

UW Medicine

## A Guide Through Grief

*Mourning the loss of a loved one*



### Questions?

Your questions are important. Please call us if you have questions or concerns.

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*We hope this booklet will help you begin the process of your healing.*

*For out of nothingness we are not born, and into nothingness we do not die. Existence is a circle, and we err when we assign to it for measurement the limits of the cradle and the grave.*

*Manuel Acuna*

Grief is a natural response to an important loss.

When we lose someone dear to us, each of us grieves in our own way and at our own pace. Many things affect how we grieve, and for how long. Our ethnic backgrounds, cultures, personalities, life experiences, spiritual beliefs, responses to stress, and our relationships all may impact our grief process.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Some of us express grief freely, find comfort in the company of others, and keep reminders of loved ones nearby. Others find comfort in being alone, away from reminders of our loss. Still others find that cultural or spiritual rituals can help restore order and meaning.

As you begin your grieving process, knowing what to expect can help you cope with the pain and loneliness. It may help to know that your feelings are common.

The grieving process may be long, slow and painful. There may be many times when you feel sorrow and yearning. For many people, the grieving process may also be a strengthening and growth-filled experience. This may be hard to believe right now, when your grief is so new.

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*Remember to be gentle with yourself.*

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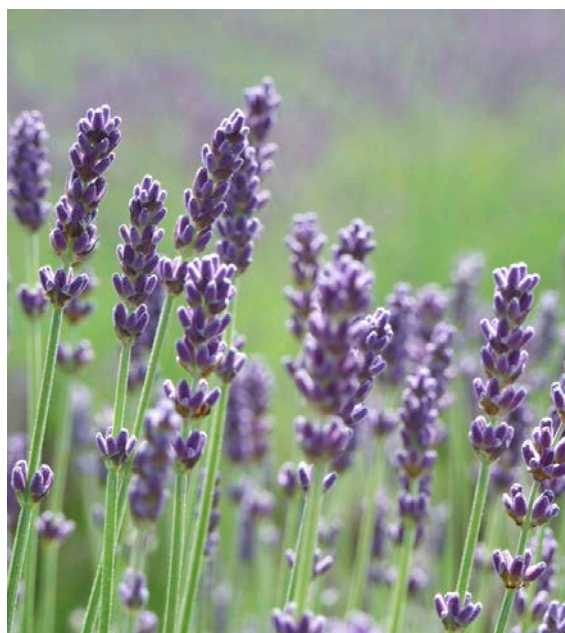
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*Notes*

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## **Right After the Death**

You may have a feeling of shock or numbness – shock that the death has occurred and denial that the loss is real. These feelings protect you from pain that can be overwhelming. Others report a feeling of relief that their loved one’s suffering has ended. These feelings are common.

## **Feeling the Loss**

You may have periods of anger. Anger can grow out of feelings of helplessness and frustration at not being able to control your situation. It can also come from feeling abandoned by your loved one. Anger is a part of the grieving process. The challenge is to learn to express it in healthy ways.

At first, you may also feel guilt related to your loss. Over time, you can learn to accept that the past is over and that blaming yourself will not bring your loved one back.

## **Recognizing That Your Loss Is Final**

When you begin to accept that your loved one is gone, depression and despair can set in. This is the time to reach out to others for comfort.

## **Rebuilding Your Life**

At some point, you will begin to have more good days than bad days, and you will move into a period of adjustment and acceptance. Although your life will never be the same, you can begin to find new meaning and purpose.

## Reactions to a Loss

Loss may change the way you behave. You may be restless or cry easily. You may eat too much or too little or have trouble sleeping.

Thinking patterns may change. You might have trouble concentrating, or you might feel confused. Making decisions can be harder. You may dwell on sad memories or worries.

Loss can cause unfamiliar, new feelings. It is common to feel anxious and sad. You may feel numb, lonely, or helpless. You may be irritable or angry, or feel like you are “going crazy.” Many grieving people feel guilty about something they did or did not do for their loved one. After a death, some people even feel relieved.

Some may notice changes in their physical health, such as dizziness, exhaustion, dry mouth, headaches, pounding heart, or shortness of breath. Stomach problems or tightness in the chest may be related to tension and anxiety.

You may also notice changes in your social life and relationships. For example, you might depend more on others for a while or feel that your friends do not understand you. You may even envy or resent their happiness.

## Helpful Resources

There are many sources of support and information in most communities. Some of these are counselors, clergy and spiritual advisors, grief support groups, and workshops. You can also find materials about the grieving process at your local library or bookstore, or online. Your social worker can help you find many of these resources.

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*I will miss those I loved who are no longer with me, but I find I am grateful for having loved them.*

*The gratitude has finally conquered the loss.*

*Anonymous*

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Let children take part in the mourning process, and let them see your grief. Encourage them to express their feelings and ask questions.

Tell your children who will be caring for them. Include them in plans for daily routines such as, “I will pick you up after school. On the days I work, Grandma will pick you up.”

It is normal for young children to play and laugh shortly after a death, even when they are very sad. Children process grief in different ways than adults do. Physical activity helps them express their emotions and burn off energy.

Teens are more likely to turn to peers for support. Be available for teens but do not be hurt if they do not want to talk with you.

Children can recover from grief if they have loved ones they can depend on for comfort and security, who can reassure them that they are loved.

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*Children are resilient. Get support for yourself so you can support your child.*

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## **Asking for Help**

If you have physical symptoms that disturb you and that do not go away for a long time, you may want to see your doctor.

If it is becoming hard to manage your daily activities or to take care of yourself, talking with a counselor may help.

## **The Phases of Grief**

Even though our reactions vary widely, there are common phases in the grief process. We can cycle in and out of these phases. Each one is part of the overall process. Moving through these phases helps you adjust to and accept your loss over time.

You may not go through these phases in order. Most people move back and forth between them, depending on other events in their lives. A person may go through the same phase of grief several times, but the intensity of the feelings and how long they last slowly lessen.

Letting yourself feel these strong feelings will allow them to lessen over time. If you hold them in, they may remain powerful. You may have dramatic changes in your emotions as you go through the grieving process.

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*After despair many hopes flourish. Just as after darkness, thousands of suns open and start to shine.*

*Rumi*

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## **Healing from Grief**

Grieving is hard work that requires energy and attention. The grief rituals and traditions of your culture or spiritual practice can help provide structure and focus.

When you are grieving, you may not be able to do many tasks at once. Try setting simpler goals for what you can get done in a day, a week, or a month. Focus on what you *do* manage to do each day, and try to make grieving a priority.

- **Talk about grief.** Recognizing your emotions, accepting them, and finding ways to express them can help shorten the grieving process and help you heal.
- **Face the reality of the loss.** Avoiding the loss may make the grieving process longer and even more painful.
- **Be gentle with yourself.** Try not to rush through your grieving. Try not to take on new responsibilities.
- **Acknowledge and express your emotions.** Strong feelings will come up as you begin to accept your loss. Allow yourself to feel them. Make time to grieve – look at old photos and read old letters. Give yourself a safe place and time to cry – you may be surprised to find that crying may bring some relief. Let go of anger by exercising vigorously or talking with a friend or counselor. Read books about grief and loss to find out how others cope.
- **Share your grief.** Accept sympathy and concern from those who can provide support. If close friends or family members are not available, consider seeing a counselor who is trained in helping people grieve. Many people find that attending a grief support group is helpful. By sharing insights with others, you can learn that your grieving is natural and normal.

- **Take care of your emotional and physical needs.** Find simple things you can do to nurture yourself. Take the time to prepare and eat balanced meals, get enough sleep, and exercise each day. Avoid alcohol and drugs – they can make your grieving process last longer.
- **Keep a journal.** Writing down your feelings can help you learn to express painful emotions. It can also give you a record of your progress.
- **Be aware of possible trouble spots.** Holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, and even ordinary meal times may be difficult. You may want to avoid special places that now are painful reminders of your loss. Try to plan ahead for these times.
- **Give yourself permission to change your routine.** Changing some of the little reminders and routines of your lost relationship may help you to grieve and begin to build a new life.
- **Refocus on life.** At some point, you will feel ready to re-enter the social world and begin to make new friends or strengthen current relationships. Over time, you will begin to create new goals and meaning for your life.

## Children and Grief

Tell children the truth when someone dies. Trying to protect them by not telling them what happened can do lasting harm. Your own cultural and spiritual beliefs will guide what you say to children about the meaning of death.

Assure your children of your love and support. Reassure them that the death is not their fault.