

# Grief and Bereavement



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**Summary:** Everyone will experience the loss of someone important to them at some point in their life. When people are faced with a loss of someone (or something) important, they may react by feeling sad, numb, upset and angry. Most of time, people will be able to grieve their loss and move on. Sometimes however, people may have troubles grieving their losses. If this happens, the good news is that many things that can be done to support a person with their grieving.

## What is Grief?

Grief is the normal response of sadness and other feelings that come from losing someone close to you.

Feeling grief is a natural part of life, because at some point, we will all face the loss of a loved one.

Bereavement is the period after a loss during which a person experiences grief and is in mourning.

## What is Normal Grief?

After the death or loss of a loved one, you may feel all sorts of feelings such as feeling:

- Sad
- Anxious, worried or scared
- Empty and numb
- Angry

You may find yourself having physical reactions such as:

- Problems concentrating
- Loss of appetite
- Difficulty sleeping

You may find yourself turning to your spiritual beliefs and religion as a support. On the other hand, others may also find themselves questioning their spiritual beliefs and religion.

All of these are normal ways that people can respond to grief.

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## What is the Grieving Process?

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In general, people go through various steps when they experience a loss, which include:

- Accepting the loss
- Expressing, letting out the feelings that come from the loss, e.g. sadness, anger, guilt, etc.
- Adjusting to living without the person that you have lost.
- Moving on with life, by finding other activities or people of meaning.

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## How Long Does Bereavement Last?

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The amount of time that people spend in their bereavement period can vary widely. If you have lost someone close to you, it can easily be months or even years.

In the beginning, you may feel tearful and cry whenever you think of the person that you have lost. Over time however, as you are able to let out your tears, and accept the loss, you will be able to move on and heal.

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## Dealing with different types of Losses

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**Loss of a pet.** People can become very close to their pets, which become essentially like a part of the family, and thus, the loss of a pet can be just as painful as the loss of a fellow human being.

**Loss of a child.** It is difficult losing a child, as it goes against the natural order. Children are simply not supposed to die ahead of their parents.

**Loss of a spouse.** Losing a spouse is particularly difficult. You may find special anniversaries and events difficult. You may also find it hard to cope practically. For example, if your spouse was the main one who did groceries, or who did the cooking, then you will need to find a way to cope with this change.

If you have lost a spouse, you will need some time to grieve the loss. When you are feeling stronger, consider the following:

- Updating your will
- Speak with your lawyer to designate who will help make medical decisions for you, in the event you are unable to make your own medical decisions
- Transferring joint property to your name
- Reviewing your life, disability and other insurance
- Taking care of any other tasks that your spouse used to do, e.g. banking, paying bills, etc.

**Loss due to suicide.** Dealing with suicide can be difficult. You may find yourself feeling angry at the person for ending their life. On the other hand, you might feel guilty or responsible for the loss.

**Planned and expected losses:** In cases such as cancer or terminal illnesses, you may experience anticipatory grief, the mourning that occurs when you are expecting death. Grief is never easy, but with anticipatory grief, at least it gives you an opportunity to prepare for the loss. It gives you a chance to express your feelings to your loved one, and to ensure that you have resolved any unresolved issues.

**Unplanned loss:** When a loss is sudden and unexpected, it tends to be more overwhelming because it is unexpected. You might have been in the midst of a disagreement or conflict with your loved one, which may contribute to guilt.

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## How Can I Cope with a Loss?

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## Do's

- **Do express your feelings.** Sometimes people learn that they are supposed to be “strong”, and they try to repress their feelings. However, feelings need to come out. Whether it is talking, writing, drawing, or other means, find a way to express your feelings.
- **Do accept whatever feelings you are having.** Whether you are feeling angry, sad, guilty, your feelings are never wrong. They are simply how you feel to what has happened.
- **Do let out the tears.** For strong, overwhelming feelings, it is important to allow yourself to cry. Crying is a natural way how our brains process overwhelming feelings. Unfortunately, some people (especially males) may have grown up in an environment where they learned that they shouldn't cry. On the contrary, tears are important in the grieving process, and after a healthy cry, people feel better.
- **Do seek out support from supportive people.** Consider spending time with caring family and friends. You may simply want to spend time with them, so that you don't feel alone. Or you may want to talk about your feelings. Let them know that you appreciate their support, and that you just need someone to listen.
- **Do participate in grieving rituals such as funerals and memorial services.** By going, you will have an opportunity to let out your feelings, and be able to receive support from others. It can be very helpful to see that you are not alone, and to see how others cope and deal with grief.
- **Do keep up healthy daily routines** such as:
  - Eating regularly
  - Exercising regularly
  - Getting to sleep on time.
- **Do find some positive meaning out of what has happened.** If you can find some way to make some positive meaning out of your loss, it will help you cope.

## Don'ts

- **Don't make any major life changes.** Sometimes after a loss, you may feel like making major changes, such as moving, changing your job. Try to wait before making any major changes in your life.
- **Don't forget about the kids.** If you have lost your spouse, and if you have kids, then don't forget about them! There are many things that you can do as well, in order to help your kids cope.
- **Don't keep your feelings suppressed.** While in certain situations it may be necessary to repress your feelings a little bit, in the long run, it is important to be able to express those feelings.
- **Don't turn to unhealthy coping strategies such as drugs and alcohol.** Don't mask your feelings by using alcohol, drugs, or other unhealthy behaviours.

## Supporting a Family Member or Friend who is Grieving

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If you have a family member or friend who is grieving, you may find some of the following helpful.

### Do's

- **Be there for the person grieving.** Show up and offer your assistance and support. Let them know that you are available to listen, to spend time, or help out.

**Provide empathy and validation for however they are feeling.** When you are with your loved one who is sad, just acknowledge that they are feeling sad and accept that.

- **Provide practical and useful support.** If your loved one is overwhelmed, offer practical support such as offering to provide or make a meal; help out with laundry or cleaning; picking up groceries; driving or accompanying them to appointments or other practical things.
- Be careful when you say things like "I know what's like -- I lost my \_\_\_ too." No matter how similar things can seem on the surface, every person's individual experience is unique.

### Don't

- Don't offer 'cliched' statements, no matter how rational or logical they may seem. When someone is overwhelmed with emotions, it may be tempting to say logical sounding things but it can often end up sounding as if you don't understand. It's simply safer to not say these types of things.
- Are you trying to support someone who has lost their child?
  - Don't say things like "You can have another one."
- Are you trying to support someone who has lost a spouse?
  - Don't say, "You find someone else."

## When to see a professional

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Consider seeing a professional if symptoms of grief are so severe that:

- You are having troubles functioning at home, work or school
- It is affecting your relationships
- Symptoms are not getting better despite several weeks or months

Ways to seek help include going to a:

- Family physician
- Counselor/therapist such as a social worker, psychologist
- Bereavement groups.

## Grief Counseling and Therapy

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Grief counseling helps you with the grieving process. Goals in grief counseling include:

- Accepting the loss by talking about the loss
- Identifying and expressing feelings associated with the loss, particularly difficult feelings such as anger and guilt
- Identifying what is missed about the deceased person, so that other ways can be found to compensate for those things
- Identifying helpful coping strategies for the loss

## About this Document

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Written by members of the Department of Psychiatry and Family Medicine at the University of Ottawa. Reviewed by members of the Family Medicine Program at the University of Ottawa, including Dr's Farad Motamedi; Mireille St-Jean; Eric Woollorton (2014).

## Disclaimer

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