

# Grief and Loss



*Let the grieving process complete itself, and take good care during this difficult time.*

Everyone experiences loss at some time in their life. But no two experiences are the same. How you respond to a loss and how you experience grief can be influenced by the nature of your loss, your personality and coping style, your past experiences, and support around you.

## Understanding the grieving process

Grieving is normal and can assist emotional healing. The death of someone close can be a life-changing experience, and the grieving process can begin before, during, or after their passing. The more you understand the basics of the grieving process, the more you may be able to help yourself or others around you who are suffering from the loss of someone close. When you grieve, you may have:

- intense emotions such as crying or feeling numb, as if none of this is real, and you are imagining it.
- feelings of guilt, embarrassment, and anger.
- physical symptoms. You may experience low energy or exhaustion, headaches, chest pain or racing heart, upset stomach, weight loss or gain (from either overeating or under eating). Sleeping excessively or periods of insomnia are often common.
- difficulty paying attention or remembering things as well as you did before your loss.

## The stages of grief

Intense grieving often lasts from three months to a year. It is not uncommon to experience profound grief for two years or more. However, it is important to remember that grief affects each person differently. The type of emotional response and length of grieving often depends on your belief system, religion, life experiences, and the kind of loss suffered. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a medical doctor working with cancer patients, wrote a landmark book titled *On Death and Dying*. In it, she described five stages of grief most commonly experienced by persons facing a terminal illness or the death of a loved one:

1. **Denial:** When hearing bad news, the most common reaction is numbness, shock, and disbelief.
2. **Anger:** We may become angry at the messenger who delivers the bad news (the doctor, for example) or angry at someone (or a higher power) that we hold responsible for our grief. Some persons turn their anger inward and blame themselves for what happened.
3. **Bargaining:** We may try to negotiate the situation, either with another person involved or with a higher power: “Please give me one more chance, and I promise things will be better. . .different. . .I will change. . .” As the bitter truth sets in, the next phase often hits hard.

4. **Depression:** As we realize that the loss is real and unchanging, we may sink into deep sorrow. We may feel overwhelming loss, loneliness, and hopelessness. An intense sadness can deplete our energy and prevent us from completing chores, work or other activities. Emotional outbursts, like sobbing over the smallest thing or crying for days on end, are common during this phase. Some persons feel their life is over, and deep despair or even suicidal feelings can arise.
5. **Acceptance:** When we come to terms with the reality of the situation, when we recognize it as a fact of our life and gradually let go of the emotional struggle, we have reached the healing phase when we may find peace and be hopeful about our future.

### Taking good care of yourself

Letting go and surrendering to the grieving process, with the help of others, can bring comfort and solace, especially if you take good care of yourself during this difficult time and afterward. To help yourself grieve well:

- **Take good physical care of yourself.** Get enough sleep, avoid numbing your pain with drugs and alcohol, exercise regularly, and eat nutritious meals.
- **Express yourself.** Be creative. Write in a journal, paint or draw, talk to people about your loved one, or, if appropriate, speak with your spiritual higher power. Create a special collage or memento about your loved one.
- **Take good emotional care of yourself.** Have fun, forgive, laugh with a friend, plan ahead, and look forward to new experiences in your life.
- **Welcome social support.** Accept help from others who can support you during your painful time, such as friends, loved ones, and counselors, including mental health professionals and spiritual advisors.

### Supporting someone who is grieving

Perhaps a friend, family member, or co-worker has recently lost someone dear. Bereavement can be a lonely and frightening experience. As a friend, co-worker, or neighbor, you can be vital in the healing process. You may not know exactly what to say or do, but just being there can be great comfort for someone grieving. Be willing to push past feeling awkward or uncomfortable. Keep in mind that you cannot solve the problem or take away the loss. You can lend support by listening with sincere caring and kindness. You can also help by ensuring that good physical and emotional care (outlined earlier) is not being overlooked.

### Finding support for your grief and loss

In addition to the support you can receive from persons close to you, Kaiser Permanente offers Grief and Bereavement Support Groups for members suffering the loss of a family member or loved one. Contact your Kaiser Permanente Mental Health Department for more information.

### Other resources

#### Books and cassettes

- *Awakening from Grief: Finding the Way Back to Joy*, by John E. Welshons (2003).
- *I Wasn't Ready to Say Goodbye: Surviving, Coping, and Healing After the Sudden Death of a Loved One*, by Brook Noel and Pamela D. Blair, PhD (2003).
- *On Death and Dying*, by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1997).
- *Being a Widow*, by Lynn Caine (1990).

- *Necessary Losses: The Loves, Illusions, Dependencies and Impossible Expectations That All of Us Have to Give Up in Order to Grow*, by Judith Viorst (1998).
- *Seven Choices: Taking the Steps to New Life After Losing Someone You Love*, by Elizabeth Harper Neeld (1990), book also available as audiotape cassette.

### Self-help organizations and Web sites

- Hospice Foundation of America (HFA): [hospicefoundation.org](http://hospicefoundation.org). HFA offers to help persons coping personally or professionally with terminal illness, death, and the process of grief and bereavement.
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: [helping.afsp.org](http://helping.afsp.org). Toll free 1-888-333-AFSP. AFSP offers information and education about depression and suicide.
- The Compassionate Friends: [compassionatefriends.org](http://compassionatefriends.org). They offer friendship and understanding to bereaved parents, grandparents, and siblings.
- American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) grief and loss programs: [aarp.org/griefandloss](http://aarp.org/griefandloss). AARP offers one-to-one outreach, support groups, education meetings, online assistance, and publications for bereaved adults and their families.
- Kaiser Permanente offers a variety of classes and support groups for dealing with grief, managing stress, and coping with depression. Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department. For a complete list of programs and additional information, check online at [members.kp.org](http://members.kp.org).

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.