

Grief from losing a loved one is a normal experience that, unfortunately, everyone goes through at some point. Grief is the most common experience humans have, but that reality doesn't help the emotional, psychological, and physical pain the death of a loved one can bring. Days stuck on a spinning wheel of thoughts: "What if I had just..?" "Why didn't I..?" "I wish I had..!" And nights tormented by dreams, images and memories of the deceased, and sudden waking to the reality that they are really gone; the moments between sleep and wake can become the most dreaded time of the day.

Losing a loved one is hard enough when it's "natural" or "expected," such as due to old age or an extended battle with cancer. If the death was traumatic in some way, such as sudden, violent, suicide, homicide, or if the person was young, there are a multitude of additional stressors that can compound the psychological experience.

Here are some common experiences when it comes to grief:

- At first, feeling like it can't be real.
- Overwhelming waves of sadness, loss, longing, and crying that seem to come on at random times and leave just as suddenly. You may think it's done with, but then it returns and each time, you have to confront the loss all over again. These waves of grief tend to be at their highest intensity for several months following the death, and tend to lessen on their own with time, with spikes along the way.
- Seeking comfort in various ways.
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Grieving the Death of a Loved One

Here are some ways to help yourself:

- Don't make major decisions or life changes when you're in the sharp pangs of grief.
- Give it time. This one's a cliché for a reason. Time really does help ease the physical and emotional waves of grief. We are naturally wired toward healing.
- Cry it out. It's natural for humans to feel the urge to cry when sad, so when it comes on, let the tears flow. (Science fact: Crying allows the body to literally release stress hormones through tears.) Because the sudden waves of grief can show up at any point in the day or night, sometimes people isolate in anticipation of being embarrassed if the uncontrollable urge to cry comes on in public. There is no need to isolate or explain yourself (although sometimes disclosing to someone near you what's happening can actually forge surprising new friendships). Another valid cliché: The ones who matter don't mind; the ones who mind don't matter. You might want to bring tissues when you go out in public, just in case, and locate the nearest bathroom if you start to feel the urge to cry and prefer to seek temporary private solace.
- View and treat yourself as you would your best friend in the same situation. What would you tell them if they were experiencing the same circumstances as you are now?
- Normalize your thoughts and emotions. There is no "right" way to grieve, and what you experience during grief varies depending on the specific circumstances of the death, your own life circumstances, and your relation to the deceased, among other factors. Resist judging your emotions as good or bad when you feel them; instead, practice observing their ebb and flow with kindness and compassion for yourself. Remind yourself that you are not alone in how you feel. The strong likelihood is if you're having a thought or feeling, in all of human history others have had/are having it, too. Podcasts, blogs, and grief support groups are great ways to be reminded of this, which can be really comforting. You are not alone in how you're thinking and feeling...ever.
- Keep on a regular routine of eating/nutrition, hygiene, exercise, hydration, and sleep, even if it doesn't seem enticing or important in the moment. The following are general guidelines for taking care of yourself, but always check with your doctor and follow medical advice specific to you. Eat 3 square meals a day plus healthy snacks between. Exercise 30 minutes a day in a way that works for you; even long walks can be incredibly helpful if you don't feel like doing your usual cardio or strength training. Go to bed early and allot yourself the full 8 hours, even if your sleep quality sucks for a while. Doing these things that you know are good for you, even-- especially-- when you don't feel like it, may be difficult when you're grieving. But once you're doing them, I think you'll be surprised by how much of a difference it makes in how you feel. The more irrational thoughts that are often part of grief-- for example, blaming yourself for a loved one's death when it really had nothing to do with you-- can get stronger when you're tired, unkempt, hungry, or dehydrated. You may start to notice this pattern for yourself. For example, you know that when your mind starts to go haywire with irrational or morbid thoughts and it's 9:00 PM it may be time for bed.
- Use healthy coping skills that give you comfort and joy - or something approximating the joy you knew before your loss-- and remind you that not all is bad in the world and there are still things to look forward to. What were our general coping mechanisms prior to the loss of a loved one become our amplified go-tos in times of distress, so make sure yours are uplifting or helpful in some way. These might include deep breathing and meditating, positive affirmations (see the end of this article for a list related to grief), yoga, exercise, dancing, gardening, writing poetry/stories, cooking, making art, listening to music, journaling, interacting with friends and family, being in nature and taking care of a pet, among others.

- **Develop thought boundaries with yourself so that grief doesn't take over your whole life. You are still alive, and you deserve to live a good life, as painful as that may be to acknowledge at times when you're grieving. This might look like scheduling a certain amount of daily or weekly time to talk and think about your loved one, then moving on with your day knowing you have already planned more time to devote to them. Being in therapy can provide a great way to practice thought boundaries, because you can decide with your therapist that you will, for example, practice focusing on your deceased loved one only during therapy sessions and related homework exercises. Or, it could be simply determining where your limit is in terms of your thoughts; for example, maybe you decide in advance that once you're repeating the same distressing thought over and over without resolution (ruminating), you know that it's time to take action to resolve the thought or to let it go and do something positive.**
- **If you had conflict with the deceased, or if they hurt you, work toward forgiving them. If the hurt was so bad that you don't think you can or should forgive them (people do heinous things sometimes), focus instead on the benefits of forgiveness for you, not them. Therapy can help you work through this process.**
- **Keep it specific to this experience. Sometimes a sad or traumatic event can cause us to generalize our experiences into global beliefs about people, life, and the world. In reality, both good and bad things happen in life, bad things sometimes happen to people who overwhelmingly do good with their lives, and good things sometimes happen to people who overwhelmingly do bad. Life can really suck and be unfair sometimes, and it can also be mundane or wonderful at other times.**

When should you seek professional help?

- **First and foremost, as mentioned above, you can seek therapy at any point in time. It is not just for obvious "problems," but also intended for processing experiences**

