



## Grief and loss



Everyone's experience of grief or loss is unique. You might experience all kinds of difficult and at times overwhelming emotions, and you might sometimes wonder if the sadness will ever end. This is a normal reaction to loss.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve but it can help to allow yourself to grieve, share your grief, and let others support you. In time you will learn to live with your loss, heal and move forward in new and different ways.

### What are grief and loss?

Grief is a natural response to loss. It might be the loss of a loved one, relationship, miscarriage, pet, job or way of life. Other experiences of loss may be due to children leaving home, infertility and separation from friends and family. The more significant the loss, the more intense the grief is likely to be.

Grief is expressed in many ways and it can affect every part of your life; your emotions, thoughts and behaviour, beliefs, physical health, your sense of self and identity, and your relationships with others.

Grief can leave you feeling sad, angry, anxious, shocked, regretful, relieved, overwhelmed, isolated, irritable or numb. Many of these reactions are not constant but instead can come in waves; often triggered by memories or occasions. The first few days after a loss are particularly intense emotionally and many people say that they function on 'auto' for a while just to get through.

Grief can affect your thinking; leaving you unable to concentrate or make decisions, forgetful and sometimes causing you to worry that you will never feel better. It can also cause difficulty in your sleeping and physical health, leading to headaches, nausea, aches and pains. It is not unusual to also question your faith or beliefs at this time as you search for answers and meaning following the loss.

The way you are feeling and thinking affects how you interact with the world around you; your friends, family and workplace. For some, being with others is comforting while others prefer more solitude as they come to terms with their loss.

Grief has no set pattern. Everyone experiences grief differently and there are cultural and circumstantial factors that affect how people express and cope with it. Some people may grieve for weeks and months, while others may describe their grief lasting for years. Through the process of grief, however, you begin to create new experiences and habits that work around your loss. You slowly begin to experience a greater sense of hope; focusing more on the future rather than the loss itself. In time memories begin to become something to enjoy rather than triggering sadness.



## **Looking after yourself after a significant loss**

Grief is something that takes time to work through. While everyone finds their own way to grieve it is important to have the support of friends and family or someone else, and to talk about your loss when you need to.

### **Allow yourself to grieve and heal**

- Grieve your way. No one can tell you how to feel.
- Understand that grief takes time. Expect that you will sometimes find yourself surprised by how you are feeling.
- Express how you feel to someone you trust. Talk using words that are comfortable and have meaning to you and don't be afraid to share your emotions; your tears, anger, relief etc.
- Honour your loss. It might be by writing a journal of memories, writing letters, treasuring precious possessions, planting a tree, writing a song; whatever feels meaningful to you.
- Be prepared for difficult events that trigger your memories and sadness. This may happen on anniversaries, birthdays, reunions or perhaps when you see particular reminders of what you have lost.
- Take one step at a time. Know that there will be setbacks but that you will heal in time.

## **Look after yourself**

- Find a balance between being alone and spending time with family and friends. Both are important in your time of grief.
- Take care of your physical health. Grieving can be exhausting so it is important to eat a healthy diet, exercise and sleep.
- Give yourself time out from the pain. Do things you enjoy, even if you don't really feel like doing them.
- Try relaxation or meditation to help to manage stress and difficult emotions.
- Work towards getting back to your normal routine, work, social activities, sport etc. Don't feel guilty about trying to get back to your life. It's part of the process.
- Approach any drug and alcohol use with care. Substances can numb your feelings but they also make it harder to heal.
- If possible, avoid making any big decisions until you can think more clearly.
- Consider your spiritual beliefs and whether these can provide you comfort.

### **Let others help you**

- Be clear about what you find helpful from others. People often don't know how to help, so tell them what you need; a shoulder to cry on, a helping hand with the children or perhaps help with a few meals.
- Explore your options for professional help if your grief feels too much for you to bear. An experienced health professional can help you work through intense emotions and overcome obstacles to your grieving.
- Consider joining a support group. Sharing your grief with others who have experienced similar losses may help.





## Grief, loss and depression

Grief and depression are quite different but they can appear similar as they can both lead to feelings of intense sadness, insomnia, poor appetite and weight loss.

For people experiencing grief these are normal reactions to loss. While the feelings of loss and sadness are at times unbearable, the intensity of these feelings can change throughout each day and are often in response to certain situations or events. Even among the sadness of the grief there is also the ability to experience moments of happiness.

Depression stands out from grief as being more persistent, with constant feelings of emptiness and despair and a difficulty feeling pleasure or joy. The focus of negative thinking tends to be more internal, with a person believing themselves to be useless and worthless. Other symptoms that suggest depression include an intense sense of guilt, disconnection from others, thoughts of suicide or a preoccupation with dying, feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness, inability to enjoy or find pleasure in things, and an inability to function at work, home, and/or school.

The sadness that you feel after your loss may never go away completely, but it won't remain the focus of your thinking over time. Your relationship to grief will change; depression may not. If you notice that depression symptoms continue, or your grief begins to get in the way of how you live, work, share relationships or live day-to-day, then it is important to get support or professional help.

To learn more about depression and the treatments available visit [beyondblue.org.au/depression](http://beyondblue.org.au/depression).

## How family and friends can help

Many people do not know what to say or do when trying to comfort someone who is grieving. However, often it is the simple offer of love and support that is the most important.

### What to say

- Acknowledge the situation and let them know you care – “I was really sad to hear about...”
- Talk openly about their loss.
- Be genuine and honest – “I’m not sure what to say or do, but I want you to know I am here for you”.
- Offer your support – “What can I do to help? Do you feel like talking?”.
- Ask how they are feeling. Each day can be different for someone who is grieving; take the time to listen and understand what they are going through.
- Talk about everyday life too. Their loss and grief does not have to be the focus of all your conversations.
- Avoid statements that are intended to comfort them but actually minimise their grief. They know they have things to be thankful for, or that at some point they have to move on, but for now they need time to grieve.

### Listen with compassion

- Offer comfort. They need to feel supported in their loss, not judged or criticised.
- Help them to understand that healing takes time.
- Accept that silence is helpful sometimes. You can offer comfort by a squeeze of the hand, or a reassuring hug. Silence can offer them a time to gather their thoughts and reflect on times gone by.
- Be patient. Sit and listen quietly as they share their stories of loss.



## Provide ongoing support

- Understand that life may never feel the same. They may learn to accept the loss and the pain may lessen, but the sadness may never completely go away.
- Let them know it's OK to share their grief. They are not alone.
- Ask them how you can help. Make suggestions if they are reluctant to receive help or they are just unsure what they need. A few home-cooked meals, doing the shopping, helping to receive guests or perhaps offering to go walking or do something enjoyable with them can all help someone through their grief.
- Encourage them to slowly return to activities or social events that they enjoy.
- Keep supporting them. They will need support throughout their time of grief, not just immediately after the loss.
- Be understanding and accept that they may act or say things differently.
- Offer extra support on special days. Certain times and days of the year may be particularly hard, such as holidays, family milestones, birthdays, and anniversaries, as they often reawaken grief.
- Encourage them to get help if their grief does not seem to be easing over time, particularly if they have suicidal thoughts, self-harm or appear to be giving up on life.
- Look after yourself. Helping a grieving person can be a heavy burden. Take care of your own physical and emotional health, and talk about your feelings with someone during this stressful time.

Grief is a process that each person experiences in a unique way. It's how you process, cope and learn to live with a significant loss. By allowing yourself to grieve and accepting the support of others you will begin to heal. You will not forget your loss but you will be able to look to the future with a sense of hope and find a way to live with your loss.

## Where to find more information

### Beyond Blue



[beyondblue.org.au](http://beyondblue.org.au)

Learn more about anxiety, depression and suicide prevention, or talk through your concerns with our Support Service. Our trained mental health professionals will listen, provide information, advice and brief counselling, and point you in the right direction so you can seek further support.



**1300 22 4636**

Email or chat to us online at  
[beyondblue.org.au/getsupport](http://beyondblue.org.au/getsupport)



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### LifeLine



[www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)



**13 11 14**

Access to crisis support, suicide prevention and mental health support services.

### Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement



[www.grief.org.au](http://www.grief.org.au)

Information about grief and support for people who are grieving.

### Head to Health



[headtohealth.gov.au](http://headtohealth.gov.au)

Head to Health can help you find free and low-cost, trusted online and phone mental health resources.

### GriefLine



[www.griefline.org.au](http://www.griefline.org.au)



**1300 845 745**

Grief helpline that provides telephone support services to individuals and families.



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