

Processing Grief: The First Step to Healing

By Jeanette Stehr-Green and Astrid Raffinpeyloz

“Grief is like the ocean; it comes on waves ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim.” Vicki Harrison

Grief is a natural and deeply personal response to a significant loss. Grief is shaped by one’s culture, religion, and social environment. Grief is also influenced by the circumstances of the loss and relationship with the person or thing that has been lost.

Grief is unpredictable. It does not follow set patterns or stages and can manifest through a wide range of emotions including sadness, anger, confusion, fear, guilt, and loneliness.

Different emotions may come and go. Powerful feelings can appear unexpectedly. Periods of calm can follow.

Grief can impact physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being. Fatigue, nausea, changes in weight, aches and pains, and insomnia are common symptoms.

Grief also alters cognitive function. Hormonal and neural changes associated with grief can activate areas of the brain associated with emotion and shutoff areas responsible for focus and planning. As a result, grief can inhibit the ability to concentrate, make decisions, and think clearly.

What causes grief?

Many people associate grief with the death of a loved one, but grief can arise during any major change that involves losing someone or something important: the death of someone connected to us, the end of a relationship, or the loss of a pet, job, dream, or goal.

Grief can also begin before the loss occurs, in anticipation of the loss. For example, a person may begin grieving while preparing for the expected death of a seriously ill loved one or another unavoidable life change.

Why do we grieve?

Grief is the other side of love. If we love, we will grieve. This universal human experience has appeared across cultures and throughout history.

Humans are wired for connection. For early humans, forming close bonds and living in groups increased safety, improved access to food and shelter, and allowed distribution of the workload. Because these relationships were essential to survival, losing them triggered a strong response.

In this sense, grief reflects the importance of our bonds. It can motivate us to protect close relationships, seek support, and gradually adjust to life after loss.

What once helped early humans survive still shapes how we respond to loss today.

Coping with Grief

Grief is unique to everyone. There is no "right" or "wrong" way to grieve. The following steps have helped some begin to process their pain.

Acknowledge your feelings. Putting on a brave face or otherwise trying to hide your feelings is not helpful. For real healing to begin, it is necessary to confront your grief.

Some find it easiest to externalize their feelings by talking with friends, family members, or others. (See below.)

Others find journaling to be a safer way to effectively acknowledge and explore their feelings.

For those who find it difficult to express their feelings through words, more creative approaches – such as painting a picture of their feelings – can be helpful.

Expressing your feelings about the loss — even when they do not seem to make sense — and allowing your thoughts and emotions to surface without judgment can help you learn to live with the loss without letting it take over your life.

Seek support from others. During times of grief, practical help from others — such as assistance with meals, childcare, errands, and other tasks — can reduce the burden. Others can also help by just being present to listen.

Identify individuals within your existing social network who care about you and can hold space for you as you process your feelings.

If you follow faith-based practices or traditions, you may find comfort by reaching out to a spiritual leader for guidance.

If you have little support from family or friends, consider a support group. Grief support groups can provide a safe environment to freely express feelings. They also provide a place to connect with others who have had similar experiences and will be understanding, non-judgmental, and supportive.

Prioritize self-care. Grief is exhausting. Treat yourself with kindness and self-compassion. Try to rest. Exercise regularly. Limit or avoid alcohol and sugar.

Consider mindfulness exercises that help you focus on the present moment — not the future or the past.

Try to stay connected with people you enjoy being around, as they can offer valuable support.

Postpone major decisions. Grief can cloud your decision-making abilities. Whenever possible, postpone making major decisions like taking a new job, making significant financial decisions, or moving out of a home.

If you must make such decisions, reach out to a family member or trusted friend for input.

Seek professional help. Grief is natural. If, however, you feel overwhelmed, experience hopelessness, or cannot function in daily life, or if your grief does not subside over time, consider reaching out to a counselor, therapist, or other professional for help.

Do we ever get over a loss? Most likely not, but we learn to live with it as our life expands again.

Grieving is a necessary part of processing a loss. It allows us to maintain connections to what we have lost while building a new way of life.

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