

GRIEF & LOSS

Bereavement: Grieving the Loss of a Loved One

Few things compare to the pain of losing someone you love. While there's no way to avoid intense feelings of grief, there are healthier ways to come to terms with your loss.

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What is bereavement?

Bereavement is the grief and mourning experience following the death of someone important to you. While it's an inevitable part of life—something that virtually all of us go through at some point—losing someone you love can be one of the most painful experiences you'll ever have to endure.

Whether it's a close friend, spouse, partner, parent, child, or other relative, the death of a loved one can feel overwhelming. You may experience waves of intense and very difficult emotions, ranging from profound sadness, emptiness, and despair to shock, numbness, guilt, or regret. You might rage at the circumstances of your loved one's death—your anger focused on yourself, doctors, other loved ones, or God. You may even find it difficult to accept the person is really gone, or struggle to see how you can ever recover and move on from your loss.

Bereavement isn't limited to emotional responses, either. Grief at the death of a loved one can also trigger physical reactions, including weight and appetite changes, difficulty sleeping, aches and pains, and an impaired immune system leading to illness and other health problems.

The level of support you have around you, your personality, and your own levels of health and well-being can all play a role in how grief impacts you following bereavement. But no matter how much pain you're in right now, it's important to know that there are healthy ways to cope with the anguish and come to terms with your grief. While life may never be quite the same again, in time you can ease your sorrow, start to look to the future with hope and optimism, and eventually move forward with your life.

Grieving the loss of a pet

Bereavement isn't restricted to the death of a person. For many of us, our pets are also close companions or family members. So, when a pet dies, you can experience similar feelings of grief, pain, and loss. As with grieving for human loved ones, healing from the loss of an animal companion takes time, but there are ways to cope with your grief.

Read: [Coping with Losing a Pet](#).

Understanding the grief of losing a loved one

The intensity of your feelings often depends on the circumstances of your loved one's death, how much time you spent anticipating their loss, your relationship to them, and your previous experiences of bereavement. Of course, just as no two relationships are the same, no two losses are ever the same, either.

In short, the more significant the person was in your life and the more feelings you had for them—regardless of their relationship to you—the greater the impact their loss is likely to have.

Losing a spouse or partner

In addition to the emotional impact of grief, when you lose a spouse or romantic partner, you often have to deal with the stress of practical considerations such as funeral arrangements and [financial issues](#), too. You may also have to [explain your spouse's death to your children](#) and find a way to comfort them while simultaneously dealing with your own heartache.

Losing a romantic partner also means grieving the loss of your daily lifestyle, the loss of a shared history, and the loss of a future planned together. You may feel alone, despairing, and worried about the future. You could even feel guilty about somehow having failed to protect your partner, or angry at your loved one for leaving you.

Losing a parent

For younger children, losing a mother or father can be one of the most [traumatic things](#) that can happen in childhood. The death of the person you relied on, the person who loved you unconditionally, can shake your foundations and leave a huge, frightening void in your world. It's also common for young children to blame themselves for a parent's death, prolonging the pain of grief.

Even as an adult child, losing a parent can be extremely distressing. It's easy to feel lost and for all those old childhood insecurities to suddenly return. You may gain some solace if your parent had a long and fulfilling life, but their death can also cause you to consider your own mortality. If you've lost both parents, you're suddenly part of the older generation, a generation without parents, and you're left to grieve your youth as well. And if your relationship with your parent wasn't an easy one, their death can leave you wrestling with a host of conflicting emotions.

Losing a child

The loss of a child is always devastating. You're not just losing the person they were, you're also losing the years of promise, hopes, and dreams that lay ahead. The grief can be more intense, the bereavement process harder to navigate, and the [trauma more acute](#).

As a parent, you feel responsible for your child's health and safety, so the sense of guilt can often be overwhelming. Whether you lost your child in a miscarriage, as an infant, or after they'd grown up and left home, losing a child carries an additional weight of injustice. It feels unnatural for a parent to outlive their child, making it that much harder to find meaning and come to terms with their death.

Losing a child can also put a huge strain your relationship with your spouse or partner and make parenting any surviving children emotionally challenging.

Losing a friend

Close friendships bring joy, understanding, and companionship into our lives. In fact, they're vital to our health and well-being, so it's no wonder we can feel their loss so gravely.

When a close friend dies, though, it's easy to feel marginalized, the closeness of your relationship not given the same significance as a family member or romantic partner. This can lead to what's called [disenfranchised grief](#), where your loss is devalued or you feel judged or stigmatized for feeling the loss so deeply.

Losing someone to suicide

The shock following a suicide can seem overwhelming. As well as mourning the loss of your loved one, you may also be struggling to come to terms with the nature of their death and the stigma that suicide can still carry.

While you may always be left with some unanswered questions about your loved one's suicide, there are ways to resolve your grief and even gain some level of acceptance. Read: [Suicide Grief](#).

Grieving your loss

Whatever your relationship to the person who died, it's important to remember that we all grieve in different ways. There's no single way to react. When you lose someone important in your life, it's okay to feel how you feel. Some people express their pain by crying, others never shed a tear—but that doesn't mean they feel the loss any less.

Don't judge yourself, think that you should be behaving in a different way, or try to impose a timetable on your grief. Grieving someone's death takes time. For some people, that time is measured in weeks or months, for others it's in years.

Allow yourself to feel. The bereavement and mourning process can trigger many intense and unexpected emotions. But the pain of your grief won't go away faster if you ignore it. In fact, trying to do so may only make things worse in the long run. To eventually find a way to come to terms with your loss, you'll need to actively face the pain. As bereavement counselor and writer Earl Grollman put it, "The only cure for grief is to grieve."

Grief doesn't always move through stages. You may have read about the different “[stages of grief](#)”—usually denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. However, many people find that grief following the death of a loved one isn't nearly that predictable. For some, grief can come in waves or feel more like an emotional rollercoaster. For others, it can move through some stages but not others. Don't think that you should be feeling a certain way at a certain time.

[\[Read: Coping with Grief and Loss\]](#)

Prepare for painful reminders. Some days the pain of your bereavement may seem more manageable than others. Then a reminder such as a photo, a piece of music, or a simple memory can trigger a wave of painful emotions again. While you can't plan ahead for such reminders, you can be prepared for an upcoming holiday, anniversary, or birthday that may reignite your grief. Talk to other friends and family ahead of time and agree on the best ways to mark such occasions.

Moving on doesn't mean forgetting your loved one. Finding a way to continue forward with your life doesn't mean your pain will end or your loved one will be forgotten. Most of us carry our losses with us throughout life; they become part of who we are. The pain should gradually become easier to bear, but the memories and the love you had for the person will always remain.

Seek support

When you lose someone you love, it's normal to want to cut yourself off from others and retreat into your shell. But this is no time to be alone. Even when you don't feel able to talk about your loss, simply being around other people who care about you can provide comfort and help ease the burden of bereavement.

Reaching out to those who care about you can also be an important first step on the road to healing. While some friends and relatives may be uncomfortable with your grief, plenty of others will be eager to lend support. Talking about your thoughts and feelings won't make you a burden. Rather, it can help you make sense of your loved one's death and find ways to honor their memory.

Lean on friends and family. Even those closest to you can struggle to know how to help during a time of bereavement, so don't hesitate to tell others what you need—whether it's helping with funeral arrangements or just being around to talk. If you don't feel you have anyone you can lean on for support at this difficult time, look to widen your social network and [build new friendships](#).

Focus on those who are “good listeners”. When you're grieving the loss of a close friend or family member, the most important thing is to feel heard by those you confide in. But the raw emotion of your grief can make some people very uncomfortable. That discomfort can cause them to avoid you, say thoughtless or hurtful things, or lose patience when you talk about your loss. Don't use their actions as a reason to isolate, though. Turn to those who are better able to listen and provide comfort.

Join a bereavement support group. Even when you have support from those closest to you, family and friends may not always know the best ways to help. Sharing your grief with others who have experienced similar losses can help you feel less alone in your pain. By listening to others share their stories, you can also gain valuable coping tips. To find a [support group](#) in your area, contact nearby hospitals, funeral homes, or counseling centers, or call a bereavement hotline listed below.

Talk to a bereavement counselor. If you're struggling to accept your loss or your grief feels overwhelming, try talking to a [bereavement or grief therapist](#)—in-person or via video conferencing online. Confiding in a professional can help you work through emotions that may be too difficult to share with family or friends, deal with any unresolved issues from your loved one's death, and find healthier ways to adapt to life following your loss.

[\[Read: Online Therapy: Is it Right for You?\]](#)

Draw comfort from your religion. If you're religious, the specific mourning rituals of your faith can provide comfort and draw you together with others to share your grief. Attending religious services, reading spiritual texts, praying, meditating, or talking to a clergy member can also offer great comfort and help you derive meaning from your loved one's death.

Using social media for grief support

Memorial pages on Facebook and other social media sites have become popular ways to inform a wide audience of a loved one's passing and to find support. As well as allowing you to impart practical information, such as funeral plans, these pages allow friends and loved ones to post their own tributes or condolences. Reading such messages can often provide comfort for those grieving the loss.

Of course, posting sensitive content on social media has its risks. Memorial pages are often open to anyone. This may encourage people who hardly knew the deceased to post well-meaning but inappropriate comments or advice. Worse, memorial pages can also attract Internet trolls. There have been many well-publicized cases of strangers posting cruel or abusive messages on memorial pages.

[\[Read: Social Media and Mental Health\]](#)

To gain some protection on Facebook, for example, you can opt to create a closed group rather than a public page. This means people have to be approved by a group member before they can access the memorial. It's also important to remember that while social media can be a useful tool for reaching out to others, it can't replace the face-to-face support you need at this time.

Celebrate your loved one's life

Rituals such as a funeral or memorial service can fulfill important functions, allowing you to acknowledge and reflect on the person's passing, remember their life, and say goodbye. In the period after a funeral, however, your grief can often become even more intense. Often, other people may appear to have moved on, while you're left struggling to make sense of your "new normal".

Remembering your loved one doesn't have to end with the funeral, though. Finding ways of celebrating the person you loved can help maintain their memory and provide comfort as you move through the grieving process.

Keep a journal or write a letter to your loved one. Saying the things you never got to say to your loved one in life can provide an important emotional release and help you make sense of what you're feeling.

Create a memorial. Building a memorial to your loved one, creating a website or blog, or compiling a photo album or scrapbook to highlight the love you shared can help promote healing. Planting flowers or a tree in your loved one's memory can be particularly rewarding, allowing you to watch something grow and flourish as you tend to it.

Build a legacy. Starting a campaign or fundraiser in your loved one's name, [volunteering](#) for a cause that was important to them, or donating to a charity they supported, for example, can help you find meaning in their loss. It can also add a sense of purpose as you move forward with your own life.

Continue to do things you used to do together. Perhaps you used to go to sports events with your loved one, listen to music, or take long walks together? There's comfort in routine, so when it's not too painful, continuing to do these things can be a way to mark your loved one's life.

Remember your loved one in simple ways. Even simple acts such as lighting a candle, visiting a favorite place, or marking an important date can help the healing process.

Take care of yourself

When you're grieving the death of a loved one, it's easy to neglect your own health and welfare. But the stress, trauma, and intense emotions you're dealing with at the moment can impact your immune system, affect your diet and sleep, and take a heavy toll on your overall mental and physical health.

Neglecting your well-being may even prolong the grieving process and make you more susceptible to depression or complicated grief. You'll also find it harder to provide comfort to children or other vulnerable family members who are also grieving. However, there are simple steps you can take to nurture your health at this time.

Manage stress. It's probably the last thing you feel like doing at the moment, but [exercising](#) is a powerful antidote to stress—and can help you sleep better at night. [Relaxation techniques](#) such as deep breathing, meditation, and yoga are also effective ways to ease anguish and worry.

Spend time in nature. Immersing yourself in nature and spending time in green spaces can be a calming, soothing experience when you're grieving. Try gardening, hiking, or [walking](#) in a park or woodland.

Pursue interests that enrich your life. Hobbies, sports, and other interests that add meaning and purpose to your life can bring a comforting routine back to your life following the upheaval of bereavement. They can also help connect you with others and nurture your spirit.

Eat and sleep well. Eating a [healthy diet](#) and getting enough rest at night can have a huge impact on your ability to cope with grief. If you're struggling to sleep at this difficult time, there are [supplements and sleep aids](#) that may be able to help—just try not to rely on them for too long.

Avoid using alcohol or drugs to cope. While it's tempting to use substances to help numb your grief and [self-medicate](#) your pain, in the long run excessive alcohol and drug use will only hamper your ability to grieve. Try using HelpGuide's free [Emotional Intelligence Toolkit](#) as a healthier way to manage your emotions.

When the pain of bereavement doesn't ease up

You may never truly get over the death of someone you love. But as time passes, it's normal for difficult emotions such as sadness or anger to gradually ease as you begin to accept your loss and move forward with your life.

However, if you aren't feeling better over time, or your pain is getting worse, it may be a sign that your grief has developed into a more serious problem, such as complicated grief or major depression.

Grief vs. depression

Distinguishing between grief and [depression](#) isn't always easy as they share many symptoms, but there are ways to tell the difference:

- **Grief** can be a roller coaster. It involves a wide variety of emotions and a mix of good and bad days. Even when you're in the middle of the grieving process, you will still have moments of pleasure or happiness.
- With **depression**, on the other hand, the feelings of emptiness and despair are constant.

[\[Read: Depression Symptoms and Warning Signs\]](#)

Other symptoms that suggest depression, not just grief, include:

- Intense, pervasive sense of guilt.
- [Thoughts of suicide](#) or a preoccupation with dying.
- Feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness.
- Slow speech and body movements.
- Inability to function at home, work, or school.
- Seeing or hearing things that aren't there.

What is complicated grief?

While the sadness of losing someone you love never goes away completely, it shouldn't remain center stage. If the pain of the loss is so constant and severe that it keeps you from resuming your life, you may be suffering from a condition known as complicated grief or persistent complex bereavement disorder.

Complicated grief is like being stuck in an intense state of mourning. You may have trouble accepting the death long after it has occurred or be so preoccupied with the person who died that it disrupts your daily routine and undermines your other relationships.

Symptoms of complicated grief include:

- Intense longing and yearning for your deceased loved one.
- Intrusive thoughts or images of the person.
- Denial of the death or sense of disbelief.
- Imagining that your loved one is alive.
- Searching for the deceased in familiar places.
- Avoiding things that remind you of your loved one.
- Extreme anger or bitterness over your loss.
- Feeling that life is empty or meaningless.

Complicated grief and trauma

If your loved one's death was sudden, violent, or otherwise extremely stressful or disturbing, complicated grief can manifest as [psychological trauma](#) or PTSD.

Being traumatized from the loss of a loved one can leave you feeling helpless and struggling with upsetting emotions, memories, and anxiety that won't go away. But with the right guidance, you can [make healing changes](#) and move on with your life.

Finding professional help

If you're experiencing symptoms of complicated grief, trauma, or clinical depression, [talk to a mental health professional](#) right away. Left untreated, these conditions can lead to significant emotional damage, life-threatening health problems, and even suicide. But treatment can help you get better.

[\[Read: Finding a Therapist Who can Help You Heal\]](#)

Contact a bereavement counselor or therapist if you:

01. Feel like life isn't worth living.
02. Wish you had died with your loved one.
03. Blame yourself for the loss or for failing to prevent it.
04. Feel numb and disconnected for more than a few weeks.
05. Are having difficulty trusting others since your loss.
06. Are unable to perform your normal daily activities.

Helplines

In the U.S	Crisis Call Center at 775-784-8090
UK	Cruse Bereavement Care at 0808 808 1677
Australia	GriefLine at (03) 9935 7400

Other support

[Find a GriefShare group meeting near you](#) – Worldwide directory of support groups for people grieving the death of a family member or friend. (GriefShare)

[Find Support](#) – Directory of programs and support groups in the U.S. for children experiencing grief and loss. (National Alliance for Grieving Children)

[Chapter Locator](#) for finding help for grieving the loss of a child in the U.S. and [International Support](#) for finding help in other countries. (The Compassionate Friends)

If you're feeling suicidal...

Seek help immediately. Please read [Suicide Help](#), talk to someone you trust, or call a suicide helpline:

- In the U.S., call 1-800-273-8255.
- In the UK, call 08457 90 90 90.
- In Australia, call 13 11 14.
- Or visit [IASP](#) to find a helpline in your country.

More Information

Helpful links

01. [Grief and Loss](#) - A guide to preparing for and mourning the death of a loved one. (Harvard Medical School Special Health Report)
02. [Death and Grief](#) - Article for teens on how to cope with grief and loss. (TeensHealth)
03. [Grief: Coping with Reminders after a Loss](#) - Tips for coping with the grief that can resurface even years after you've lost a loved one. (Mayo Clinic)
04. [Life after Loss: Dealing with Grief](#) - Guide to coping with grief and loss. (University of Texas Counseling and Mental Health Center)
05. [Bereavement](#) - Symptoms, causes, and treatment. (Psychology Today)
06. [Bereavement and Grief](#) - Mourning the loss of a loved one. (Mental Health America)
07. [Understanding Grief](#) - Articles to help you cope with the grieving process. (Cruse Bereavement Care)

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