



UNDERSTANDING GRIEF

Grief is a normal reaction to losing a loved one. How we grieve is personal and unique. Each person responds differently. Indeed, members of the same family may grieve in different ways. Some people cry a lot, while others cry very little or not at all. Some express their grief through talking and verbally processing; others prefer sitting in quiet reflection.

Grief can be expressed through action, rather than emotion, such as washing the car, organizing the funeral, and cooking meals. Grief manifests itself through a range of behaviors. We may grieve one loss one way, and another loss another way. It is important to recognize these differences and give ourselves and others the space to mourn in whatever way fits. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.

Grief is often characterized as an emotional response, where we feel sad, depressed, angry, confused, afraid or any number of feelings—sometimes all at once! Grieving also includes physical responses, such as headaches, muscle aches, nausea, exhaustion, changes in appetite, trouble sleeping, and even menstrual irregularities. Our bodies grieve, too. On top of that, our brains are affected. Cognitive reactions can include an inability to concentrate, trouble remembering things, continually thinking about the loss, dreaming about it, and trying to make sense of the loss. It is not unusual to have difficulty at work or school.

Having no right or wrong way to grieve can be helpful in allowing us to do it our own way; but it also means that there are no instructions to follow. There is no manual to tell us how to do it. Grief is not linear: it does not progress in a straight line or move through specific stages. There is no concrete time frame. This can feel overwhelming. And it can be disorienting, even paralyzing.



Over time, grief becomes familiar and less intense. We learn what helps us to regain our balance. We figure out who we are now and come to a new understanding of the world. It is not always smooth sailing, yet we can develop confidence in our ability to navigate the waves. We don't "get over it," but we can move forward and engage in life. And we can learn how to honor and continue the bond we have with our loved one.

Guidance

Let yourself feel the emotions that come up

Express your feelings in ways that work for you: write in a journal, listen/play music, create, build. Crying releases endorphins and expels toxins, as evidenced by the different chemical make-up of tears from grief compared to other tears.



Your body needs fuel to grieve.

Eat Right

Get good sleep

Use a meditation / sleep app, limit screen time before bed, set your phone to nighttime mode.

It releases more of those feel-good endorphins. (So does petting a dog or a cat!)

Exercise

Watch alcohol consumption

Alcohol is a depressant. It might dull the pain in the moment, but too much can ultimately make you feel worse.

Losing a loved one is like having open heart surgery without the anesthesia. Think about how you would take care of yourself from that perspective.

Cut yourself some slack

Allow yourself to laugh and enjoy life.

Embrace moments of joy. It's okay to take breaks from grieving. It doesn't mean you have forgotten them or are disloyal.



Reach out to others. Isolating yourself is different from restorative alone time. Don't be afraid to ask for help. This could be talking to a trusted friend or going to therapy.

www.adec.org has a list of therapists who specialize in grief.

www.psychologytoday.com has a list of therapists across all specialities.

Remember: Grief is not a sign of weakness. It is love turned inside out.



Rayna Vaught Godfrey, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist in private practice in Jacksonville, Florida. She specializes in grief and loss with adolescents and adults. She received her master's and doctoral degrees in counseling psychology at the University of Denver. A member of the Association for Death Education and Counseling, she has presented at international conferences and workshops on the experience of losing a sibling in adulthood. Her website is www.raynagodfrey.com.