



# Understanding *grief*

## An introduction to grief



It might sound like a straightforward thing to define, but grief is far more complex than you may think. Some generic terms that you may hear to describe grief include: sadness when someone dies; the pain of losing someone; or depression after a death. While these descriptions may be appropriate in some cases, the truth of the matter is that grief is abstract, complex, and highly subjective. It can include a huge number of different emotions depending on the individual experiencing it.

There is therefore no one definition of grief, however grief can be summarised as follows:

**It is a normal and expected reaction to the loss or death of anyone or anything. It is not a serious mental difficulty or illness. Grief is a necessary process after loss.**

## What is a grief?

While we can see that grief is a complex and difficult to define process, there are some common features within the grieving process that are applicable to all that experience it. Grief is the conflicting feelings we experience when something ends that was a regular and familiar pattern in our lives. For example, the death of an elderly relative.

When an elderly relative dies, there is of course great sadness, but sometimes people also state that they feel a sense of relief. As relief is usually a positive emotion, this balance of sadness and relief can create an overwhelming conflict, which can add to the complexity of grief.

Grief represents a change in our lives. When someone we love dies, the connection is broken. Again, keep in mind that grief does not necessarily have to be related to the death of someone close. It can also be connected to the loss of anything: a job, a relationship, or even a way of life.

## Why do we grieve?

As we have established, grief is challenging, complex and unpredictable. It's also very necessary, however hard it may be, to come to terms with a loss or big change in our lives.

But why do we actually grieve? Well there are two main reasons for grieving after a loss.

The first is that we grieve because we loved. The love or connection that we had with someone close to us does not go away when that person is no longer here. After the loss of someone dear to you, the person is no longer here, but your connection remains.

The same applies for example to the loss of a job. The job may have ended and with it the way of life that you were used to. But you may wake up the next morning and still feel a connection to the job and the way of life.

So essentially, we grieve because the connection we had to someone or something is still there even when that someone or something isn't.

The second reason is that we grieve for ourselves. In times of grief it may feel difficult to comprehend what has happened. It doesn't make sense. Grief is our way of coming to terms with, understanding, and accepting what has happened.



Grief is the conflicting feelings we experience when something ends that was a regular and familiar pattern in our lives.

Throughout the grieving process, we may question things, we may get angry, we may experience depression, but ultimately the process of grief is for us to establish some acceptance of the situation.

## Understanding the cycle of grief

As we have explored, the grieving process is a process of acceptance, but what are the stages that assist in getting to that point of acceptance?

Well ultimately there are five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These stages are not linear. We do not necessarily experience one stage, move on to the next and so on. We may jump from stage to stage, go back and experience stages again and even repeat the grief cycle multiple times.

Let's have a closer look at the different stages of grief.

### Denial

Denial is usually the first stage of grief. Although denying that something has happened might seem helpful, denial does not actually serve a purpose for our experience of grief. It does however allow us to manage the initial trauma. Through denial, we are able to cope with the initial shock and manage the pace at which we process the situation. Denial therefore essentially allows us to stagger our exposure to the grief.

Denial can take many forms in the grieving process. It might feel like things no longer make sense. We may feel a numb sensation in response to the situation or experience. Or we may question how things can continue and if we are able to cope.

### Anger

Again, much like denial, anger is a vital and important stage to the grieving process and it is important to allow yourself to feel anger in all its fullness. The more we keep our angry feelings hidden, the more they will impact on our lives.

Your anger may be directed towards many different individuals or entities during your grief. If you have lost a loved one, you may feel anger towards medical staff who couldn't do more; yourself for not spending more time with that person; or even the person who has passed away because they have abandoned you.

Whatever form your anger takes, it's important to allow yourself to be angry.

“Denial essentially allows us to stagger our exposure to grief.”



## **Bargaining**

After a loss, it is common to ask yourself why? You might ask ‘what if’ or ‘if only...’ questions. This is known as bargaining. It is one of the initial ways in which we start to get used to the idea that someone or something has left our lives.

Bargaining may even take the form of a truce. For example: “If I devote my life to helping others then maybe I can realise this has all been a dream”. Much of our bargaining keeps us in the past as we try and come to terms with, and make sense of, what has happened.

Keep in mind here also that the stages of grief are not like episodes of a TV series. You don’t start one, end it, and move on to the next. Rather, the stages are much like experiences that you can flip in and out of at any given time. For example, bargaining may be something that an individual experiences consistently through their grieving process.

## **Depression**

Depression is a normal and natural stage to experience during any grieving process. It’s important to recognise that it is appropriate to experience elements of depression during a loss. However, there is a difference between depression after a loss and a clinical diagnosable depression.

In our society, depression is often seen as unnatural, or a sign that something is wrong. In the case of grieving, it is perfectly normal to experience depression – it is inevitable that you will reach a point at which you feel an overwhelming sadness due to the loss.

Although depression may feel like things are getting worse, experiencing deep sadness is a marker that a person is starting to come to terms with their grief.

## **Acceptance**

Often the acceptance stage of grief is misunderstood. People expect to feel alright or like they have overcome grief. This isn’t the case. The acceptance stage is about accepting the reality of what has happened.

This stage is about recognising that the person, or thing, that we knew in our lives is no longer there. Acceptance is not about feeling good in our new circumstances. It is about recognising that our circumstances have changed forever and we must adapt accordingly.



The stages of grief are not linear and each stage can be experienced several times before the acceptance stage is reached.

## Myths about grief and the grieving process

### **“The pain of grief will go away if you ignore it”**

As we have already discussed, it is important to experiencing all of the emotions relating to grief in order to reach the final stage of acceptance. Hiding or ignoring difficult feelings will only serve to make the process longer and harder.

### **“You need to ‘be strong’”**

The belief that being strong means being stoic, or not showing emotions, is common in society. It is also one of the things that make grief more challenging.

Think about a recent tragedy or bereavement that someone you know has experienced. Maybe you have heard the comment “they are dealing so well with this”, or “aren’t they managing well? They are so strong.” What is really meant by these statements? Often what we mean is that the person isn’t showing emotions. They are ‘keeping it together’. We associate the process of not showing painful emotions as strength in times of grief, but in reality, true strength is being true to our emotions. It is vital that we are true to our emotions in order to manage our grief appropriately.

### **“Grief is a personal thing”**

Often when we grieve, we feel that it isn’t something we should burden others with. We feel that it is a process we must work through alone.

In reality, it is important to allow ourselves to be supported during grief. That is why talking about the person or circumstances that you have lost is helpful. Simply connecting with someone and talking about your experiences can be a powerful step forward in the grieving process. You may be grieving, but that doesn’t mean you have to cut yourself off from others.

### **“You will be in a state of grief forever”**

Sometimes people worry that they will be stuck in a cycle of grief forever. This isn’t the case.

Grieving is really difficult and painful, but the strong feelings of sadness will dull over time and you will eventually experience some form of acceptance. Yes, at times in the future you may experience difficult feelings and your life may have changed entirely, but that initial period of grief will end.

So to be clear, missing someone or something isn’t the same as grieving.

“It is vital that we are true to our emotions in order to manage our grief appropriately.”



One day your experience of grief will pass, but that doesn't mean you won't miss that person or situation.

You can grieve for any form of loss.

**“You only grieve due to the death of someone”**

No, grieving isn't reserved for the death of a loved one or someone close. You can grieve for any form of loss, for example, the loss of a job or the loss of a way of life or relationship.



## Managing and working with grief

Notice that this section is not a how to guide to overcome grief. It is about managing and working with grief, because when we experience loss, we need to grieve. It's a valuable process that allows us to eventually reach a point of acceptance of what we have lost.

Our objective is not to overcome grief or solve it, but rather to accept it and work with it. So how do we do that?

### Turn to those you trust and love

Grief requires ample support and one of the best ways to get this support is to turn to those who you trust and love the most. Invest in their support, allow yourself to communicate with them about how you feel. Allow yourself to share the feelings of pain and the challenges you are experiencing with the grief.

### Join a support group

This might seem pretty alien to you, but joining a support group can be hugely beneficial. One of the most challenging things about grief is the feeling of loneliness and isolation. Often it may feel like you are cut off

Joining a support group can help people with the feelings of loneliness and isolation which people often feel when they are grieving



from the rest of the world, or that you are all on your own when it comes to managing grief. Joining a support group allows you to realise that you are not on your own. Being connected to others who are going through the same thing, or similar, can be very helpful.

### **Accept your grief** **- it's OK to feel what you are feeling**

This goes back to some of our previous points about grief. It is really important to be accepting of your grief. Don't try to bypass or ignore it. This really does not work.

We need to appreciate that grieving is OK, that it is acceptable, and that it is necessary for us to get to a point of acceptance of our loss.

Often, one of the most helpful realisations people make when grieving is to understand and accept that it is OK to feel sad, angry, or depressed about their loss. Acceptance is a key factor in processing grief.

### **Talk to a therapist**

Accessing some professional help can be a really positive step forwards in the grieving process. Accessing therapy isn't always the easiest thing in the world to do, particularly if you have never been in therapy before. However, working through the grieving process with a therapist can be an incredibly helpful and supportive experience.

Working with a therapist can assist with processing grief, making sense of the different stages that you will inevitably experience, and ultimately in coming to terms with your loss.

### **Express yourself in a creative way**

Often, when grieving, it can feel really difficult to express how you feel. The emotions we go through in the grieving process can feel foreign to us - they often make little sense.

As a result, it might feel challenging to be able to express your emotions. One way to help with this is by finding a creative alternative. For example, you could paint, draw, play music, or write a poem or short story to assist with the process of grief and to help you understand how you are feeling. Being able to express your emotions is important when grieving.

“The emotions we go through in the grieving process can feel foreign to us - they often make little sense.”

## **Plan ahead for triggers**

Triggers are really important to consider when working through your grief. For example, you might hear a certain song, or a friend may start talking about something that brings strong feelings to the fore. Whatever the trigger, it is OK to respond like this and to be upset. Perhaps these things remind you of the person or thing you have lost?

The objective is not to avoid, deny or run away from your grief, but to recognise when something has or may trigger an emotion, and manage it appropriately.

Allow yourself to feel that sadness - again, that is OK. However, also allow yourself to recognise that the trigger is not the same as the loss itself. You do not need to allow yourself to experience the grief all over again. Take some slow breathes, excuse yourself if needs be, and allow the feelings to pass.

## **Take care of your physical wellbeing**

Taking care of your physical wellbeing is a practical way to take positive steps forward in the development of your grief.

Think about it. What feels better? Staying at home and not moving during a challenging time of grief? Or trying your best to get out and about and maybe even considering doing some exercise?

Of course, exercising more is much more productive and healthier when managing your grief. The simple process of feeling you have achieved something small and releasing some endorphins due to being outside and exercising will benefit you in working through your grief.

## **Conclusion**

We really hope you found this booklet supportive, educational, and informative. We wanted to leave you with a few reminders of the most important points that are worth reflecting on when experiencing grief.

- It's OK to grieve.
- Grieving is not something you need to overcome. It's something you need to go through.
- Managing grief is appropriate - but don't deny your grief.
- Be aware of the stages of grief and what stage you might be in and when.
- Talk about your grief with those you trust.



Releasing some endorphins due to being outside and exercising will benefit you in working through your grief.

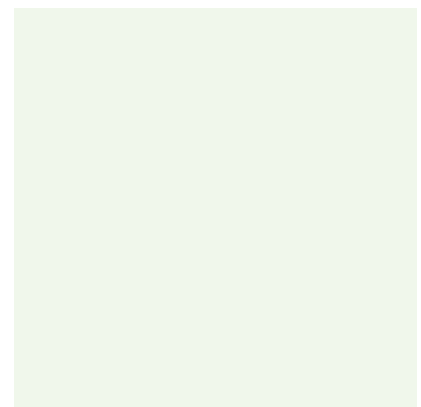
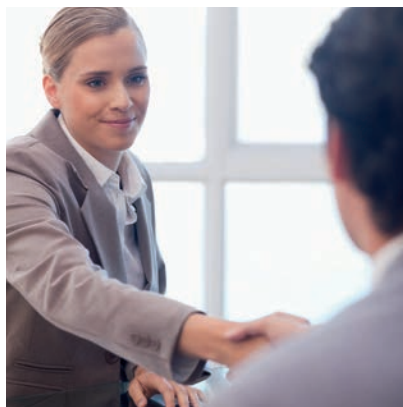
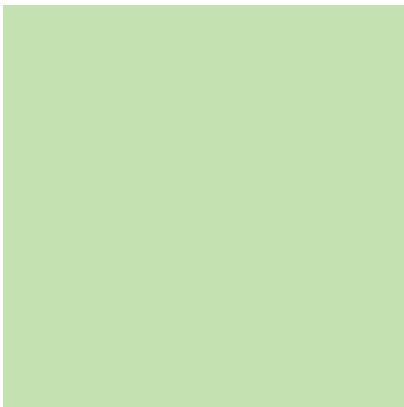
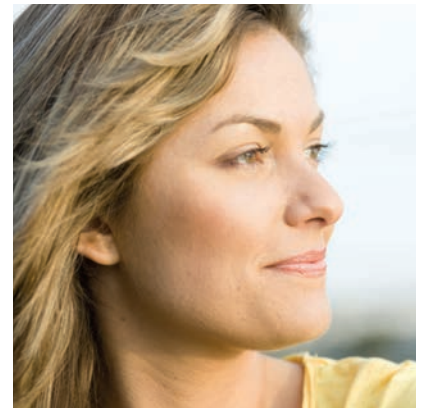


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