



# Navigating the Waters of Your Grief

## A Bereavement Book

*"Grief is like the ocean; it comes in waves ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim."*

*- Vicki Harrison*



Resources from:  
Centre for Grief and Healing (BFO-P/H)  
& Cruse Bereavement Care



Kemp Care  
Network



Grief and Bereavement  
Centre of Excellence

## Has someone died?

### What people tell us

After a death you may initially feel shocked, numb, guilty, angry, afraid and full of pain. These feelings may change to feelings of longing, sadness, loneliness – even hopelessness and fear about the future.

These feelings are not unnatural, or wrong. They are all 'normal' reactions to what may be the most difficult experience of your life. Over time these feelings should lessen.

Every person's experience of grief is unique, but these are some of the things people often say when they come to us for help following a bereavement.

#### ***"I don't feel anything. I feel numb."***

The shock can make you feel numb. You may feel confused and lost. This should pass with time. You may find initially you can carry on as if nothing has happened. This is a way of managing the pain and loss and can help you get through the early days when there is so much to do.

#### ***"I feel out of control. My emotions are all over the place – one minute I'm OK, the next minute I'm in tears."***

Mood swings can be very frightening but they are normal. You may feel as if you are on an emotional roller coaster. You may feel overwhelmed and find it difficult to do even everyday tasks. It can be hard to concentrate.

Some people find it helpful to throw themselves into work; others find they need to take some time out of day-to-day life and activities. Everyone needs to find their own way of coping.

#### ***"I can't eat or sleep."***

Physical reactions to a death are very common. You may lose your appetite, have difficulty sleeping, or feel exhausted all the time. People are also often very vulnerable to physical illnesses after a bereavement. If you are not sleeping well, you may feel mentally drained and unable to think straight. These are normal reactions to distress and loss, and should pass in time. But you may want to consult your GP if the problems persist.

#### ***"I keep hearing his voice. I'm worried that I'm going mad."***

It may take you some time to grasp what has happened. Don't worry. It is quite normal to see the person, to hear their voice, or find yourself talking to them, especially if they were an important presence in your life. It can often happen when you least expect it, as if your mind has temporarily 'forgotten' that they have died.

***"I feel such pain. I keep on thinking again and again about what happened. I keep going over every detail of her last few days."***

This, again, is a common reaction, particularly where the death was sudden and unexpected or occurred in traumatic circumstances. It is the mind's way of dealing with what has happened. You may feel immense emotional pain – some people can find this overwhelming and frightening.

***"I feel so guilty."***

A lot of people talk to us about feelings of guilt – for being alive, when the person is dead; for not having somehow prevented their death; for having let them down in some way. You may find yourself constantly thinking: 'If only...' If only I had contacted the doctor sooner, if only I had showed them how much I cared when they were alive. You may be constantly asking yourself 'why?' Why them? Why did this happen to us? Why didn't I do more? Death can seem cruel and unfair. It can make people feel powerless and helpless. These emotions can be very painful to live with, but feeling guilty will not help. It is important to try to focus on the good times, and not to dwell on things in the past that you cannot change.

***"I feel so depressed. Life has no meaning without her. I can't see the point of going on."***

Hopelessness and despair are understandable reactions when someone who has been a central part of your life

dies. It is not unusual for people facing bereavement to think about their own death, and even think about taking their own life as a way of escaping the pain. It is important to talk to people you trust about these thoughts, and to remember that life does go on, and while there will always be someone missing in your life, there are many things that are worth living for. It may be helpful to talk through these feelings of hopelessness and despair with someone experienced in bereavement support or bereavement counselling.

***"I feel so angry with him. How could he leave me like this."***

You may find yourself facing family, financial and domestic responsibilities with which you don't feel able to cope. You may feel very angry that suddenly you have to deal with all these things. You may feel angry with someone you feel is responsible in some way for the death. Anger is a completely normal part of grief. It is a perfectly healthy and understandable response to feeling out of control, powerless and abandoned.

***"I can't concentrate at work."***

People can find it hard to concentrate following a death, which may create difficulties at work. Explain this to your manager. You may be able to come to some temporary arrangement about shorter working hours, or other ways of helping you through this difficult time.



***"I thought I'd be over this by now. It's been months, and I still find myself bursting into tears."***

Sometimes it is just when you think you should be feeling better that you feel as if you are falling apart. In the early days following a bereavement, family and friends often rally around and it is only later, when everyone has gone home and you are left with your grief, that the reality of the death hits you. The physical and emotional loneliness can be very hard to bear. There is no time limit on grief. If you feel that you are struggling with your emotions or that you are not coping with life, then it may be time to seek help and support.

***"Since our mom died my sister and I row all the time."***

Even close family members who are sharing the same loss will respond differently to a bereavement. Everyone has their own way of grieving, and their own ways of showing and coping with their feelings, but sometimes this can be hard for others to understand. A death can bring people together, but it can also create huge tensions and strains within families. Conflicts can emerge –for example, about funeral arrangements, legacies and responsibilities for dealing with the dead person's possessions and property.

***"Everyone just vanished after the funeral. Now friends won't look me in the eye when I see them in the street, and no one calls any more."***

Friends and acquaintances may seem to be avoiding you, particularly once the funeral is over. This is often because they don't know how to behave or what to say. You may want to talk about the person who has died, and find that people keep trying to change the subject, or suggest that it is 'bad for you' to talk about them so much. Talking about the person who has died is an important part of the grieving process, and hopefully there are people in your life who will listen and understand, and be able to share your memories.

***"I don't know how I'll cope with the anniversary of her death."***

You may be particularly affected on and near significant anniversaries for many years after a death. Some people find it helpful to plan in advance what they are going to do on those days, to avoid feeling left alone with their emotions. Some people create a tradition of visiting special places that remind them of the person who has died. Others find this too painful. There is no right and wrong way to mark these anniversaries. You need to find the way that is right for you.

*If you need reassurance, or information, or simply to talk to someone, call the Cruse National Helpline on 844-477-9400.*

# *Taking care of yourself*

It is important that you take care of yourself following a bereavement.

One of the most helpful things is to talk about the person who has died and your relationship with them. Who you talk to will depend on you. It may be your family, friends, a faith/spiritual adviser, your GP or a support organization.

## **Do...**

- Talk to other people about the person who has died, about your memories and your feelings.
- Look after yourself. Eat properly and try to get enough rest (even if you can't sleep).
- Give yourself time and permission to grieve.
- Seek help and support if you feel you need it. Tell people what you need.

## **Don't...**

- Isolate yourself.
- Keep your emotions bottled up. Think you are weak for needing help.
- Feel guilty if you are struggling to cope.
- Turn to drugs or alcohol– the relief will only be temporary.



# Grief Emotions

**CREATED BY: THE CENTRE FOR GRIEF & HEALING**

**ADAPTED FROM: DR. ALAN D. WOLFELT**

## SADNESS

Your feelings of sadness can leave you feeling isolated and alone.

Consequently, you will need to talk them out with accepting and understanding people.

Keep talking until you have exhausted your capacity to talk. Doing so will help you reconnect with the world outside of you. Or if you can't talk it out, write it out! Or paint it out! Or sing it out! And give yourself permission to cry—as often and as much as you need to. Tears can help you cleanse your body, mind, and spirit. While depression is normal and natural in grief, it's also important to be aware of the possibility of clinical depression. If your sadness isn't softening over time, if you can't function in our daily life, if you feel a pervasive sense of worthlessness and hopelessness, you may have clinical depression on top of your grief.

Please see your physician or therapist right away. Medication and/or therapy may give you just the support you need right now to get unstuck so that you can move toward healing.

## SHOCK AND DENIAL

Remember that your feelings of shock and numbness are normal, even necessary. They are helping you survive right now. And they will naturally fade over time. In the meantime, be gentle with yourself. Be self-compassionate. Let other people take care of you. Accept any support you are offered.

## ANXIETY AND FEAR

It's normal to feel anxious and afraid after the death of a significant person in your life. It's normal to worry, "Am I going to survive this? Will someone else die too? How will everything get taken care of? How can I possibly ever be happy again?"

Under no circumstances should you allow your natural fears and anxieties to go unexpressed. If you don't talk about them, you may find yourself retreating from other people and the world in general. Many grieving people become prisoners in their own minds and hearts. They repress their anxiety, panic, and fear, only to discover that these feelings are now repressing them. If you are having true panic attacks, please see your physician or therapist right away. You will not be able to move toward healing if fear is controlling your life.



## DISORGANIZATION

This feeling can be scary. You may feel like you're in the middle of a wild, rushing river, where you can't get a grasp on anything. Disconnected thoughts may race through your mind, and your strong, random feelings may be overwhelming. You might also feel as if you can't function in your daily life. Even bathing, dressing, and feeding yourself may feel like too much to handle right now. Find someone to share your confusing thoughts and feelings with. As you talk, you might think you're not making much sense—and you may not be. But talking it out can still be clarifying. Say no to any unnecessary commitments for now. Make written lists of must-do tasks. Also, avoid making any critical decisions when you're feeling this way. Go slowly and be patient with yourself.

## ANGER

In grief, experiencing explosive emotions such as anger, hate, blame, terror, resentment, rage, and jealousy is normal. Beneath them are usually feelings of pain, helplessness, frustration, fear, and hurt. You have two avenues for dealing with your anger—outward or inward. The outward avenue leads to healing; the inward avenue does not. Keeping explosive emotions inside leads to low self-esteem, depression, guilt, physical complaints, and sometimes even persistent thoughts of suicide. Find ways to express them outside of yourself that do not harm you or anyone else.

Turn to a nonjudgmental listener. Try physical activities that allow you to channel or calm your feelings, such as long walks, running, martial arts, golf, racquet sports, or yoga.

## GUILT AND REGRET

Guilt and regret are common in grief. Talk to others about them, but don't allow others to explain your feelings away. If your listeners instantly dismiss your feelings of guilt, telling you that you did nothing wrong, they aren't bearing witness to what feels true or needs exploring inside of you. As you express yourself, remember—you aren't perfect. No one is. At times, you will naturally go back and review if you could have said or done something differently. Allow yourself this review time, but as you do so, be compassionate with yourself. Continue to remind yourself that there are often things in life that cannot be changed.

## RELIEF

In some cases, it's quite normal and understandable to feel a sense of relief or release after a death. But even so, these feelings can then lead to what I call relief-guilt. If you feel guilty or ambivalent about your sense of relief, write about it or talk it out. Find someone you trust to listen and hear you.



# FIVE MYTHS ABOUT GRIEF

BY: DR. ALAN D. WOLFELT

## **Myth: Grief and mourning are the same experience.**

Most people tend to use the words grief and mourning interchangeably. However, there is an important distinction between them. We have learned that people move toward healing not by just grieving, but through mourning. Simply stated, grief is the internal thoughts and feelings we experience when someone we love dies. Mourning, on the other hand, is taking the internal experience of grief and expressing it outside ourselves.

In reality, many people in our culture grieve, but they do not mourn. Instead of being encouraged to express their grief outwardly, they are often greeted with messages such as “carry on,” “keep your chin up,” and “keep busy.” So, they end up grieving within themselves in isolation, instead of mourning outside of themselves in the presence of loving companions.

## **Myth: There is a predictable and orderly progression to grief.**

Stage-like thinking about both dying and grief has been appealing to many people. Somehow the “stages of grief” have helped people make sense out of an experience that isn’t as orderly and predictable as we would like it to be. If only it were so simple! One such consequence is when people around the grieving person believe that he or she should be in “stage 2” or “stage 4” by now. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Each person’s grief is uniquely his or her own. It is neither predictable nor orderly. Nor can its different dimensions be so easily categorized. We only get ourselves in trouble when we try to prescribe what the grief and mourning experiences of others should be—or when we try to fit our own grief into neat little boxes.

## **Myth: It is best to move away from grief instead of toward it.**

Many griever's do not give themselves permission or receive permission from others to mourn. We live in a society that often encourages people to prematurely move away from their grief instead of toward it. Many people view grief as something to be overcome rather than experienced. The result is that many of us either grieve in isolation or attempt to run away from our grief.

People who continue to express their grief outwardly—to mourn—are often viewed as “weak,” “crazy” or “self-pitying.” Such messages encourage the repression of the griever’s thoughts and feelings. The problem is that attempting to mask or move away from grief results in internal anxiety and confusion. They’re not crazy, just grieving. And in order to heal they must move toward their grief through continued mourning, not away from it through repression and denial.





## Myth: Tears expressing grief are only a sign of weakness

Unfortunately, many people associate tears of grief with personal inadequacy and weakness. Crying on the part of the mourner often generates feelings of helplessness in friends, family, and caregivers.

Out of a wish to protect mourners from pain, friends and family may try to stop the tears. Comments such as, “Tears won’t bring him back” and “He wouldn’t want you to cry” discourage the expression of tears. Yet crying is nature’s way of releasing internal tension in the body and allows the mourner to communicate a need to be comforted. Crying makes people feel better, emotionally and physically. Tears are not a sign of weakness. In fact, crying is an indication of the griever’s willingness to do the “work of mourning.”

## Myth: The Goal is to “Get Over” Your Grief

We have all heard people ask, “Are you over it yet?” To think that we as human beings “get over” grief is ridiculous! We never “get over” our grief but instead become reconciled to it.

We do not resolve or recover from our grief. These terms suggest a total return to “normalcy” and yet in my personal, as well as professional, experience, we are all forever changed by the experience of grief. For the mourner to assume that life will be exactly as it was prior to the death is unrealistic and potentially damaging. Those people who think the goal is to “resolve” grief become destructive to the healing process.

Mourners do, however, learn to reconcile their grief. We learn to integrate the new reality of moving forward in life without the physical presence of the person who has died. With reconciliation a renewed sense of energy and confidence, an ability to fully acknowledge the reality of the death, and the capacity to become reinvolved with the activities of living. We also come to acknowledge that pain and grief are difficult—yet necessary—parts of life and living.

As the experience of reconciliation unfolds, we recognize that life will be different without the presence of the person who died. At first we realize this with our head, and later come to realize it with our heart. We also realize that reconciliation is a process, not an event.

The sense of loss does not completely disappear yet softens and the intense pangs of grief become less frequent. Hope for a continued life emerges as we are able to make commitments to the future, realizing that the person who died will never be forgotten, yet knowing that one’s own life can and will move forward.

# COPING WITH HOLIDAYS & SPECIAL OCCASIONS

BY: DR. ALAN D. WOLFELT

## You Are Not Alone

Holidays are often difficult for anyone who has experienced the death of someone loved. Rather than being times of family togetherness, sharing and thanksgiving, holidays can bring feelings of sadness, loss and emptiness.

## Love Does Not End With Death

Since love does not end with death, holidays may result in a renewed sense of personal grief - a feeling of loss unlike that experienced in the routine of daily living. Society encourages you to join in the holiday spirit, but all around you, the sounds, sights and smells trigger memories of the one you love who has died. No simple guidelines exist that will take away the hurt you are feeling. We hope, however, that the following suggestion will help you better cope with your grief during this joyful yet painful time of the year.

## Talk About Your Grief

During the holiday season, don't be afraid to express your feelings of grief. Ignoring your grief won't make the pain go away and talking about it openly often makes you feel better. Find caring friends and relatives who listen- without judging you. They help make you feel understood.

## Be Tolerant of Your Physical or Psychological Limits

Feelings of loss will probably leave you fatigued, and your low energy level may naturally slow you down. Respect what your body and mind are telling you, and lower your own expectations about being at your peak during the holiday season.

## Eliminate Unnecessary Stress

You may already feel stressed, so don't overextend yourself. Avoid isolating yourself but be sure to recognize the need to have special time for yourself. Realize also that merely "keeping busy" won't distract you from your grief but may actually increase stress and postpone the need to talk out thoughts and feelings related to your grief.

## Be With Supportive Comforting People

Identify those friends and relatives who understand that the holiday season can increase your sense of loss and who will allow you to talk openly about your feelings. Find those persons who encourage you to be yourself and accept your feelings- both happy and sad.

## **Mention The Name of The Person Who Has Died**

Include the persons name in your holiday conversation. If you are able to talk candidly, other people are more likely to recognize your need to remember that special person who was an important part in your life.

## **Do What is Right For You During The Holidays**

Well-meaning friends and family often try to prescribe what is good or you during the holidays. Instead of going along with their plans, focus on what you want to do. Discuss your wishes with a caring, trusted friend. Talking about these wishes will help you clarify what it is you want to do during the holidays. As you become aware of your needs, share them with your friends and family.

## **Plan Ahead For Family Gatherings**

Decide which family traditions you want to continue and which ones you would like to begin following the death of someone loved. Structure your holiday time. This will help you anticipate activities rather than just reacting to whatever happens. Getting caught off guard can create feeling of panic, fear and anxiety during a time of the year when your feelings of grief are already heightened. As you make your plans, however, leave room to change them if you feel it is appropriate.

## **Embrace Your Treasure of Memories**

Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after the death of someone loved. And holidays always make you think about past times. Instead of ignoring these memories, share them with your family and friends. Keep in mind the memories are tinged with both happiness and sadness. If your memories bring laughter and smiles, if your memories bring sadness, then it's all right to cry. Memories that were made in love—none can ever take them away from you.

## **Renew Your Resources for Living**

Spend time thinking about the meaning and purpose of your life. The death of someone loved creates opportunities to take inventory of your life past, present and future. The combination of a holiday and a loss naturally results in looking inward and assessing your individual situation. Make the best use of this time to define the positive things in life that surround you.

## **Grief is Both a Necessity & a Privilege**

It comes as a result of giving and receiving love. Don't let anyone take your grief away. Love yourself. Be patient with yourself. And allow yourself to be surrounded by loving and caring people.



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## GRIEF & BEREAVEMENT PROGRAMS AT KEMP CARE NETWORK

We offer a range of programs to help support adults, children, youth and families on their grief journeys. Our programs are designed to provide comfort, understanding and healing during challenging times.



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on our programs or  
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