

# Understanding Grief



The American Psychological Association defines grief as the anguish experienced after significant loss, usually the death of a beloved person. It is important to understand that grief is not limited to the loss of people, as we can experience this feeling of anguish following the loss of a pet, a job, a home, or other valued possessions.

Grief affects all of us differently. Societal, cultural, and generational differences can affect how we experience and process grief, and it is crucial to be mindful of this when supporting our loved ones through difficult times. Although we want to help our loved ones when dealing with such stressors, there is no “quick fix” for overcoming grief. Research shows that most people can successfully work through grief and loss with the passage of time if they have social support and healthy habits. However, the length of time varies, and experts emphasize that there is no “normal” amount of time for someone to grieve. Research also suggests that most people do not go through “phases of grief” in progressive steps, underscoring the idea that grief presents itself differently in every individual.

## What Does Grief Look Like?

Emotional symptoms of grief:

- **Shock and denial** – When people experience a loss of a loved one, or a major loss of something of value such as a job or home, it can be extremely difficult to accept what has happened. It will take time to adjust to a new normal.
- **Sadness** – Sadness is recognized as one of the most universally experienced symptoms of grief. When coping with loss, you may experience feelings of emptiness, numbness, loneliness, or despair.
- **Guilt** – It is normal to experience regret or guilt when coping with loss. Sometimes we can feel guilty about the things we didn’t say or do, or we can feel guilty about being relieved that a loved one died after a difficult health battle. These feelings are valid and normal.
- **Fear** – Any significant loss can trigger an array of fears and worries. Losing a loved one may trigger fear about your own mortality or may leave you worried about what life will be without your loved one.

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## Strategies for Processing Grief

While there is no “right way” to grieve, there are a few strategies that can help us cope with grief in a healthy way:

- ✓ **Use your social support network.** Draw upon your family and friends and accept the assistance they offer you.
- ✓ **Join a support group.** When your family and friends don't quite understand what you are experiencing, you can find comfort and validation in support groups.
- ✓ **Find a creative way to express your feelings.** Journaling, painting, drawing, or singing can help release the painful feelings that you experience as you cope with grief.
- ✓ **Plan ahead for difficult holidays.** If you are dealing with the loss of a loved one, birthdays, holidays, and anniversaries can be triggering. It is completely normal to re-experience the more intense feelings of grief during these times.
- ✓ **Physical health is important.** Maintaining your physical health during times of grief is vital. This can feel more difficult than usual but maintaining a healthy body will have profound effects on your mental health. Try your best to get an appropriate amount of sleep, eat balanced meals, and exercise when possible.

## How Mental Health Professionals Can Help

There are many factors that complicate and intensify grief. For many people, the sadness we feel after losing someone or something that we valued never goes away. However, if your grief and pain is constant, severe, and interfering with your normal life, you may benefit from additional support from a licensed mental health professional. Therapists are trained to help you implement strategies to better cope with loss and resume a more normal life.

## Who do I contact to find out more?

Referrals for therapy and medication management can be made by physicians, mental health professionals, other allied health professionals, or from the patient or family directly. Please contact us as listed below for more information.



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