

# Coping with grief after loss



## Losing someone you love can change your world



After loss, you often miss the person or the pet who has died and you want them back. You may feel sad, alone, or even angry. You might have trouble concentrating or sleeping. If you were a busy caregiver, you might feel lost when you're suddenly faced with lots of unscheduled time. These feelings are normal. There's no right or wrong way to mourn. Scientists have been studying how people process grief and are learning more about healthy ways to cope with loss.

The death of a loved one, whether it is a friend, loved one, work colleague or family pet, can affect how you feel, how you act, and what you think. Together, these reactions are called grief. It's a natural response to loss. Grieving doesn't mean that you have to feel certain emotions. People can grieve in very different ways.

Cultural beliefs and traditions can influence how someone expresses grief and mourns. For example, in some cultures, grief is expressed quietly and privately. In others, it can be loud and out in the open. Culture also shapes how long family members are expected to grieve. "People often believe they should feel a certain way," says Dr. Wendy Lichtenthal, a psychologist at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. "But such thoughts can lead to feeling badly about feeling badly. It's hugely important to give yourself permission to grieve and allow yourself to feel whatever you are feeling. People can be quite hard on themselves and critical of what they are feeling. Be compassionate and kind to yourself."

## Adapting to Loss

Experts say you should let yourself grieve in your own way and time. People have unique ways of expressing emotions. For example, some might express their feelings by doing things rather than talking about them. They may feel better going on a walk or swimming, or by doing something creative like writing or painting. For others, it may be more helpful to talk with family and friends about the person who's gone, or with a counselor.

"Though people don't often associate them with grief, laughing and smiling are also healthy responses to loss and can be protective," explains Dr. George Bonanno, Columbia University. He has found that people who express flexibility in their emotions often cope well with loss and are healthier over time.

"It's not about whether you should express or suppress emotion, but that you can do this when the situation calls for it," he says. For instance, a person with emotional flexibility can show positive feelings, like joy, when sharing a happy memory of the person they lost and then switch to expressing sadness or anger when recalling more negative memories, like an argument with that person.

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Grief is a process of letting go and learning to accept and live with loss. The amount of time it takes to do this varies with each person. "Usually, people experience a strong acute grief reaction when someone dies, and at the same time, they begin the gradual process of adapting to the loss," explains psychiatrist Dr. M. Katherine Shear at Columbia University. "To adapt to a loss, a person needs to accept its finality and understand what it means to them. They also have to find a way to re-envision their life with possibilities for happiness and for honoring their enduring connection to the person who died."

Researchers like Lichtenthal have found that finding meaning in life after loss can help you adapt. Connecting to those things that are most important, including the relationship with the person who died, can help you coexist with the pain of grief.

## Types of Grief

About 10 percent of bereaved people experience complicated grief, a condition that makes it harder for some people to adapt to the loss of a loved one. People with this prolonged, intense grief tend to get caught up in certain kinds of thinking, says Shear, who studies complicated grief. They may think the death did not have to happen or happen in the way that it did. They also might judge their grief—is it too little or too much—and focus on avoiding reminders.

"It can be discouraging to experience complicated grief, but it's important not to be judgmental about your grief and not to let other people judge you," Shear explains. You may begin to feel the loss of your loved one even before their death. This is called anticipatory grief. It's common among people who are long-term caregivers.

You might feel sad about the changes you are going through and the losses you are going to have. Some studies have found that when patients, doctors, and loved ones directly address the prospect of death before loss happens, it helps survivors cope after the death.

## Life Beyond Loss

Although the death of a loved one can feel overwhelming, many people make it through the grieving process with the support of family and friends. Take care of yourself, accept offers of help from those around you, and be sure to get counseling if you need it.

## Tips for Coping with Loss

- Take care of yourself. Try to exercise regularly, eat healthy food, and get enough sleep. Avoid habits that can put your health at risk, like drinking too much alcohol or smoking.
- Talk with caring friends. Let others know if you need to talk.
- Try not to make any major changes right away. It's a good idea to wait for a while before making big decisions, like moving or changing jobs.

- Join a grief support group in person or online. It might help to talk with others who are also grieving. Check with your local hospice, hospitals, religious communities, and government agencies to find a group in your area.
- Consider professional support. Sometimes talking to a counselor about your grief can help.
- Talk to your doctor. Be sure to let your health care provider know if you're having trouble with everyday activities, like getting dressed, sleeping, or fixing meals.
- Be patient with yourself. Mourning takes time. It's common to feel a mix of emotions for a while.

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