

Grieving the Death of a Loved One



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The holidays are an especially tough time for those of us grieving the loss of a loved one. I hope that the following tips are helpful to ease your pain and give you tools to move forward in positive ways.

Grief from losing a loved one is a normal experience that, unfortunately, everyone goes through at some point. Grief is the most common experience humans have, but that reality doesn't help the emotional, psychological, and physical pain the death of a loved one can bring. Days stuck on a spinning wheel of thoughts: "What if I had just...?" "Why didn't I...?" "I wish I had..." And nights tormented by dreams, images and memories of the deceased, and sudden waking to the reality that they are really gone; the moments between sleep and wake can become the most dreaded time of the day.

Losing a loved one is hard enough when it's "natural" or "expected," such as due to old age or an extended battle with cancer. If the death was traumatic in some way, such as sudden, violent, suicide, homicide, or if the person was young, there are a multitude of additional stressors that can compound the psychological experience.

Here are some common experiences when it comes to grief:

- At first, feeling like it can't be real.
- Overwhelming waves of sadness, loss, longing, and crying that seem to come on at random times and leave just as suddenly. You may think it's done with, but then it returns and each time, you have to confront the loss all over again. These waves of grief tend to be at their highest intensity for several months following the death, and tend to lessen on their own with time, with spikes along the way.
- Seeking comfort in various ways.
- Pain. Grief can lead to inflammation, and emotional pain activates the same parts of the brain as physical pain. Intense grief can affect the heart, called "broken heart syndrome." If you have any physical ailments or medical conditions, make sure you are checking in with a medical provider.
- Reviewing your time with the deceased and replaying memories. This might include some regret about arguments you had or anything you ever did that hurt them.
- Feeling guilty for enjoying parts of life when your loved one cannot.
- A shift in perspective about how you want to live your life. You may start to wonder if you're in the right line of work, relationship, or location, refocus your attention on your family, restart old hobbies you love, plan your dream trip, let go of resentments, and more. This might occur right in the beginning, later in your process, or not at all.
- Problems remembering things or focusing. Grief is processed like an emotional trauma in the brain, which requires our brain to work differently, at least for a while. Having a hard time remembering things, making decisions, or concentrating are all normal.
- If you had unresolved conflict with the deceased, or if they hurt you in some way, it's normal to still be angry with them even after their death. Although this might bring on feelings of guilt within you, dying isn't an immediate panacea to all prior conflict and doesn't erase things the deceased had done.
- Wanting answers about their death, if there is any part of it that is yet unresolved or unclear. This is a form of seeking closure as much as possible and is part of the healing process.
- Dreaming about your loved one in ways that feel very real.
- Considering ways you could have helped them or imagining how you could have prevented their death.

Grieving the Death of a Loved One

Here are some ways to help yourself:

- Don't make major decisions or life changes when you're in the sharp pangs of grief.
- Give it time. This one's a cliché for a reason. Time really does help ease the physical and emotional waves of grief. We are naturally wired toward healing.
- Cry it out. It's natural for humans to feel the urge to cry when sad, so when it comes on, let the tears flow. (Science fact: Crying allows the body to literally release stress hormones through tears.) Because the sudden waves of grief can show up at any point in the day or night, sometimes people isolate in anticipation of being embarrassed if the uncontrollable urge to cry comes on in public. There is no need to isolate or explain yourself (although sometimes disclosing to someone near you what's happening can actually forge surprising new friendships). Another valid cliché: The ones who matter don't mind; the ones who mind don't matter. You might want to bring tissues when you go out in public, just in case, and locate the nearest bathroom if you start to feel the urge to cry and prefer to seek temporary private solace.
- View and treat yourself as you would your best friend in the same situation. What would you tell them if they were experiencing the same circumstances as you are now?
- Normalize your thoughts and emotions. There is no "right" way to grieve, and what you experience during grief varies depending on the specific circumstances of the death, your own life circumstances, and your relation to the deceased, among other factors. Resist judging your emotions as good or bad when you feel them; instead, practice observing their ebb and flow with kindness and compassion for yourself. Remind yourself that you are not alone in how you feel. The strong likelihood is if you're having a thought or feeling, in all of human history others have had/are having it, too. Podcasts, blogs, and grief support groups are great ways to be reminded of this, which can be really comforting. You are not alone in how you're thinking and feeling...ever.
- Keep on a regular routine of eating/nutrition, hygiene, exercise, hydration, and sleep, even if it doesn't seem enticing or important in the moment. The following are general guidelines for taking care of yourself, but always check with your doctor and follow medical advice specific to you. Eat 3 square meals a day plus healthy snacks between. Exercise 30 minutes a day in a way that works for you; even long walks can be incredibly helpful if you don't feel like doing your usual cardio or strength training. Go to bed early and allot yourself the full 8 hours, even if your sleep quality sucks for a while. Doing these things that you know are good for you, even-- especially-- when you don't feel like it, may be difficult when you're grieving. But once you're doing them, I think you'll be surprised by how much of a difference it makes in how you feel. The more irrational thoughts that are often part of grief-- for example, blaming yourself for a loved one's death when it really had nothing to do with you-- can get stronger when you're tired, unkempt, hungry, or dehydrated. You may start to notice this pattern for yourself. For example, you know that when your mind starts to go haywire with irrational or morbid thoughts and it's 9:00 PM, it may be time for bed.
- Use healthy coping skills that give you comfort and joy-- or something approximating the joy you knew before your loss-- and remind you that not all is bad in the world and there are still things to look forward to. What were our general coping mechanisms prior to the loss of a loved one become our amplified go-tos in times of distress, so make sure yours are uplifting or helpful in some way. These might include deep breathing, meditating, positive affirmations (see the end of this article for a list related to grief), yoga, exercise, dancing, gardening, writing poetry/stories, cooking, making art, listening to/making music, journaling, interacting with friends and family, being in nature, and taking care of a pet, among others.

Grieving the Death of a Loved One

- Determine your reasons for living and sources of joy, and return to them when you feel lost or purposeless. These might include family, friends, and pets; future plans and goals; healthy, pleasurable coping skills (like taking a long bath or cooking a meal you love); a fulfilling career you've been working toward; and more.
- During this especially challenging time of the pandemic, while staying at home and physical distancing, many of our usual coping skills have flown out the window and we need to be creative and flexible...two things that are certainly more challenging while grieving. One thing you can do, when you can't do everything you want to now, is plan fun or uplifting things for the future. Make a "bucket list" of trips you want to take and projects you want to do, and write out a plan for how you're going to overcome your current challenges. Maybe include trips you and your loved one planned to take and projects you wanted to do together but didn't get the chance to.
- Speak, write, and/or pray to your loved one who has passed. Tell them about your thoughts, emotions, fears, and regrets, and use your intuition to see what messages come to you. Write that down, too, so you can remember if your distressing thoughts return.
- Focus on the positive memories you had with the deceased. Every relationship that ever existed, no matter how good it is, has conflict, so try to forgive yourself for having said or done things at one point in time. You were doing the best you could given the information and skills you had at that time. Whenever you have a regret about your loved one that there is nothing you can do to change or improve, practice shifting your thinking to a positive memory with them instead.
- Do things to honor your loved one. Some examples include memorializing their life in photo albums, buying a dedication plaque at their favorite place, setting up a scholarship in their name, framing art they made, sharing positive stories about them with others, volunteering to help others, and making craft projects with flowers from their funeral.
- Ask yourself, "What would they want me to feel/think/do?" Assuming it was a generally mutually loving relationship, this can quickly snap you out of dysfunctional thinking patterns that cause guilt for feeling happy or excited about anything in life. When you really think about it, your loved one wouldn't want you to suffer, and they know that your full participation in life is not an insult to them.
- Turn to your faith, whether that is organized religion that informs you about the afterlife, or spirituality that helps you feel connected to others and something bigger than us.
- Find a grief support group of people who have had similar experiences (e.g., parents who lost adult children or young widowers). Therapists often hear from surviving loved ones that it seems like no one else could possibly understand their experience, and they tend to feel very lonely in their thoughts and feelings. This common, but inaccurate, way of thinking leads to actual social isolation, which is not helpful outside of purposeful "alone time" for reflection, self-care, etc. In fact, there are countless others who also have the same sense of being alone in their specific grief.
- Empower yourself with information about the stages of grief, initially written about by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. Know that the stages are nonlinear, meaning you might skip stages and return to ones you thought you were done with. An Internet search will bring up ample information on the topic.
- Seek psychotherapy or grief counseling to have a safe, private space to freely share and get professional input. Counselors are trained to be good listeners, objective sounding boards, and offer proven strategies to help. Therapy is not just for people with mental health disorders.

Grieving the Death of a Loved One

- Develop thought boundaries with yourself so that grief doesn't take over your whole life. You are still alive, and you deserve to live a good life, as painful as that may be to acknowledge at times when you're grieving. This might look like scheduling a certain amount of daily or weekly time to talk and think about your loved one, then moving on with your day knowing you have already planned more time to devote to them. Being in therapy can provide a great way to practice thought boundaries, because you can decide with your therapist that you will, for example, practice focusing on your deceased loved one only during therapy sessions and related homework exercises. Or, it could be simply determining where your limit is in terms of your thoughts; for example, maybe you decide in advance that once you're repeating the same distressing thought over and over without resolution (ruminating), you know that it's time to take action to resolve the thought or to let it go and do something positive.
- If you had conflict with the deceased, or if they hurt you, work toward forgiving them. If the hurt was so bad that you don't think you can or should forgive them (people do heinous things sometimes), focus instead on the benefits of forgiveness for you, not them. Therapy can help you work through this process.
- Keep it specific to this experience. Sometimes a sad or traumatic event can cause us to generalize our experiences into global beliefs about people, life, and the world. In reality, both good and bad things happen in life, bad things sometimes happen to people who overwhelmingly do good with their lives, and good things sometimes happen to people who overwhelmingly do bad. Life can really suck and be unfair sometimes, and it can also be mundane or wonderful at other times.

When should you seek professional help?

- First and foremost, as mentioned above, you can seek therapy at any point in time. It is not just for obvious "problems," but also intended for processing experiences and just having a safe space to share your thoughts and feelings with an objective person who has your best interest at heart. Don't wait for a "right" time to go to therapy; if you're thinking about it, give it a try. Therapy is especially accessible now during the pandemic, with most therapy done over telehealth apps and video.
- If you're using coping mechanisms that are not helpful or destructive, which can generally be described as anything that is causing additional complications and problems beyond your grief. We tend to do this in moments of avoiding psychological pain, through the use of means that give a temporary sense of release, satisfaction, or numbing that usually turns into regret. Some of these unhealthy coping mechanisms include drugs, alcohol, excessive shopping that puts you into debt, sex outside of when you feel safe and purposeful about it, restricting calories/binge eating/purging, self-injurious behavior such as cutting or burning yourself without suicidal intent, wanting to escape the pain through suicide, angry outbursts at people who aren't the cause of your anger, and physical aggression or violence. There are more, and certainly others of lesser intensity, but if you're doing or thinking about doing any of these, or you're getting negative feedback from people who love you, those are good indicators that it's time to seek immediate professional support. You'll never regret having meditated; you will likely regret having gotten drunk and buying \$3,000 worth of clothes on a credit card if that's your entire monthly income.

Grieving the Death of a Loved One

- If you're experiencing symptoms of a trauma response. These might include intrusive, morbid thoughts about your loved one dying, a belief that the world is always unsafe, a belief that people are generally not trustworthy, a belief that you're irrevocably damaged, jumpiness, flashbacks in which you feel you're right back in the traumatic experience, nightmares, a sense that you or the world aren't real, and more. You'll want to be assessed by a mental health professional, preferably one who specializes in trauma. Experiencing trauma doesn't have to be a life sentence of suffering; there are some very effective trauma treatments. Major foci of treatment include easing the physical symptoms of trauma and heading toward incorporating the traumatic experience into the rest of your life timeline.
- If you're experiencing hallucinations and/or delusions. Extreme stress and trauma can trigger what's called psychosis, or detachment from reality in these ways. Hallucinations can generally be defined as seeing, hearing, or smelling things that others don't. Delusions are strong false beliefs that remain unchanged even in the face of disproving evidence. They can be more complicated than these very brief descriptions, and it's not uncommon in some cultures to report visits from and conversations with the deceased, so don't jump to quick conclusions about yourself or others. But you may as well get assessed by a physician, psychologist, or psychiatrist to be sure, especially if it becomes a pattern for you, is distressing to you or those who love you, and starts to negatively impact your life in some way.
- If you're feeling depressed. This is different from grief but can result from maladaptive grieving, or grief that does not reach some closure eventually. Instead, it turns into generalized thinking about oneself, life, and/or the world as bad, hopeless, disappointing, or pointless. Depression can look like being tired no matter how much you slept, feeling physically weighted down, isolating from others (outside of the necessary physical distancing due to the pandemic), decreased or increased appetite for no apparent reason, overwhelming sadness and lethargy, loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed, and more.

If you are thinking about therapy, do not hesitate to contact California Lutheran University's Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at (805)493-3727. All currently enrolled students have access to free, confidential, solution-focused, and culturally affirming mental health services. All staff and faculty can contact CAPS for a consultation to provide assistance in locating resources.

CAPS is open Monday - Friday, 8 am - 5 pm. Emergency hours are available during office hours for any students experiencing a psychological crisis. Outside of office hours, if you are having a psychological crisis, you are encouraged to:

- Call 911
- Go to an emergency room
- Call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-8255 (Ayuda en Español a 1-888-628-9454)
- Text "START" to 741-741

More grief-specific information and resources can be found at grief.com

Continue reading for positive affirmations you can practice while grieving.

Grieving the Death of a Loved One

Positive Affirmations for Grief:

Here are some examples of positive affirmations-- comforting, grounding, uplifting thoughts-- to help alleviate some aspects of grief. Review these daily, or even multiple times a day, as gentle reminders. You can also create your own that are really specific to your experience and circumstances. Make sure they're not "just being positive," rather statements that are accurate and/or resonate with you.

(Replace "they/them" with the name of your deceased loved one.)

They want me to be joyful and live a full, satisfying life.

Although they aren't physically here with me anymore, I can connect with them anytime in my own ways.

I'm so grateful for the time I had with them.

My favorite memories of them are... and that's what I choose to focus on.

I am alive here and now.

There are people and pets here who love and need me.

Wherever they went when they died, I will be there with them too one day.

I have a purpose in life I want to fulfill.

While I am alive, it's easier and nicer for me and everyone around me to live well instead of to suffer.

I am not alone in my experience.

No matter how dark my thoughts get, I know that others have had the same thoughts before too.

There are ample support resources for me.

I vow to live my life each day with mindfulness, joy, and purposeful intent.

Though my pain is intense now, I know it'll ease up over time, and there are things I can do to help myself in the process.

I deserve to feel good about myself and life.