

I am grieving - How can I support myself

When you are grieving it is natural to sometimes feel overwhelmed and uncertain if you can cope. Don't worry, you're not alone. This factsheet aims to offer some simple guidance to help you understand your grief response and provides some ideas about how you can look after yourself at this challenging time.

What is grief?

Grief is the human response to change and loss in our lives, such as the death of someone we love. It is a natural and normal response, which has a physical impact on our bodies as well affecting our emotions and our thinking. Grief challenges the way we think about ourselves and the world, and influences our spirituality and relationships. The experience of grief may require us to embark on a personal journey of learning new things about ourselves and different ways to view the world.

How do we express grief?

Each of us expresses grief in unique and personal ways. We respond differently to the physical impacts, the emotional turmoil and the challenges to our worldview. Some of us openly express our hurt, while others withdraw. It is important to remember that grief is a normal and natural response and that there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Here are (not an exhaustive list) some different reactions grieving people have experienced:

Emotions that I may feel ...

- Anxiety, fretfulness and feeling emotionally overwhelmed
- Anger, frustration or disillusionment
- Loneliness and isolation

Thoughts that I may have ...

- Disbelief
- Confusion
- Sense of presence or detachment
- Preoccupation

Behaviours that I may show ...

- Searching and calling out
- Restless over-activity
- Absentmindedness
- Visiting places and carrying objects
- Avoiding reminders

Physical Reactions that I may experience ...

- Sleep and appetite changes
- Tightness in chest and throat and breathlessness
- Lack of energy

The grief process

Grief is a challenging and complex time of hurt, but it is a natural part of life. Try not to feel overwhelmed - you can cope with grief. We tend to cope best when we feel safe, supported and understand what is happening to us. In thinking about how best to support ourselves when we are grieving it can be helpful to return to the definition of grief above - the idea that grief can be experienced for many people as a process or journey.



At Good Grief we find J. William Worden's grief theory very helpful for making sense of this journey. Worden has identified that the grief process involves four key tasks. At Good Grief we have adapted these tasks slightly to take account of the wide range of losses we grieve for in life in addition to bereavement:

1. To accept the reality of the loss
2. To process the pain of grief
3. To adjust to a changed world after the loss
4. To find an enduring connection with what has been lost while embarking on a new life

It is important to understand that the four tasks are not steps or stages. Although time is an important healer, and the tasks follow the natural course of grief, we do not move through the tasks automatically. Actively engaging with each task may help. The tasks can be approached in any order, and it is likely that you will revisit and reprocess each several times as time goes by. Give each task time and engage with them in whichever way feels natural to you.

How to support yourself

Understanding the grief process, as described above, is an important step in adjusting to life after your loss. Understanding what is required helps to make the grief journey a little less bewildering. But how might we engage with the tasks in a meaningful way? How might we make the shift from a passive experience of grief ('this has happened to me') to the active engagement ('what does this require of me?') highlighted by Worden's tasks?

One small, practical step you might begin with is identifying and honestly acknowledging each emotion you are feeling. Rather than trying to push away or ignore uncomfortable feelings, allow them to 'be,' and then direct your attention towards considering how to best manage these when they arise. For instance, what steps can you take when sadness consumes you at work? What strategies might you create for yourself for when your frustration feels overwhelming?

Starting with your feelings in this way may help to give you the energy and awareness to take another small step - to start to think about focusing on the areas of your life that you can influence as distinct from those you can't. Rather than focusing on the 'if onlys,' this will help you to direct your efforts and emotional energy towards the choices, actions and decisions that will help you live your life in a way that is meaningful to you today.

Grief can be overwhelming, challenging and life changing. To manage, you need to gather yourself some extra support. This might include:

- Time - the opportunity to take some 'time out' from your responsibilities to focus on your grief or to refresh yourself.
- Safe space - spaces or places where you can safely (for yourself and others) experience different emotions (such as sadness, anger, fear, guilt and humour).
- A companion - at least one friend, relative or counsellor who you can talk openly with to help make sense of what has happened and regularly reflect upon your reactions without feeling judged.
- Support network - a wider network of people you can call upon to help in a range of contexts - including the practical aspects of daily life.

It is very important to be able to accept offers of help from family, friends and neighbours. Don't be afraid to ask for the sort of support that would be most helpful for you. If finding time for yourself is a challenge, ask someone to look after the children for an afternoon. If a messy house is compounding your sense of despair, ask a relative to give you a hand in restoring some sense of how you'd like the place to be. Asking for help from others is not a sign of weakness, it is a sign of strength - a positive step that you can choose to take.



Additional Support

Grief is a normal and natural response to the hurt people feel when they lose something or someone they love. Sometimes people need a little extra support when they are grieving. Two websites that may be of help and the bookshops at acgb.org.au and dougy.org and don't hesitate to recommend individual professional support through their GP.

