



cancer.org | 1.800.227.2345

Coping with the Loss of a Loved One

Working through grief can be hard, but there are things that can help. This includes some steps you can take on your own and others will need support from other people.

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

Grief and Bereavement

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.

- [Grief](#)
- [Mourning](#)
- [Bereavement](#)
- [Children and grief](#)
- [How long does the grieving process last?](#)
- [Difficult relationships](#)

Grief

Grief is how a person reacts to the loss of a loved one. You may feel sad, angry, numb, confused, and many other emotions. You may act differently from what you normally would. It is a process you go through and you may feel many different emotions over time. Grief is different for everyone - there is no wrong way to grieve.

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.

The three types of grief are:

Anticipatory grief

Some people start grieving before their loved one's death. They might start to think about how life will change after their loved one's death, feel anxious or sad, or become more concerned about how their loved one is feeling. This is called anticipatory grief. It is normal and allows the person who is dying and their loved ones to deal with any issues that have not been resolved. It is part of preparing for the loss of a loved one.

Having anticipatory grief does not change how a person grieves after their loved one dies. When their loved one dies, many people still feel shocked and sad. For most people, the actual death starts the normal grieving process.

Common or normal grief

Each person feels grief in their own way and there can be many ups and downs to the grieving process. Some days will be better than others and, over time, the grief will most often lift.

Here are some of the more common ways that people might react to the loss of a loved one.

Emotions

You may feel shock, numbness, sadness, denial, despair, and/or anger. You might have anxiety or depression. You can also feel guilty, relieved, or helpless. You may find yourself wishing for the time before your loved one was told they have cancer.

When you are grieving, reminders like a song or comment that makes you think of your loved one can make you cry. You might also cry for no reason.

You may also feel differently about your religion, faith, or spirituality. Grief and loss can make you question your beliefs or how you see the world. It may also deepen your faith or help you to understand the meaning of life in a new way.

Thoughts

You may experience disbelief, confusion, and have trouble concentrating. You might not be able to think of anything except the loss of the person who died. You may also have dreams about your loved one or see or hear things that other people don't (hallucinations).

Physical feelings

Grief can cause physical feelings. Your throat or chest feels tight or heavy. You might feel sick to your stomach or don't feel like eating. Some people who find it hard to eat may lose weight.

- Thinking very often about the loved one or how they died
- Intense sorrow and emotional pain, sometimes including bitterness or anger
- Not being able to enjoy good memories about the loved one
- Blaming oneself for the death
- Wishing to die to be with the loved one
- Avoiding reminders of their loss
- Constant longing for the deceased
- Feeling alone, detached or distrustful of others
- Trouble pursuing interests or planning for the future
- Feeling that life is meaningless or empty without the loved one
- Loss of identity or purpose in life, feeling like part of them died with the loved one

Some people are more likely to develop complicated grief. Spouses and parents are most at risk. Other factors that may increase the risk are:

- Having several losses in a short period of time
- History of anxiety
- Trouble coping in the past

If you or anyone close to the deceased has symptoms of complicated grief, talk with a health care provider or mental health professional. Mental health treatment can help people with complicated grief. People with complicated grief are at risk of their symptoms getting worse and more at risk of committing suicide.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/caregivers/helping-children-when-a-family-member-has-cancer/dealing-with-parents-terminal-illness/kids-understanding-death.html

References

American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO). Grief and loss. Accessed at cancer.net. Content is no longer available.

Hospice Foundation of America. What is grief? Hospicefoundation.org. Accessed at [https://hospicefoundation.org/Grief-\(1\)/What-to-Expect](https://hospicefoundation.org/Grief-(1)/What-to-Expect) on November 20, 2023.

Mental Health America (MHA). Coping with loss: Bereavement and grief. Accessed at <https://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/conditions/coping-loss-bereavement-and-grief> on November 14, 2023.

National Cancer Institute. Grief, bereavement, and coping with loss (PDQ®). Accessed <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/advanced-cancer/caregivers/planning/bereavement-hp-pdq> on November 14, 2023.

National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization. Bereavement care. caringinfo.org. Accessed at <https://www.caringinfo.org/types-of-care/bereavement-care/> on November 14, 2023.

Stroebe M, Schut H, Boerner K. Cautioning Health-Care Professionals. *Omega* (Westport). 2017;74(4):455-473. doi:10.1177/0030222817691870

Toftagen CS, Kip K, Witt A, McMillan SC. Complicated grief: Risk factors, interventions, and resources for oncology nurses. *Clin J Oncol Nurs*. 2017; 21(3):331-337.

Tyrrell P, Harberger S, Schoo C, et al. Kubler-Ross Stages of Dying and Subsequent Models of Grief. [Updated 2023 Feb 26]. In: StatPearls [Internet]. Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing; 2023 Jan-. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK507885/>

Last Revised: December 19, 2023



hot baths, naps, and reading a good book.

- Avoid drinking too much alcohol or using other drugs. This might dull your emotions so that you take longer to go through the grieving process. Using these substances might also increase the risk for unresolved grief and other problems.
- Prepare for holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries knowing that strong feelings might come back. Decide if you want to keep certain traditions or create new ones. Plan what you want to do and who you want to be with during these times. Do something to honor the memory of your loved one.

Getting support

Family members, friends, support groups, community organizations, or mental health professionals (therapists or counselors) all might be able to help as you resolve your grief.

Talk with them 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.

Join a bereavement support group.

Being with other people who have lost a loved one can help you feel less alone. They can offer practical advice and information. Many hospices, hospitals, and community organizations have these types of support groups. If you can't find a group near you, online groups may be helpful.

Bereavement counseling

Bereavement or grief counseling helps people cope with the loss of a loved one. It gives people a safe place to get in touch with, share and work to accept and resolve the emotions that can come with grief. This counseling can also help people learn how to live their lives without their loved one.

Bereavement care is offered through hospices for up to 13 months. If your loved one wasn't in hospice, check with your cancer care or palliative care provider for help.

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 reactions are affected by their cultural and spiritual values as well as by the relationships among family members. It takes time for a bereaved family to recover.

Families need to grieve together as well as each member on their own to help the family cope. Each person will have different needs. Family members should try to be open and honest with each other. This is not the time for family members to hide their feelings 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 how things will work going forward. This is a time to be even more gentle and patient with each other.

Losing a child

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

A longer and slower grief process should be expected when someone loses a child. The grief may worsen with time as the parents see other children grow and do things their child never will.

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.

Helping someone who is grieving

Many people feel awkward when trying to comfort someone who is grieving. You may not know what to say or do. The following tips may be helpful.

What to say

- Share your sorrow. Example: “I’m sorry to hear that this happened to you.”
- 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 they feel and listen to the answer. Encourage them to talk about their feelings and share memories of their loved one.
- Don’t try to force them to talk. Not everyone is ready to share how they are feeling.
- Don’t offer false comfort or minimize the loss. They need you to listen, not say things like “they’re no longer in pain” or “you’ll get over it in time”. Avoid telling the person “You’re so strong.” This puts pressure on them to hold in feelings and keep acting “strong.”

What to do

- Just be with them. Even if you don’t know what to say, having someone near can be comforting.
- Be patient. It can take a long time to recover from the loss of a loved one. Just be there in case they want to talk.
- Offer to help with errands, babysitting, shopping, housework, cooking, driving, or yardwork. Sometimes people want help and sometimes they don’t. They may not take you up on your offer, but remember they’re not rejecting you. And don’t be afraid to offer again as time goes on.
- 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 very tough.

Watch for signs that the person needs professional help

If the grieving person begins to abuse alcohol or drugs, doesn’t take care of themselves, becomes ill, or talks about suicide, it may be a sign of [complicated grief](#) for 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.

References

American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO). Grief and loss. Accessed at cancer.net. Content is no longer available.

Hospice Foundation of America. What is grief? Hospicefoundation.org. Accessed at [https://hospicefoundation.org/Grief-\(1\)/What-to-Expect](https://hospicefoundation.org/Grief-(1)/What-to-Expect) on November 20, 2023.

Mental Health America (MHA). Coping with loss: Bereavement and grief. Accessed at <https://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/conditions/coping-loss-bereavement-and-grief> on November 14, 2023.

National Cancer Institute. Grief, bereavement, and coping with loss (PDQ®). Accessed <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/advanced-cancer/caregivers/planning/bereavement-hp-pdq> on November 14, 2023.

National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization. Bereavement care. [caringinfo.org](https://www.caringinfo.org). Accessed at <https://www.caringinfo.org/types-of-care/bereavement-care/> on November 14, 2023.

Toftagen CS, Kip K, Witt A, McMillan SC. Complicated grief: Risk factors, interventions, and resources for oncology nurses. *Clin J Oncol Nurs*. 2017; 21(3):331-337.

Last Revised: December 19, 2023

Written by

The American Cancer Society medical and editorial content team
(<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/acs-medical-content-and-news-staff.html>)

Our team is made up of doctors and oncology certified nurses with deep knowledge of cancer care as well as editors and translators with extensive experience in medical writing.

American Cancer Society medical information is copyrighted material. For reprint requests, please see our Content Usage Policy (www.cancer.org/about-us/policies/content-usage.html).

cancer.org | 1.800.227.2345