



## Coping with the Loss of a Loved One

*Jill Adaman, Ph.D.*

Losing someone we love is one of the most painful experiences most of us will have in our lifetimes. Grief can feel overwhelming at times. It changes not only our daily lives, but also our larger sense of being supported in the world. We may find that our basic sense of faith or optimism about life is challenged. Fortunately, people are resilient and can often cope with more difficult circumstances than they realize. Grief does become more manageable with time and until then, we can learn ways to take care of ourselves and let others support us.

### Understanding grief

- Grief is not just sadness. It is a mix of many feelings which may include sadness, anger, frustration, and possibly regret about past actions or words left unsaid. In some cases, there may be an element of relief if your loved one had been suffering.
- You may have heard of the [five stages of grief](#) identified by Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, which include denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Not everyone experiences all of these stages, and you may experience them in a different order or find yourself moving back and forth between stages. This is absolutely normal.
- Grief tends to come in waves. You might feel overwhelmed one moment, better the next moment, then overwhelmed again. Sometimes you might be triggered by seeing or hearing something that reminds you of your loved one, or by a memory that pops into your head. It can be comforting to remind yourself that over time, the waves become less intense and happen less frequently.
- Although you will always miss your loved one, you will get better at navigating life without them physically present. This is what we mean by healing. It happens over time, and the timeline is different for everyone.

### Getting through the days

- Grief can take different forms in different people. You might have trouble sleeping, a lack of appetite, headache, stomach or digestive problems, or other physical symptoms. Many people have difficulty concentrating or thinking clearly. You may find yourself feeling irritable or crying at unexpected times. Some people have a delayed reaction to grief; they seem unemotional about the loss at first but then feel it full force a few days or weeks later. Whatever way your grief shows itself, try to be patient with yourself and take care of yourself the way you would take care of a beloved relative or friend.

- Try to eat, sleep, and move your body a bit when you can. Grief can make it harder to do any of these, so be kind to yourself. See your doctor if you have significant insomnia.
- Take your time in deciding what to do with your loved one's belongings. You'll know when you're ready. Ask others to help if that feels right for you, and feel free to take a break of any length whenever you need one.
- If at all possible, don't make any big decisions in the early weeks of grief.
- Even while you're grieving, try to take in whatever moments of comfort that you can. Try to allow yourself to notice and enjoy a beautiful day, a good meal, a funny TV show, or a loving comment from a friend. Your loved one would want this for you.

## Managing relationships with family and friends

- Let others provide support. Certain people may help you feel understood and cared about by sitting with you when you cry. Others might be better at cooking or mowing the lawn for you. Ask for what you need.
- Some people won't know what to say, or will say the wrong thing. Try to remember that most people mean well. If someone inadvertently says something unhelpful to you, take what comfort you can in their concerned tone of voice or facial expression, or in the way they touch your shoulder or embrace you.
- People close to you may experience or express their grief differently than you do. Some people express their feelings openly, while others keep things inside. Keep in mind that although someone may experience their grief differently than you do, they may still be in pain about the loss.
- Family relationships may change over time, as people begin taking on new roles that were once filled by the lost loved one. It may take time for everyone to figure this out and adjust to it.

## When you need more support

If you find yourself unable to function because of your grief, if you are having thoughts of harming yourself in any way, or just would like someone to talk to in a difficult time, please reach out for professional support. This doesn't mean you're weak or mentally ill; it just means you need some guidance in accessing your inner strength and resources.

You can find help through [PPA's Psychologist Locator](#), other state and national organizations of mental health professionals, or recommendations from trusted friends or health professionals. Websites such as [What's your Grief](#) and [Grieving.com](#) can provide helpful information, support, and resources. Grief is a difficult journey, but it does get easier and you don't have to walk alone.

***Talk to someone who can help! To find a licensed psychologist near you, use PPA's Psychologist Locator at <https://www.papsy.org/locator>. For information on other mental health topics, go to <https://www.papsy.org>, then "Resources" and then "Public Resources". PPA offers these articles for informational purposes only; they are not a substitute for professional diagnosis and treatment.***