

# Coping With Loss: Bereavement & Grief

*In our hearts, we all know that death is a part of life.  
In fact, death gives meaning to our existence because it reminds us how precious life is.*

## **Coping With Loss**

The loss of a loved one is life's most stressful event and can cause a major emotional crisis. After the death of someone you love, you experience bereavement, which literally means "to be deprived by death."

## **Knowing What to Expect**

When a death takes place, you may experience a wide range of emotions, even when the death is expected. Many people report feeling an initial stage of numbness after first learning of a death, but there is no real order to the grieving process. Some emotions you may experience include denial, disbelief, confusion, shock, sadness, yearning, anger, humiliation, despair or guilt.

These feelings are normal and common reactions to loss. You may not be prepared for the intensity and duration of your emotions or how swiftly your moods may change. You may even begin to doubt the stability of your mental health. But be assured that these feelings are healthy and appropriate and will help you come to terms with your loss. Remember: It takes time to fully absorb the impact of a major loss. You never stop missing your loved one, but the pain eases after time and allows you to go on with your life.

## **Mourning a Loved One**

It is not easy to cope after a loved one dies. You will mourn and grieve. Mourning is the natural process you go through to accept a major loss. Mourning may include religious traditions honoring the dead or gathering with friends and family. Mourning is personal and may last months or years.

Grieving is the outward expression of your loss. Your grief is likely to be expressed physically, emotionally, and psychologically. For instance, crying is a physical expression, while depression is a psychological expression. It is very important to allow yourself to express these feelings. At first it may seem helpful to separate yourself from the pain, but you cannot avoid grieving forever. Someday those feelings will need to be resolved or they may cause physical or emotional illness.

Many people report physical symptoms that accompany grief. Stomach pain, loss of appetite, sleep disturbances and loss of energy are all common symptoms of acute grief. Of all life's stresses, mourning can seriously test your natural defense systems. Profound emotional reactions may occur. These reactions include anxiety attacks, chronic fatigue, depression and thoughts of suicide. An obsession with the deceased is also a common reaction to death.

## **Dealing with a Major Loss**

**A child's death** arouses an overwhelming sense of injustice — for lost potential, unfulfilled dreams and senseless suffering. Parents may feel responsible for the child's death, no matter how irrational that may seem. Parents may also feel that they have lost a vital part of their own identity.

**A spouse's death** is very traumatic. In addition to the severe emotional shock, the death may cause a potential financial crisis if the spouse was the family's main income source. The death may necessitate major social adjustments for the surviving spouse.



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**Elderly people** may be especially vulnerable when they lose a spouse because it means losing a lifetime of shared experiences. At this time, feelings of loneliness may be compounded by the death of close friends.

**A loss due to suicide** can be among the most difficult losses to bear. They may leave the survivors with a tremendous burden of guilt, anger and shame. Survivors may even feel responsible. Seeking counseling during the first weeks after the suicide is particularly beneficial and advisable.

## **Living with Grief**

Coping with death is vital to your mental health. There are many ways to cope effectively with your pain.

**Seek out caring people.** Find relatives and friends who can understand your feelings of loss. Join support groups with others who are experiencing similar losses.

**Express your feelings.** Tell others how you are feeling; it will help you to work through your grieving.

**Take care of your health.** Maintain regular contact with your physician and be sure to eat well and get plenty of rest. Be aware of the danger of developing a dependence on medication or alcohol.

**Accept that life is for the living.** It takes effort to begin to live again in the present and not dwell on the past.

**Postpone major life changes.** Try to hold off on making any major changes, such as moving, remarrying, changing jobs or having another child. You should give yourself time to adjust to your loss.

**Be patient.** It can take months or even years to absorb a major loss and accept your changed life.

**Seek outside help when necessary.** If your grief seems like it is too much to bear, seek professional assistance to help work through your grief. It's a sign of strength, not weakness, to seek help.

## **Helping Others Grieve**

**Share the sorrow.** Allow them, even encourage them, to talk about their feelings and share memories.

**Don't offer false comfort.** It doesn't help the grieving person when you say "it was for the best" or "you'll get over it in time." Instead, offer a simple expression of sorrow and take time to listen.

**Offer practical help.** Babysitting, cooking and running errands are all ways to help someone who is in the midst of grieving.

**Be patient.** Remember that it can take time to recover from a major loss. Make yourself available to talk.

**Encourage professional help when necessary.** Don't hesitate to recommend professional help when you feel someone is experiencing too much pain to cope alone.

## **Looking to the Future**

Remember, with support, patience and effort, you will survive grief. Someday the pain will lessen, leaving you with cherished memories of your loved one.

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