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Coping With the Loss of a Loved One

Losing a loved one to cancer can be a painful and difficult time. Learn some tips that may help as you move through the grieving process.

- [Grief and Bereavement](#)
- [Seeking Help and Support for Grief and Loss](#)

Grief and Bereavement

What are grief, mourning, and bereavement?

Grief

Grief is normal, and it is a process. Expressing grief is how a person reacts to the loss of a loved one.

Many people think of grief as a single instance or as a short time of pain or sadness in response to a loss – like the tears shed at a loved one's funeral. But **grieving includes the entire emotional process of coping with a loss, and it can last a long time.** The process involves many different emotions, actions, and expressions, all of which help a person come to terms with the loss of a loved one.

We may hear the time of grief being described as "normal grieving," but this simply refers to a process anyone may go through, and none of us experiences grief the same way. This is because grief doesn't look or feel the same for everyone. And every loss is

different.

Mourning

Mourning often goes along with grief. While grief is a personal experience and process, **mourning is how grief and loss are shown in public.** Mourning may involve religious beliefs or rituals, and may be affected by our ethnic background and cultural customs. The rituals of mourning—seeing friends and family and preparing for the funeral and burial or final physical separation—often give some structure to the grieving process. Sometimes a sense of numbness lasts through these activities, leaving the person feeling as though they are just “going through the motions” of these rituals.

Bereavement

Grief and mourning happen during a period of time called bereavement. **Bereavement refers to the time when a person experiences sadness after losing a loved one.**

How long does the grieving process last?

Since each person grieves differently, the length and intensity of the emotions people go through varies from person to person. **Grieving is painful, and it's important that those who have suffered a loss be allowed the time they need to express their grief.**

Although grief is described in phases or stages, it may feel more like a roller coaster, with ups and downs. This can make it hard for the bereaved person to feel any sense of progress in dealing with the loss. A person may feel better for a while, only to become sad again. Sometimes, people wonder how long the grieving process will last, and when they can expect some relief. There's no answer to this question, but some of the factors that affect the intensity and length of grieving are:

- Your relationship with the person who died
- The circumstances of their death
- Your own life experiences

It's common for the grief process to take a year or longer. A grieving person must resolve the emotional and life changes that come with the death of a loved one. The pain may become less intense, but it's normal to feel emotionally involved with the deceased for many years. In time, the person should be able to use their emotional energy in other ways and to strengthen other relationships.

Grief can take unexpected forms

Difficult relationships with the deceased prior to death can cause unique grieving experiences for loved ones. In addition, prolonged illnesses can also cause grief to take unexpected forms.

Difficult relationships

A person who had a difficult relationship with the deceased (a parent who was abusive, estranged, or abandoned the family, for example) is often surprised by the painful emotions they have after their death. It's not uncommon to have profound distress as the bereaved mourns the relationship he or she had wished for with the person who died, and lets go of any chance of achieving it.

Others might feel relief, while some may wonder why they feel nothing at all at the death of such a person. Regret and guilt are common, too. This is all a normal part of the process of adjusting and letting go.

Grief after long illness

The grief experience may be different when the loss occurs after a long illness rather than suddenly. When someone is terminally ill, family, friends, and even the patient might start to grieve in response to the expectation of death. This is a normal response called *anticipatory grief*. It can help people complete unfinished business and prepare loved ones for the actual loss, but it might not lessen the pain they feel when the person dies.

Many people think they are prepared for the loss because death is expected. But when their loved one actually dies, it can still be a shock and bring about unexpected feelings of sadness and loss. For most people, the actual death starts the normal grieving process.

Stages of grief

People may go through many different emotional states while grieving. And in advanced cancer, the grieving process and stages often start before the loss of a loved one because of anticipatory grief.

Researchers describe grief in stages, but it's important to know that each person moves through the stages differently and at a different pace. Some may go through the stages just as they are described below, and other people may move back and forth between

stages. Some people may get stuck in one stage and have trouble reaching the final stage of the grief process.

Experts describe 5 stages that are usually experienced by adults during the grief process.

- **Denial and isolation** - This first stage may start before the loss occurs if the death of the loved one is expected. Or it may begin immediately at the time or shortly after the loss. It can last anywhere from a few hours to days or weeks. The feelings experienced in the first stage of grief may be fear, shock, or numbness. The person may have pangs of distress, often triggered by reminders of the deceased. During this time, the bereaved person may feel emotionally “shut off” from the world. The grieving person may avoid others or avoid talking about the loss.
- **Anger** - The next stage can last for days, weeks, or months. It is when the earliest feelings are replaced by frustration and anxiety. This stage can involve anger, loneliness, or uncertainty. It may be when the feelings of loss are most intense and painful. The person may feel agitated or weak, cry, engage in aimless or disorganized activities, or be preoccupied with thoughts or images of the person they lost.
- **Bargaining** - This stage is likely to be shorter than others. It happens when a grieving person is struggling to find meaning for the loss of their loved one. They may reach out to others and tell their story. In doing so, they may begin to think more clearly about the changes brought about by the loss of their loved one.
- **Depression** - As life changes are realized, depression may set in. This stage is used to describe a grieving person who feels overwhelmed and helpless. They may withdraw, become hostile, or express extreme sadness. During this time, grief tends to come in waves of distress.
- **Acceptance** - This last phase of grief happens when people find ways to come to terms with and accept the loss. Usually, the person comes to accept the loss slowly over a few months to a year. This acceptance includes adjusting to daily life without the deceased.

Children grieve, too, but the process may look different from adults. To learn more about this, see [Helping Children When a Family Member Has Cancer](#)¹.

Some or all of the following may be seen in a person who is grieving:

- Socially withdrawing
- Trouble thinking and concentrating

- Becomes restless and anxious at times
- Loss of appetite
- Looks sad
- Feels depressed
- Dreams of the deceased (or even have hallucinations or “visions” in which they briefly hear or see the deceased)
- Loses weight
- Trouble sleeping
- Feels tired or weak
- Becomes preoccupied with death or events surrounding death
- Searches for reasons for the loss (sometimes with results that make no sense to others)
- Dwells on mistakes, real or imagined, that he or she made with the deceased
- Feels guilty for the loss
- Feels all alone and distant from others
- Expresses anger or envy at seeing others with their loved ones

Reaching the acceptance stage and adjusting to the loss does not mean that all the pain is over. Grieving for someone who was close to you includes losing the future you expected with that person. This must also be mourned. The sense of loss can last for decades. For example, years after a parent dies, the bereaved may be reminded of the parent’s absence at an event he or she would have been expected to attend. This can bring back strong emotions, and require mourning yet another part of the loss.

Seeking Help and Support for Grief and Loss

The importance of support during the grief process

During the time of bereavement and throughout the grief process, a grieving person needs a lot of emotional support. You can read more in [Grief and Bereavement](#). Finding support can be the key to a person’s recovery and acceptance of the loss. Family members, friends, support groups, community organizations, or mental health professionals (therapists or counselors) can all help.

The grieving person must travel through the grief process, and should be allowed to move through it at their own pace. For some people, the grieving process can go on for a long time. This happens more often when a person was very close to the deceased. Sometimes this leads to what is known as *complicated grief*.

Complicated grief

If what's considered to be "normal grieving" does not occur, or if the grieving goes on for a long time without any progress, it's called "complicated grief" or "unresolved grief." Symptoms of complicated grief might include:

- Continued disbelief in the death of the loved one, or emotional numbness over the loss
- Inability to accept the death
- Feeling preoccupied with the loved one or how they died
- Intense sorrow and emotional pain, sometimes including bitterness or anger
- Unable to enjoy good memories about the loved one
- Blaming oneself for the death
- Wishing to die to be with the loved one
- Excessively avoiding reminders of their loss
- Continuous yearning and longing for the deceased
- Feeling alone, detached from others, or distrustful of others since the death
- Trouble pursuing interests or planning for the future after the death of the loved one
- Feeling that life is meaningless or empty without the loved one
- Loss of identity or purpose in life, feeling like part of themselves died with the loved one

For some people who are taking care of a loved one with a long-term illness, complicated grief can actually start while their loved one is still alive. Caregivers under severe stress, especially if the outlook is bleak, may be at higher risk of having abnormal grief even before the death.

If you or anyone close to the deceased has any of the above symptoms of complicated grief, talk with a health care provider or mental health professional. Certain kinds of mental health treatment have been shown to help people with complicated grief. Treatment is important, since people with complicated grief are at risk of their emotional illness getting worse, and are at higher risk of committing suicide.

Coping with loss

Ideally, a bereaved person will be able to work through the process of grieving. With time and support, they'll accept and make sense of the loss, work through the pain, and adjust to a life without their loved one physically being present.

If you or someone you know has lost a loved one, the following tips may help you cope with the loss:

- Let yourself feel the pain and all the other emotions, too. Don't tell yourself how to feel or let others tell you how you should feel.
- Be patient with the process. Don't pressure yourself with expectations. Accept that you need to experience your pain, your emotions, and your own way of healing all in your own time. Don't judge your emotions or compare yourself to others. Remember that no one else can tell you how you should mourn or when to stop.
- Acknowledge your feelings, even the ones you don't like. Let yourself cry. You need to do both for healing.
- Get support. Talk about your loss, your memories, and your experience of the life and death of your loved one. Don't think you are protecting your family and friends by not expressing your sadness. Ask others for what you need. Find and talk to others who have lost a loved one.
- Try to maintain your normal lifestyle. Don't make any major life changes (for example, moving, changing jobs, changing important relationships) during the first year of bereavement. This will let you keep your roots and some sense of security.
- Take care of yourself. Eat well and exercise. Physical activity is a good way to release tension. Allow yourself physical pleasures that help you renew yourself, like hot baths, naps, and favorite foods.
- Avoid drinking too much alcohol or using other drugs. This can harm your body as well as dull your emotions. It's also likely to slow your recovery and may cause new problems.
- Forgive yourself for all the things you did or didn't say or do. Compassion and forgiveness for yourself and others is important in healing.
- Give yourself a break from grief. You must work through it, but you don't need to focus on grief all the time. Find distractions like going to a movie, dinner, or a ball game; reading a good book; listening to music; or getting a massage or manicure.
- Prepare for holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries knowing that strong feelings may come back. Decide if you want to keep certain traditions or create new ones. Plan in advance how you want to spend your time and with whom. Do something to honor the memory of your loved one.
- Join a bereavement support group. Other people can encourage, guide, and

comfort you. They can also offer practical advice and information, and help you feel less alone. If you can't find a group near you, online groups may be helpful.

- When you feel ready, do something creative. Some options include: Write a letter to the person who died to say everything you wish you could say to them. Start keeping a journal. Make a scrapbook. Paint pictures. Plant flowers or trees. Involve yourself in a cause or activity that the deceased loved.

Family changes after a loss

When a loved one dies, it affects all their family members and loved ones. Each family finds its own ways of coping with death. A family's attitudes and reactions are shaped by cultural and spiritual values as well as by the relationships among family members. It takes time for a bereaved family to regain its balance.

It's important that each family member be able to grieve with one another to help the family cope. Each person will experience the loss differently and have different needs. As hard as it may be, it's important for family members to be open and honest when talking with each other. This is not the time for family members to hide their emotions to try and protect one another.

The loss of one person in a family means that roles in the family will change. Family members will need to talk about the effects of this change and work out the shift in responsibilities. This time of change is stressful for everyone. This is a time to be even more gentle and patient with each other.

Losing a child

Facing the death of a child may be the hardest thing a parent ever has to do. People who have lost a child have stronger grief reactions. They often have more anger, guilt, physical symptoms, greater depression, and a loss of meaning and purpose in life. A loss is tragic at any age, but the sense of unfairness of a life unfulfilled magnifies the anger and rage parents feel.

A longer and slower bereavement and recovery should be expected when someone loses a child. The grief may get worse with time as the parents see others going through the milestones they expected to pass with their child.

Bereaved parents especially may be helped by a grief support group. These groups may be available in the local community. You can ask your child's cancer care team for

referral to counseling or local groups.

Getting professional help

Bereavement counseling is a special type of professional help. You may be able to find it through hospice services or a referral from a health care provider. This type of counseling has been shown to reduce the level of distress that mourners go through after the death of their loved one. It can help them move through the phases of grief. Bereavement counseling can also help them adjust to their new lives without the deceased.

Helping someone who is grieving

It's common to feel awkward when trying to comfort someone who is grieving. Many people don't know what to say or do. Use the following tips as a guide.

What to say

- Acknowledge the situation. Example: "I heard that your_____ died." Use the word "died." This shows that you are more open to talk about how the person really feels.
- Express your concern. Example: "I'm sorry to hear that this happened to you."
- Be genuine and don't hide your feelings. Example: "I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care."
- Offer your support. Example: "Tell me what I can do for you."
- Ask how the bereaved person feels and listen to the answer. Don't assume you know how they will feel on any given day.

What to do

- Be there. Even if you don't know what to say, just having someone near can be very comforting.
- Listen and give support. But don't try to force someone if they're not ready to talk.
- Be a good listener. Accept whatever feelings the person expresses. Even if you can't imagine feeling like they do, never tell them how they should or shouldn't feel.
- Give reassurance without minimizing the loss. Try to have empathy with the person without assuming you know how they feel.
- Offer to help with errands, shopping, housework, cooking, driving, or yard work.

Sometimes people want help and sometimes they don't. They may not take you up on your offer, so remember they're not rejecting you or your friendship.

- Avoid telling the person "You're so strong." This puts pressure on the person to hold in feelings and keep acting "strong."
- Continue to offer support even after the first shock wears off. Recovery takes a long time.
- It may help to check in with the bereaved on anniversaries of the death, marriage, and birthday of the deceased, since those can be especially difficult.

If the grieving person begins to abuse alcohol or drugs, neglects personal hygiene, develops physical problems, or talks about suicide, it may be a sign of complicated grief or depression. Talk to them about getting professional help.

If you believe someone is thinking about suicide, don't leave them alone. Try to get the person to get help from their doctor or the nearest hospital emergency room right away. If that's not possible, call 911. If you can safely do so, remove firearms and other tools for suicide.

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