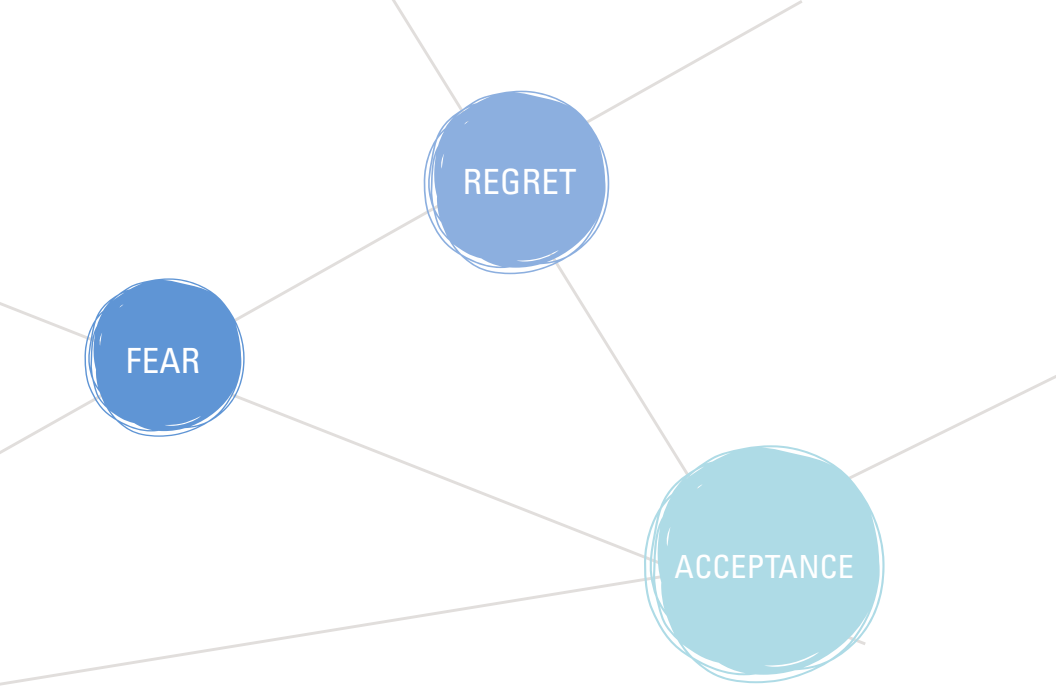


Coping with Grief



THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS
MD Anderson
Cancer Center
Making Cancer History®





Understanding Grief

Grief is the sorrow or mental distress that is felt about a loss. Like love, grief can be a strong and sometimes overwhelming emotion. Grief is a natural response to losing someone or something. Grief is part of being human, but the grieving process is a personal experience. Everyone grieves in different ways.

Anticipatory Grief

People can experience grief before a loss happens. People may grieve a loved one's death or their own death that is expected in the future. Grief before a loss is called anticipatory grief. Anticipatory grief does not prevent or decrease grief after the death.

Responses to Loss

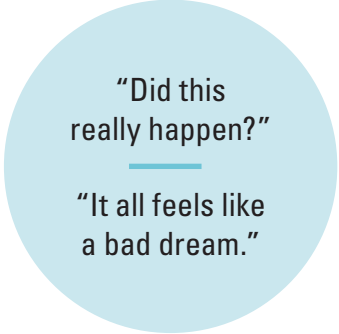
Grieving a loved one's death can bring up a variety of intense emotions. It may not be easy for your mind and heart to accept and adjust to a life after a loved one dies. How a loved one dies may affect your response. Often, grief involves mourning the loss of your loved ones and the life you wished to have with them.

People may experience unfamiliar emotions, thoughts and behaviors when they are grieving. As you work through your grief, remember:

- Your relationship with your loved one can affect how difficult it is for you to adjust.
- Emotions may change quickly. You may go back and forth between emotions.
- There is no correct order or timeline for emotions.
- Your response to a death may be different from other people's responses.
- Allowing yourself to feel your emotions can help you eventually move past the emotions.


Shock and Disbelief (Denial)

It may take time to fully process a death. It is common to feel as if you do not have emotions. It may be hard to cry or feel sad. Your mind might try to deny that the death is real, even though you know it happened.



"Did this
really happen?"

"It all feels like
a bad dream."



“God, if you
bring them back,
I promise I will
be better.”

Bargaining

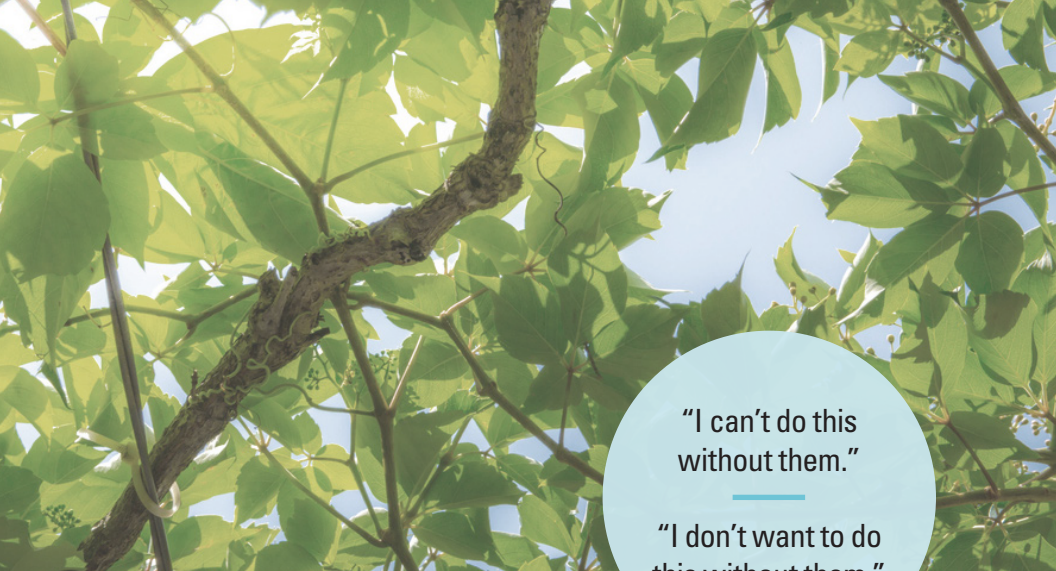
A loss can make you feel helpless. When you feel helpless, it is common for the mind to try to control the situation. Your mind might try to bargain with ideas about different realities. You may bargain for things that you know cannot happen.

Anger

Death and the changes in your life after a death can feel unfair. You may feel angry at yourself, the person who died, other people or God. Feeling angry might seem unacceptable or confusing, but anger is a normal response to grief and there are healthy ways to express it.

Healthy ways to express anger include:

- Talk with someone you trust about what makes you feel angry.
- Write about what makes you feel angry.
- Release anger through activity (run, swim or some other strenuous physical activity).



"I can't do this
without them."

"I don't want to do
this without them."

Fear

Experiencing a loss may raise questions and feelings of uncertainty. Having fears about the future is common.

Be patient with yourself as you build the courage to face the unknown future.

Despair

Despair is a heavy, dark feeling. While experiencing these feelings, it may feel like despair will last forever. When you are grieving, despair can be a natural, appropriate response.

Clinical depression is different from despair.

Symptoms of clinical depression tend to be constant and difficult to overcome. Only a professional can diagnose clinical depression and recommend treatment for it.

If you think your symptoms may be clinical depression, tell your doctor or seek support from a counselor.

Seek help right away if you have harmful thoughts, feelings or behaviors, such as:

- Increased use of alcohol, prescription or over-the-counter medicines or illegal drugs
- Impulsive urges or behaviors such as driving recklessly or doing other dangerous things
- Feeling rage beyond normal anger
- Having thoughts about death, suicide or hurting yourself

Support is always available at the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. **Call or text 988.**

To chat online or use the videophone for Deaf/Hard of Hearing American Sign Language users, visit [988Lifeline.org/Talk-To-Someone-Now](https://988lifeline.org/Talk-To-Someone-Now).

Regret

It is common to think about the things that you could have said or done and wonder if what happened may have been prevented. Regrets are a normal part of loss. Remember, different choices may not have changed what happened.

“Why?” Questions

People often ask why a death happened or why it happened to them. Grief can also cause spiritual struggles. It is OK to have these thoughts and ask these questions. You may find that no answer makes you feel better. The truth is that love, heartbreak and loss are all part of life.

Acceptance

It takes time to see how you can adjust to a world without your loved ones. Accepting the death of a loved one does not mean that you feel OK about it. Accepting a new reality means you learn to live with it. It is OK for grieving to take a lot of energy. It takes a lot of work to move through your feelings and towards fully accepting a death. Little by little, you will find yourself putting energy into living your life.

It is helpful to look for ways to remember and stay connected to your loved one. Adjusting to a new way of life is a slow process.

Other Responses

Emotions are not the only symptoms of grief. You may notice other ways grief affects your ability to do daily activities. It may be difficult to focus and concentrate. It is common to want to only think or talk about your loved one. Some people may even see or hear the person who died. Over time, the intensity of these symptoms decreases.

Physical signs of grief are also normal, including:

- Loss of energy
- Loss of appetite
- Getting sick more often
- Headaches, backaches and chest pain
- Increased blood pressure
- Nausea
- Weight loss or weight gain
- Changes in sleep

If these symptoms continue for a long period of time, talk with your doctor.

You may want to schedule a routine physical check-up at this time. Your doctor can help monitor your health and decide if medicines may help you.

Tips for Coping With Grief

- **Be patient.** It takes time to process things. There is no timeframe for your emotions.
- **Express your emotions.** Do not try to hide what you feel. Allow yourself time to feel and move through whatever you are feeling.
- **Learn about grief.** Understanding grief can help you process your experiences and emotions. See page 13 for suggested resources.
- **Let others help you.** People want to help. Accept their help when you need it.
- **Spend time with others.** Time alone is OK, but try to remain open to being around other people who can give you needed support.
- **Eat well.** Eat foods that are good for you. Your body needs good nutrition during stressful times.
- **Exercise.** Even a short walk can help. If getting started is difficult, set a small goal such as 5 to 10 minutes of exercise each day. Gradually increase the length of time.
- **Rest.** If it is difficult to fall asleep, try to find a routine that helps you relax at night. You may try a warm bath or shower, gentle stretching, calming scents or caffeine-free tea. Limit daytime naps or keep them short so they don't affect nighttime sleeping.
- **Make time for activities you enjoy.** Even a small break from focusing on grief can help.
- **Seek support.** Support outside of family and friends can be valuable after a loss. Seek support from people such as spiritual mentors and leaders, community support groups, online support groups and grief counselors.

Stay Connected

Caring for yourself while you honor your loved one does not mean you forget them or ever fully let go. Creating a new bond helps maintain those connections with loved ones who have passed on as your life continues. This may look differently over time and can be a slow process.

Allow yourself time to have the thoughts, questions and emotions that come to you. It is OK to feel stuck sometimes. Acknowledge your feelings and make space to remember and honor your loved one in meaningful ways. Staying connected to their memory may help you find understanding and purpose in the world without them.

The ways you stay connected to your loved one should be meaningful to you. To help you find what is best for you, consider these practices:

- Start new traditions that honor your loved one.
- Care for your spiritual needs. Spiritual activities can include spending time in nature, meditation, prayer, listening to or playing music, reading inspirational books, visiting a special place or giving gifts related to what your loved one valued.
- Choose to remember positive, meaningful moments.
- Make space in your thoughts for gratitude.

Your thoughts and practices may change over time. Try to keep your expectations realistic. Be patient with your emotions. It may take longer than you expect to see yourself making changes.



Make time to
remember special
times together.

Helping Children With Grief

Children grieve in different ways than adults. A child's age, beliefs, personality, relationship to the person who died, relationship to surviving caregivers, and reaction of adults around them may affect their response to a loved one's death.

Children often experience grief in short spurts. They may seem to be sad for a short time and then want to return to normal activities. This can be difficult for adults to understand, but it is a normal part of a child's grief.

It is important that children receive support and reassurance. Accept what they say and do not tell them how they should feel.

- **Keep daily routines as normal as possible.**
Encourage the child to participate in their regular activities. Primary caregivers and familiar people can provide care and support.
- **Encourage children to talk about their feelings.**
Accept what they say and do not tell them how to feel.
- **Share your emotions.** It encourages children to also share their emotions with you. It is OK for children to see you cry. Talk about the person who died and the happy memories you all share. Include them in the family grieving process.
- **Teach them about your family's beliefs and rituals.**
It is OK for children to attend services, but do not force them to attend.
- **Consider the child's age.** Age affects the way children understand and respond to death. Some children respond by returning to younger behaviors. As children get older, they understand that death is final. Teenagers already experience many personal changes, so they often feel intense grief.



- **Listen.** It is important to know what children are thinking. When you listen, you can know how to help them understand what has happened and what will happen next.
- **Be patient.** Children may ask the same questions many times. Be patient, loving and consistent in your responses.
- **Be honest.** It is important to talk about illness and death with children. Honest information is best. It is good to show children that talking about death and cancer and asking questions is OK. Be gentle and use simple words to be clear.
- **Provide assurance.** Children may use their imagination to explain things they do not understand. They may think they did something to cause the death. Assure the child that they are not to blame.
- **Provide comfort.** Stay physically close to the child and spend extra time with them. Tell the child you love them and that you will care for them.
- **Take care of yourself.** Grieving children do better when they have a healthy adult giving support to them. Ask for extra support when you need it.
- **Seek more support.** A child's school can help provide support and identify behavior changes.

Age-appropriate books can help children and teenagers understand death and process their emotions. Reading a book with your child may help start important conversations about grief.

When to Seek Professional Help for a Child


Professional support may be appropriate if a child shows any of these symptoms for more than one month or if symptoms begin to affect the child's quality of life:

- Weight loss or weight gain
- Frequent illness, headaches or stomach aches
- Changes in sleeping or eating patterns
- Being too quiet or withdrawn
- Fear and anxiety
- Aggressive play or acts of rage
- Trouble with school, friendships or extra-curricular activities
- Risky behavior, such as using drugs, alcohol or reckless driving
- Sudden mood changes
- Ongoing tearfulness

School counselors, child or adolescent therapists and pediatricians can provide support.

Get help right away if the child:

- Mentions they do not want to be alive anymore
- Admits to having thoughts of suicide or harming themselves
- Call or text 988



Remind children
that they are safe
and loved.

MD Anderson Resources

Social Work

Counseling, support groups
and community resources

MDAnderson.org/SocialWork

MDAnderson.org/SupportGroups

713-792-6195

The Learning Center

Recommended books and
resources for children and adults

[MDAndersonTLC.LibGuides.com/
Grief](https://MDAndersonTLC.LibGuides.com/Grief)

713-745-8063

Spiritual Care

Counseling, guidance and
prayer (available 24 hours a day)

713-792-7184

More Resources

American Cancer Society

Information on grief
and local resources

Cancer.org

800-ACS-2345

The Dougy Center

Resources for grieving
children and adults

Dougy.org

866-775-5683

Compassionate Friends

Support for parents
who have lost a child

CompassionateFriends.org

877-969-0010

Bo's Place (Houston)

Programs for grieving
children and families

BosPlace.org

713-942-8339

National Alliance for Grieving Children

Resources for helping
grieving children

ChildrenGrieve.org

866-432-1542

Houston Grief Support

A support group for adults

HoustonGriefSupport.org

281-487-8787

