

What is Grief?

Grief is:

- the pain we feel when we lose someone we love.
- a normal response to loss.
- a natural part of the life cycle.
- very individual. Everyone grieves differently. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.
- an emotional roller coaster of highs and lows.
- often stressful.
- a process that takes time. Because we all grieve in different ways and at different rates, there is no set timetable for how long it will last.

Grief is not:

- a disorder or disease.
- contagious.
- a sign of weakness.

Many Factors Influence Grief

How hard and how long you grieve depend on the following factors:

- Your personality.
- Your relationship with the person who died.
- How the person died—sudden or expected death.
- The age of the person who died.
- If you witnessed the death.
- How you were told about the death.
- Your past experience with loss and death.
- Your culture.
- Your belief systems.
- What support is available to you.

Where Can You Find Grief?

Grief is everywhere. It is all around us because it is a normal and natural part of life. The two most common experiences we share as human beings are birth and death.

What Does Grief Look Like?

Grief takes on different shapes, attitudes and behaviors. Teens experience grief in many different ways and not necessarily in the same order or at the same time.

- **Anger:** You may lash out in anger because you feel you have lost control of your life. And it is normal to feel angry with the person who has died.
- **Withdrawal:** You may pull away from friends, drop out of clubs and sports, or cancel plans. Sometimes it's just easier to be alone.



More this way...

- **Inability to relate with peers:** Relating to friends can become difficult because their problems may seem very small and fixable compared to your loss.
- **Impatience:** You may become impatient or irritated with others—especially if someone complains about something trivial and fixable.
- **Overachievement:** You may try to be your very best to make it easier for other family members to cope. This can put even more pressure on you.
- **Lack of focus:** You may find it difficult to pay attention because your mind can't shut off what has happened. So you become unfocused and unorganized.
- **Drop in school grades:** Because you are having a hard time focusing, your grades may drop. If they don't go back up within a reasonable amount of time, ask a teacher or friend for help.
- **Lack of interest or motivation:** You may adopt a "why bother" attitude.
- **Worry:** You may not be able to stop worrying about your loved ones because of the fear that you might lose them, as well.
- **Guilt:** You may feel guilt because of something you have said/not said, thought, felt, or wished about the person who died. You may even think that you could have prevented the death. You may also feel guilty for wanting to feel normal again.
- **Overwhelming sadness:** This can feel like an incredible weight that prevents you from wanting to do anything.
- **Loneliness:** You can feel very isolated and different from your peers.
- **No outward response:** At school, you may act like nothing has happened so you won't call attention to yourself. At home, you may try to act like nothing is bothering you so your family won't be sad or worry about you.
- **Sexual activity:** You may engage in sexual activity so you can escape the pain and feel connected with someone.
- **Drug or alcohol use:** You may experiment with either or both as part of that "why bother" attitude or to mask or stop the pain you feel. Use of drugs or alcohol makes grief more difficult.
- **Unusual happenings:** You may experience seeing or hearing the loved one that has died or have vivid dreams about them. Some teens find this comforting since it feels like a connection with their loved one. Others may find it uncomfortable. It can help to talk or write about it.

Your Grief Your Way

Grief is a very individual journey, and there is no right or wrong way to feel. Even though others may tell you how you should feel, they can't possibly know what you are experiencing. You know yourself better than anyone, and you have the right to:

- Voice your thoughts and feelings.
- Ask questions about your pain and loss, and expect to be told the truth.
- Be treated as a unique individual and not like a child.
- Be who you are, to grieve in your own way and not be measured by another's standards.
- Be involved in the funeral/memorial service if you want to be.
- Be comforted by family and friends, even when they do not understand your pain.
- Create a space to express your grief.
- Ask for professional or personal help when you need it.
- Grieve until you are ready to move forward with your life.
- Share your personal journey with others—not only to receive comfort, but also to give comfort to others experiencing their own loss.

How Grief Affects You

You may not realize it, but grief affects you on **every** level. Here's how:

Physically

- Crying
- Trouble sleeping
- Restlessness or hyperactivity
- Headache
- Stomachache or nausea
- Loss of appetite or increased appetite
- Weight loss or gain
- Lack of energy
- Pain around the heart (origin of the word "heartache")

Mentally

- Unable to concentrate or stay focused
- Unable to make decisions
- Easily confused and forgetful
- Unorganized
- Constantly thinking about the death
- Not wanting to go on living
- Disbelief or denial that the person is really dead
- Glorifying the person who has died (Sometimes, we only remember the good qualities or times spent with that person.)

Spiritually

- A loss or questioning of faith
- Anger at your faith system
- A strengthened faith
- A rediscovery of faith or interest in other belief systems (Wanting to connect with a faith community or a group to feel a sense of family.)
- Searching for the meaning of life (What your contribution will be/how you will be remembered.)
- An increased sense of connection with the loved one who died.
- Questioning why bad things have to happen.

Emotionally

- Shock
- Numbness
- Anger (at the medical/legal system, the person who died, who/ what was responsible for the death.)
- Guilt
- Fear (this will happen again.)
- Regret
- Sadness
- Loneliness
- Insecurity
- Relief (That the person is no longer suffering or a bad relationship is over.)
- Shame (May be felt because of the nature of the death— suicide, AIDS, anorexia, crime.)

Socially

- Feeling left out
- Feeling different
- Feeling isolated
- Change in peer relationships
- Withdrawal from friends and family



More this way...

What you need when you grieve

In order to cope with your loss and move forward with your life, you need:

