

Grief After the Loss of a Loved One

Losing a loved one can be a life-altering experience. Because of this, it's natural to feel a variety of emotions. For example, you may feel disbelief, anger, or sadness that the person is gone. It's possible you might feel anxiety about what life will be like without them. Occasionally, you may experience joy when remembering the good times. And you might also go through periods of feeling numb. There's no right way to feel and no right way to grieve.

Although everyone will have a unique and personalized experience as they mourn, grieving is universal and there are some common phases you might experience.

This guide provides an overview of the phases of grief so you know what to expect. It also provides tips on how to cope so you know what might help as you move toward healing.

Tip: Learning and remembering information after a loss can be hard, so it may be helpful to revisit this guide multiple times.

Understanding grief and grieving: An overview of phases and timelines

Realistic expectations can make coping easier, so it's helpful to reconsider a common myth about grief: People do not actually move through five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) in a steady, predictable journey. For most people, grief moves through two phases: acute and integrated.

The acute phase

During the acute phase, your life may be impacted by the loss in a variety of ways. You may have changes to your thoughts, activity level, physical body, spirituality, and even changes to aspects of your identity or lifestyle. You may also experience a variety of emotions, both positive and negative, with varying intensities. Your experience will be unique to you. While you might understandably wish for predictability, it may be comforting to know that your unique patterns reflect the distinct and special relationship you had with your loved one. When you allow yourself to experience the reality of your own grief, you honor yourself and the relationship you had, while also helping yourself mourn and ultimately heal. This acute phase of grief tends to diminish over the first year after the loss.

The integrated phase

After the acute period, you'll enter into the integrated phase of grief. During this time your grief will be less consuming and far-reaching. You may largely adapt to life after loss, but this doesn't mean your loved one is forgotten. On the contrary, you will carry your loved one with you in your heart as you slowly learn to renavigate the world and resume day-to-day activities.

Prolonged or complicated grief

While most can expect this two-stage progression, for about 10 percent of people grief can become prolonged or complicated and can last several years. While there is no way to predict if someone will experience grief in this way, researchers have identified several factors that make it more likely, such as:

- If the loss was through sudden or traumatic circumstances
- If there were multiple losses
- If a person doesn't have enough social support
- If a person has a history of mood or anxiety disorders or prior experiences with trauma

Prolonged grief can be very challenging. This guide will help you understand what you can expect from it and provide tips on how to move forward.

Let's begin with an in-depth look into the acute phase and strategies for how to cope with it.

Understanding the acute phase of grief

Acute grief is raw and can affect many different parts of your life. Because these impacts can be pervasive and are so new, this phase can be especially hard. Some of the changes you might expect include:

Thinking

Grief can affect what you think about. You may be understandably preoccupied with thoughts of your loved one. You're adjusting to and processing the loss, and you might be working to keep your loved one close in your mind. You may also be thinking about the grieving process itself, including having thoughts that feel very true in the moment, but ultimately are untrue, like, "It will feel this bad forever." Grief can also impact the way you think. You may have difficulty focusing, remembering things, or prioritizing tasks. This difficulty can often feel notable because these activities that used to feel more "automatic" now require more intention and effort.

Emotions

You might feel strong feelings, including sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, and regret. Emotions are signals to us about events in our lives, and the loss of a loved one is among the most impactful events you can experience. You might also feel strong positive emotions, such as when you remember the good times with your loved one. It's also normal to feel completely numb because you're not yet prepared to feel strong emotions or because you need a break from feeling them. Although positive feelings or numbness may be surprising, they are normal responses.

Behaviors

You may find yourself increasing your general level of activity to try to stay busy and distracted in response to the loss. Or, you might find yourself withdrawing and decreasing your level of activity to cope. Each of us responds in different ways, and adjustments up or down in activity level are common. While these fluctuations are to be expected, prolonged self-isolation or distraction can prevent healing, so be mindful if either of these becomes the primary method of coping.

Spirituality

Religion or spirituality can be a source of comfort. You might find yourself turning to them, regardless of whether you identify as religious. Loss can put us into contact with big questions, and religion and spirituality are places where people can go in search of answers. Alternatively, you may find yourself questioning your religion or spirituality, perhaps even for the first time. This, too, is normal when you're wrestling with questions like, "How can such difficult losses be possible?"

Physical

Loss can be a very stressful experience, and that stress can impact your body. For example, stress can cause challenges with sleep and changes in appetite. The emotional drain of loss can diminish your energy and cause fatigue. Because your mind and body are interconnected, it's natural that you're likely to feel the loss in your body as well.

Secondary loss

Loss is complex. When you lose a loved one, you not only lose the person but also the distinct things they provided through their relationship with you. These secondary losses can include things like changes to financial security, lifestyle, and identity. For example, if your loved one was the breadwinner, you may now be coping with financial insecurity. If your loved one managed logistics like paying bills, you may find yourself confused about how to do those tasks. You may also experience the loss of your role as spouse, child, or caregiver. These are just some of the many examples of secondary losses. Some will become apparent right away, such as the loss of a caregiver role, while others might unfold over time. Because these losses may not be readily apparent, they can often be overlooked. However, these losses deserve your attention and care, too, as your life is shifting in new and unpredictable ways.

You may experience a wide variety of changes and emotions during the acute phase of grief. Give yourself some grace when unexpected thoughts, feelings, behaviors, spiritual or physical changes, or secondary losses occur.

Coping with the acute phase of grief

Because grief is a natural and important reaction, the goal of these strategies is not to avoid your grief. Instead, the goal is to care for yourself and treat yourself kindly as you mourn your loss and honor your loved one.

Thinking

If you're preoccupied by thoughts of your loved one, it can help to recognize this as a sign of your love for them. If you find yourself thinking, "It will feel this bad forever," or similar thoughts, gently remind yourself that your mood is likely coloring your thinking. Your feelings, no matter how profound—and they can feel very profound in this phase—will not last forever. When faced with difficulties focusing, remembering, and prioritizing, acknowledge that thinking is going to be more challenging than it typically is. It may be effective to use strategies like writing things down and setting alarms. Most importantly, though, be kind to yourself as these challenges arise. It makes so much sense that your thinking is impacted as your mind is adjusting to this new reality after the loss of your loved one.

Emotions

Acknowledge and allow emotions. Many emotional reactions can make sense in the context of what's happening and can serve as important signals about how you're processing this loss. Noticing what the emotion is signaling can be a helpful way to work on accepting its presence. For example:

- Feelings of sadness can mean you lost someone who was important to you.
- Feelings of anger might indicate you're mad that someone has been taken from you.
- Feelings of anxiety may be signaling that you're worrying about what life might be like with this person gone.

Pushing away uncomfortable emotions won't speed up your grieving process; in fact, it may slow down your grieving process and make it even harder. Know that these emotions will decrease over time, and when this intensity does change, it doesn't mean your loss has lost its meaning. It just means you're learning to carry it with you differently.

Behaviors

Try to maintain self-care behaviors, or the fundamentals of prioritizing your mental and physical health. For example, eat healthy foods, exercise, and try to get plenty of sleep. While these behaviors can feel challenging, self-care will help you face the emotional difficulties of this phase with more resilience and resources. Social support is also an important part of self-care. Take time to talk with your family and friends, especially those who will let you share about your loved one and your loss. You may find that talking about this special person will help you remember and honor them. When you're ready, you may want to find other ways to honor them, such as making a scrapbook, eating their favorite foods, or participating in activities or causes that were important to them. One behavior to be wary of during this phase, however, is making any big life choices, like changing jobs. Carefully consider any major life decisions with the support of people you trust to make sure you make a wise decision that aligns with your values and serves your longer-term goals.

Spirituality

Religion and spirituality can be a source of comfort for some. If this is the case for you, continue to pursue this by setting aside time for prayers, rituals, services, or any other spiritual practices that nourish you. If you find yourself questioning religion or spirituality in a way that is new for you, know that this is common and can be expected. You may feel like judging yourself for questioning your faith, but this is unlikely to help you move through this challenge. Instead, consider compassionately connecting to a variety of resources in your spiritual circle that might help you move through this difficulty, such as like-minded friends, a spiritual leader, services, books, or your larger religious community.

Physical

Give yourself permission to prioritize physical comforts that can nourish your body, such as: taking naps, taking hot baths, or eating favorite foods. However, be mindful of overdoing unhealthy foods or sleeping through the day, as these behaviors can make you feel worse and make it more difficult to cope with the emotional ups and downs of grief.

Secondary loss

Often, secondary losses can get overlooked. Recognizing them and putting a name to them can give them the acknowledgement they deserve. Coping with these types of losses may take time, so be patient with yourself. It can be helpful to ask for assistance as you adjust to your new normal. However, grief professionals describe growing in the areas that are left behind as an important way to cope over time. For example, it will be helpful to learn how to manage finances independently if that had been your loved one's responsibility previously. When it comes to role loss, like loss of your role as a caregiver, it's important to look for ways to forge new aspects of your identity. Start with something small such as taking a class in an area of interest, and then build from there to something larger such as going back to school. Don't jump right in: Allow time for grieving first.

Through time and healthy coping, most people will pass through the acute phase and into the integrated phase of grief.

Understanding the integrated phase of grief

The transition from the acute phase to the integrated phase takes place gradually over time. In the integrated phase, the emotional peak has passed and your understanding of the world changes to incorporate your loss. While you will still have thoughts and memories of your loved one, they will no longer dominate your thoughts. Instead they will live more peacefully in your heart. In this phase, the impacts of grief will interfere less with your day-to-day life. You'll resume activities that can restore a sense of well-being.

While the integrated stage is more peaceful, you'll likely experience occasional spikes of grief in this phase, especially around important times like holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, and other losses.

Coping with the integrated phase of grief

Coping will center on supporting yourself through these acute spikes of grief that can occur around important days.

Planning ahead for important days

Around holidays and birthdays, plan ahead and expect that these times will be difficult. Give yourself permission to re-evaluate how you spend these days, such as observing traditions or doing something new. Thoughtfully and intentionally plan the way you'll spend your time and with whom you'll spend it. Don't force yourself to do more than you want to or to do anything on these days that doesn't serve your needs.

When planning for these occasions, it may help to pinpoint an outlet for your grief and a way to honor the memory of your loved one, such as lighting a candle in their honor or having everyone share a story about them. It may also help to decide on a "Plan A" and a backup "Plan B." Plan A may look like honoring the holiday with family and friends, whereas Plan B may be a more solitary activity like going to a favorite place you used to share together or looking through photo albums. Often, having a Plan B can feel so reassuring that you may feel you actually want to go through with Plan A.

Coping with emotional reactions

In addition to deciding what you'll do on these occasions, anticipate that you'll have emotional reactions. It's important not to push away these feelings. Research shows that—by observing, allowing, and naming your feelings as well as noting that they'll eventually pass—you may decrease the intensity of the feelings and actually heal more quickly.

It's important to accept that it can be difficult or confusing to celebrate a holiday or birthday without someone who mattered a great deal to you. Allow yourself to listen to what your emotions are communicating, even if they're mixed. It's normal to feel sad that someone you loved is not with you, but it's also normal to feel angry at them for not being there. If, at the same time, you're enjoying parts of a holiday or birthday, allow yourself to do that. It's OK to feel joy during these special times. Mixed emotions can be common. Allow yourself to feel both the negative and the positive emotions; embracing the complexity of your emotions honors your experience and will help you move through this difficult time.

While the integrated phase of grief will be punctuated by these acute feelings, the good news is that these will only appear from time to time and will eventually subside. This phase is largely much more peaceful than the acute phase.

However, not everybody who experiences loss will progress to this integrated phase in a predictable manner. Instead, some individuals will experience prolonged grief.

Understanding prolonged or complicated grief

Prolonged grief, sometimes called complicated grief, is when acute feelings last for a year or more without resolving and, unfortunately, there is no transition into the integrated phase. Instead, prolonged grief is characterized by a continual heightened state of suffering that can be very challenging. Thankfully, researchers and clinicians have been working to advance the understanding and treatment of prolonged grief.

Here's what these experts have come to understand: While grief is a natural response to the loss of a loved one, prolonged grief is not typical or helpful and it can be very taxing on your mental health. Prolonged grief creates a state of suspended and heightened distress that often prevents healing or significantly interferes with home, work, school, or social responsibilities. Because of this distress and impairment, prolonged grief has been formalized into a diagnosis called Prolonged Grief Disorder. A mental health clinician can assess, diagnose, and provide treatment options for this condition.

It can be helpful to know what to watch for around the one-year mark. Prolonged Grief Disorder is marked by a daily heightened yearning for the loved one—or a preoccupation with thoughts or memories of them. In addition, prolonged grief symptoms include: confusion about your identity; disbelief; heightened emotional pain; challenges in engaging with life or others; avoidance of people, places, or things that remind you of the loss; emotional numbness; heightened loneliness; and a feeling that life lacks meaning. If some of these symptoms apply to you, it's important to connect with a mental health professional to understand if you have a diagnosis of Prolonged Grief Disorder. Left without intervention, prolonged grief can cause additional mental health difficulties.

Coping with prolonged or complicated grief

Thankfully, there are effective interventions for prolonged grief that can help with healing from this difficult loss. Therapy can take different forms, but one commonality across treatments is addressing some of the difficult topics and emotions surrounding the loss that will help you move through the grief. Support from mental health professionals can assist in moving through these sensitive topics so you're not alone in broaching them and you can move toward healing.

Reaching out for support

Please reach out for help if you see any signs of prolonged grief or if you're struggling at any stage of grief. You do not have to wait until you see signs of prolonged grief before seeking support.

Loss of a loved one is truly challenging. It requires you to completely reorganize your understanding of your world, so it makes sense that it comes with many challenging impacts. Fortunately, coping strategies and professional support can help you navigate these challenging times.