



Understanding Grief

What is grief?

Whenever you experience the death of a loved one, you also experience grief. There are many types of loss during our lifetime, and each one affects us differently. Because we each grieve in our own way, we cannot predict how we will cope with a loss or how our grief will present. You may feel guilty, angry or anxious, and there is no way to know how long these feelings will last, or how the future will be without your loved one. However, there are many steps you can take toward healing during your time of grief.

1. Accept the reality of the loss.

At first it may seem like a bad dream. The first step toward healing is accepting that your loved one will not return. It may be helpful to reflect on the details of their death in order to bring this reality to your understanding. Accepting the loss is acknowledging it and learning to live without your loved one. Know that it is okay to cry. Tears are a healthy way to express your sadness and move toward healing. Since the process of grieving has many ups and downs, be patient with yourself.

2. Face the emotional experience.

The process of grieving includes many strong feelings. Family members and friends will try to help you, but you may find it easier to talk to someone outside of your usual support group. Part of healing is taking the time to explore your intense feelings about your loved one. Working through these feelings will be hard but can help you come to terms with your loss.

3. Adjust to life without your loved one.

Learning to go on after the death of a loved one can be very difficult. Initially, you may try to continue living your life as it was before your loss. It might be difficult to keep up with the demands of daily living at this time. It is important to prioritize tasks and recognize that you cannot do everything at once. During this time of adjustment you may want to delay making important decisions about moving or changing jobs. This will help you focus on the current changes you are experiencing after the death of a loved one, without adding additional stress.

4. Remember and keep living.

You may think that letting go of the emotional pain you feel means letting go of the memories you have of your loved one. That is not the case. Your loved one will always be a part of your life as they continue to live in your memories. It is possible to find healthy ways to remember your loved one while moving forward with your life. You are not replacing or forgetting them — rather, you are choosing to continue living your life by seeking fulfillment and developing meaningful, new relationships. It is also important to take care of your physical body and seek outside interests.

Symptoms of grief

Some of us may have been raised in families that encouraged us to deal with emotional situations with a “stiff upper lip.” Tears may be viewed as a sign of weakness, which may lead you to manage your grief alone believing that no one can understand how you feel. You may worry “something is wrong with me” or be embarrassed that others will label you as being “emotional” or “crazy.”

You do not have to experience grief alone. Seek support from those you trust and allow others to comfort you. It is important for you to realize that the loss you are experiencing is most likely a normal, natural and expected response to the death of a significant person in your life.

Grief response varies among individuals and may result in some of the following symptoms:

- Physical symptoms: Difficulty sleeping, shortness of breath, nausea, loss of appetite, poor concentration, headaches
- Emotional Symptoms: Guilt, regret, anger, irritability, sense of loss, crying spells, lack of motivation, loneliness, isolation

Complicated grief

When you are grieving, it is expected that you will experience sadness, numbness, guilt and anger. As time passes, these emotions will likely become less intense. However, if your grief is getting worse or the pain of your loss is so great that it interferes with your ability to function day to day, you may have developed a condition known as “complicated grief.”

Symptoms of “complicated grief” may include:

- Intense longing for your loved one
- Extreme images and thoughts or reminders of your loved one
- Problems accepting the death
- Imagining your loved one is alive
- Looking for your loved one in familiar places
- Avoiding things and places that remind you of your loved one
- Delay in your grief reaction due to other life events or losses
- Intense bitterness and anger about your loss
- Nightmares and unexplained fears

The exact cause of “complicated grief” is unknown. Risks for developing complicated grief include:

- An unexpected or violent death
- Death due to suicide
- Limited support system
- Dependent relationship with the loved one
- Difficulty coping with change
- Traumatic childhood experiences, such as abuse or neglect

You should avoid setting time expectations on your grief. If you feel that things are not getting better for you, consider contacting a support group, your health care provider or a mental health professional. If you allow complicated grief to continue without getting help, you are increasing your risk for other health problems.

When “complicated grief” does not improve, you may be at risk for:

- Depression
- Suicidal thoughts
- Anxiety
- Substance abuse, including alcohol and nicotine
- Long term problems with daily living
- Health problems such as heart disease, high blood pressure and cancer

Grief and depression

It may be difficult to distinguish between grief and depression since they share many of the same features. The grief reaction is more often experienced as a roller coaster of emotions with a mix of good days and bad days. Depression usually presents as constant feelings of emptiness, worthlessness and hopelessness. Other symptoms that suggest depression include slower body movements, slower speech, ongoing sense of guilt, feeling your life is empty or without meaning, difficulty functioning in your normal daily routines, anger, feeling easily agitated, thoughts of suicide or a preoccupation with dying.

If you recognize any of these symptoms, it is important that you contact a mental health professional or your health care provider immediately. There is effective treatment available. If you have thoughts of suicide, talk to someone you trust. **If you think you may act on suicidal thoughts, call 911 or seek help immediately.**

Ways to help children cope with grief

While it is natural to want to protect a child from experiencing grief and loss, it is a very important time for children to learn about death and grieving. Children experience grief and loss based on their age, developmental stage, life experiences and relationship with the deceased. Children experience grief by alternating between play and strong expressions of emotion. Normal reactions may be anger, sadness, withdrawal or silence.

Children should be encouraged to talk about their feelings and their understanding of death and grief. They need to be told of the death as soon as possible. They should be given information about what to expect at funeral or memorial services. Just like adults, each child will handle the loss differently, and it is best if others can respect their individual grieving process.

Children may revisit their loss as they move through stages of growth and as their understanding of loss changes. It isn't unusual for children to have more questions and reactions as they get older. Openly communicating throughout the child's development is the most helpful way to assist a child in dealing with his/her feelings of grief and loss. In addition to verbal communication, sometimes art, play, music and dance can also be used to encourage children to express their feelings. Ongoing support and care can help them cope with loss and lead a healthy life.

Support

Grieving takes a considerable toll on your emotions, so it is a good idea to seek support. Your personal support network, faith community, support groups or counseling may be helpful. Pay attention to your own needs. Don't believe that is a sign of strength to grieve alone in silence.

Many different types of community-based support are available. Some are self-help or mutual help groups, which are facilitated by someone who has experienced the same type of loss. Some support groups are led by mental health professionals. These may focus on bereavement in general or on specified losses, such as loss of a spouse/child or loss due to suicide/violent crime.

Many communities now have programs geared specifically toward helping children cope with loss. Children, like adults, often feel very alone in their grief. Support groups may give children the comfort of being with others who are experiencing similar feelings.

Information and resources

GRIEF/BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT GROUPS IN MADISON COUNTY

Caring House Support Group Hospice Family Care program

Bereavement support group for children ages 3-18

203 Longwood Drive • Huntsville, AL

(256) 650-1212 | caringhousehuntsville.com

Grief (Bereavement) Support Group

Covenant Presbyterian Church | 301 Drake Avenue • Huntsville, AL

(256) 881-4501

GriefShare Mt. Zion Baptist Church

Grief support group

228 Mount Zion Road • Huntsville, AL

(256) 837-2665

GriefShare Willowbrook Baptist Church

Grief support group

7625 Bailey Cove Road • Huntsville, AL

(256) 656-2109

Grief Support Group for Adults Hospice Family Care program

203 Longwood Drive • Huntsville, AL

(256) 650-1212

Helping Other Parents Endure Hospice Family Care program

Support group for parents who have experienced the death of a child

203 Longwood Drive • Huntsville, AL

(256) 650-1212

Resolve Through Sharing

Bereavement support group for parents grieving the loss of their baby through miscarriage, stillbirth or newborn death

Huntsville Hospital Dowdle Center

(256) 265-7440 | hhwomenandchildren.org/bereavement-care-program

FINDING HELP OUTSIDE OF MADISON COUNTY

- Check with your local hospice for bereavement support groups
- Check with your local church, mosque, temple or synagogue for support groups
- Get individual help from a professional (social worker, counselor, psychologist, etc.)
- Check local mental health clinics
- Check with your funeral home; many provide support groups, lending libraries and counseling services

If you feel the need to talk to someone IMMEDIATELY, please call:
Suicide Prevention Hotline · 1-800-273 TALK (8255) or
Helpline · (256) 716-1000 or 1-800-691-8426

Helpful readings

- "Living When a Loved One Has Died" by Earl Grollman
- "When a Parent Dies: A Guide for Adults" by Edward Myers
- "The Grieving Child: A Parent's Guide" by Helen Fitzgerald
- "How to Go on Living After the Death of a Child" by Larry Peppers
- "When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens about Grieving and Healing" by Marilyn Gootman
- "No Time for Goodbyes: Coping with Sorrow, Anger and Injustice After a Tragic Death" by Janice Harris Lord
- "But I Didn't Say Goodbye" by Barbara Rubel
- "My Friend, I Care" by Barbara Karnes
- "I Can't Stop Crying" by John D. Martin and Frank D. Ferris

 **Bereavement Care Team**

Huntsville Hospital · Huntsville Hospital for Women & Children · Madison Hospital