caused the death. Further, if they hear that someone died in their sleep, they might fear that they, too, might die in their sleep. It is important to be sensitive to such interpretations and to talk about them when they occur. As children grow and mature it will be important to talk with them occasionally about the death so that their understanding of it can grow.

#### ■ **reassurance about adult grief**

When a death occurs, it is not necessary for adults to hide their grieving from children. However, children and adolescents can become frightened following a death if it appears that the key adults in their lives are emotionally out of control or distant. It is very important that children be assured that, in spite of the death, they will be cared for and safe.

If you are concerned that your own grief is preventing you from being emotionally available for your children, invite someone you trust to help out for a time.

■ **permission to have their own thoughts and feelings**

Adults must be careful about imposing their reactions on children. Children need to have their own responses to the death.

■ **normal routine**

In the midst of all that happens following a death, maintaining a child's routine can help give a sense of security. Avoid making major changes in the first months, unless there is no good alternative. Change often increases stress for children.

### **Things to remember about children and grief**

Children may have a "short feeling span" as well as a "short attention span." Therefore they may not be able to handle intense feelings for long periods of time and may switch to other activities and play. This does not in any way mean they are less affected by the death than others.

Children, like most of us, need to feel safe, emotionally and physically, before they can share difficult feelings. They need a strong relationship with at least one trusted adult in order to explore their feelings of grief. Help children identify adults with whom they feel secure in sharing their feelings.

Children under the age of 5 will probably believe that death is reversible. It is not uncommon for a young child who attends a grandfather's funeral to ask something like, "Will Grandpa be able to come to my birthday party?" For young children, keep answers brief, simple, and repeat when necessary.

If you find that feeling depressed is getting in the way of your being able to function over an extended period of time, it will be important to seek help from your health care provider or a counselor. If you have a history of clinical depression, this is certainly a time to take very good care of yourself and to seek counsel if you need it.

### **Second guessing**

When someone close to us dies, it is normal and natural to ask "what if" questions. Depending on the nature of the illness or injury that caused someone's death, many of those close to the person often look back over the past, wondering:

- "What else could I have done?"
- "What could I have done differently?"
- "If only I had..., then the doctors might have detected the illness sooner."
- "Did I do the right thing in asking that the treatment be stopped?"

Other second guessing may center on the actions of others, such as:

- "If only the doctors had..."
- "If only my loved one had..."

If you become upset by second guessing of any kind, it is important that you share your concerns and feelings with people who can help.

If you are focusing on your own actions, remember that **hindsight is much more clear than foresight**. Beyond that, we are human and we have our limitations.

If you are focusing on the actions of others, *seek good counsel*. Start with friends you trust. Check with them about your reactions and concerns before over-reacting or under-reacting.



## Loss overload

Experiencing many losses in a short period of time can result in *loss overload*. For example, some people, in addition to grieving the death of a loved one, may also be dealing with a divorce, the loss of a job, the serious illness of another friend or relative or even a number of recent deaths.

It isn't easy to grieve one loss, especially a death. It's even harder to deal with many losses at the same time. At such times, one's own health and well-being can be at risk.

If you are experiencing loss overload, remember that each individual loss will need to be grieved. Try to deal with the losses in ways that you can handle, not everything at once. Consider getting some help in sorting through it all and figuring out how best to care for yourself. It may be time for professional support and care to help you through a truly difficult period.

## Depression

It is not unusual for people who are grieving to feel depressed. They can find it difficult to gather the energy for even the most basic daily tasks. Many times a death follows a long illness that has put enormous strain on the energy and resources of family and friends. As a result, feelings of depression have often been present for families and friends even before the loved one died.

Sometimes depression occurs when people bottle up painful feelings, especially anger. In such cases, it can help to express those pent-up feelings in acceptable ways and to talk about them with trusted people.

## Help children remember

Small children may not be able to remember the loved one who has died. Photographs or videos of the person who died, especially ones in which the child is also present, may help the child remember, as well as help the child to express feelings and concerns that need to be acknowledged.

Continue to remember birthdays and anniversaries to keep the memory alive.

Tell stories that will show the love, concern, pride and joy that the person who died had for the child.

Special possessions of the deceased person might become keepsakes and cherished mementos for the child.

## Ways to encourage a child to communicate

- Listen carefully.
- Listen for underlying feelings and concerns.
- Let the child know that their feelings and concerns are OK.
- Respect the child's views.
- Let the child's questions guide the conversation.
- Answer honestly, and only after you are sure what is being asked.
- Stories, games, play, art, or music might be natural ways to help children talk about their feelings and thoughts.
- Ask the child to tell you what they have heard in order to provide an opportunity to clear up any misunderstanding.

## Things that Make Grieving Difficult

Grieving is hard. Loss hurts. It can also be difficult to see another family member or friend suffer because of the death. Furthermore, there is often not much community support for grieving people. Days off from work are limited. Things DO have to be done at home, school, or on the job. Many people want those who are grieving to “get back to normal” quickly.

### Getting back to normal

One woman found it hard to stay calm when a dear friend asked her too soon after her husband’s death:

“When do you figure you’re going to be back to your old personality?” After a long and awkward silence she responded to her friend, “Never!... when you have watched your husband die for 9 months, you are never the same again.” (Coughlin)

Some people describe the transition following a death as moving to a “new normal.” In other words, while it can be important to return to familiar patterns and routines, even to believe that life can be good again for us, it is important to realize that our lives change when someone significant to us dies.

### Loss of dreams

Some deaths are more difficult because of the hopes and dreams we had for or with that person: retirement dreams, plans for children or grandchildren, things we had planned to say to, or do with, the person.

For others, the loss of dreams has to do with pictures or expectations we have held for ourselves. One woman yelled, “I don’t want to be a widow!” She liked being a wife and could not yet think of herself differently.

The same can occur for parents, partners, even friends. “I wish I had been there when he died!” represents the loss of a dream for many people.

Still another kind of shattered dream is the manner of death. Some people want to die at home, in their own bed. They may have expressed a desired way or timing for their death. When a death occurs at a time or place which did not fit with the “plan,” the death can be more difficult to bear.

Be aware that you may be grieving more than the death of your loved one. You may be grieving the “loss of dreams.”

### Deaths that are difficult to talk about

Some deaths can be more difficult because of the way they happened or because of prejudices in society. It might not be easy, for example, to tell others that a loved one’s death was self-inflicted or resulted from carelessness, violence or a disease that is hard to talk about.

In such situations, survivors may have feelings of guilt, blame and embarrassment that complicate their grieving. There can also be tension and conflict among family members as people try to cope with and make sense of the death. Remind yourself that family and friends can have differing opinions and still be able to comfort one another while grieving.

Grieving can be harder if the manner or cause of death is not easy to talk about. If this is true, try to find people with whom you can talk about all your feelings and reactions, especially the difficult ones. Don’t cut yourself off from support and care. Time alone, while good in small doses, can keep you from the care you need.