

# Understanding Grief



Grief is a natural process of reaction and adjustment to loss and change. When we lose someone or something that is important to us, we grieve. There are many types of losses – loss of health, loss of employment, marital breakdown, divorce and death – and the reactions we have after a loss may be very different. Every significant loss challenges us to find ways of coping with the changes that absence brings.

This doesn't mean that we put the loss behind us, but we now have to adjust to a life without that person or thing that meant so much to us. For most of us the death of someone close will be the biggest loss we face. Your grieving process is to try to make sense of what has happened while learning to live your life without that person.

## What to expect

We are all novices when it comes to grief and there is no right way to grieve. No two people's reactions will be the same, but these are some you might have.

## Feelings

You may feel sad, numb, irritable, angry, relieved, guilty, lonely, depressed, frightened or helpless. These feelings can come and go and don't follow any particular sequence.

## Physical symptoms

You may feel more tired than usual, yet find it hard to sleep. It's normal to have very vivid dreams. Your appetite may change and energy levels may be low. Your concentration may be dull so that you are absent-minded or have difficulty absorbing new information.

## Thoughts

You might find you spend a lot of time thinking about the loss and the events leading up to it. It's normal to spend time thinking about 'if only' and how things might have been different. Many people find they think a lot about why it happened.

Although you know the person has died, you may 'forget' it briefly, particularly when you wake up. You may imagine you see or have contact with the person who died. These thoughts can be overwhelming or frightening at times. The emotions and physical symptoms of grief can lead you to wonder if you are grieving the 'right' way or even if you're going mad.

## Social changes

You may find you need time alone or you may feel a need to tell the story of your loss many times over. You may find you seek out people who can understand your need to talk and distance yourself from people who are uncomfortable with this. You may be disappointed and surprised at who can support you and who cannot.

## Spiritual struggles

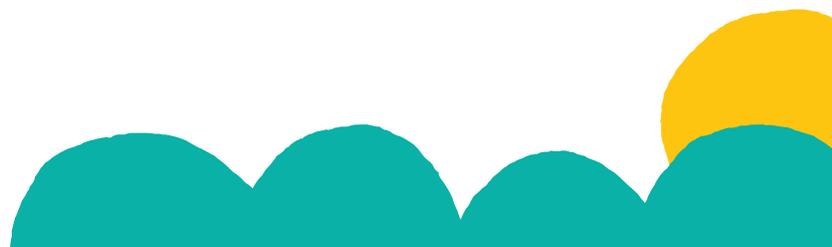
You may struggle with questions about the meaning of life, your relationship with God and your beliefs about what happens after death.

Although it may be difficult to imagine in the early days of grief, as time goes on you will find the resources and strength within yourself that you didn't know you had. Even as we struggle with grief, we can learn and grow with it.



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To die and grieve well wherever the place





## The grief process

Many people experience a sense of shock and disbelief when a death occurs. You may appear to be coping well but often feel detached and almost in a dream. This initial reaction is a protective device that allows you to shut down in some ways as you prepare for what lies ahead. You may be surprised that the pain increases when this numbness begins to wear off and the reality of your loss begins to sink in. As the reality comes into focus so too does the pain of your loss. You begin to notice all you have lost.

Grief doesn't happen in a set way. It's not like having the flu, where you feel very ill and then begin to feel a bit better until you finally return to being your old self again. The feelings and thoughts of grief come and go in waves. Sometimes you may feel you are coping quite well and then experience a burst of grief as you are reminded of your loss. It can be confusing to suddenly feel angry, for example, if you feel you've already 'gotten over' anger.

It may help to remember that the thoughts and feelings will come and go as you try to come to terms with grief while also living your day-to-day life.

- Grief is a process and it takes time
- Everyone's grief is different and unique
- There is no right way to grieve
- Strong emotions and thoughts are part of grief

## How long does grieving take?

There is no set time for grief. Grieving can be a lifetime adjustment, with some feelings coming back many times. You also find you feel a 'dip' around important dates like anniversaries and birthdays. You will find that your grief is less intense and eases over time. That does not mean that you are over your grief but you are finding a way to re-engage in life without the person that died.



## What may help?

- Seek out accurate information about grief and loss
- Be patient and gentle with yourself as you grieve
- Acknowledge the extent of your loss
- Allow yourself to cope and to grieve in a way that suits you
- Try to sleep well, eat well and take gentle exercise
- Accept emotional and practical support from friends and family
- Try not to make major or rash decisions while you grieve
- Talk to your GP if you feel you need further support

## Prolonged Grief

When the symptoms of grief remain very intense and get in the way of everyday life, this is called Prolonged Grief (sometimes known as Complicated Grief). This is only considered when someone has been bereaved for at least six months.

More information on Prolonged Grief is available from our *When Grief Gets Stuck* leaflet.

## Useful Resources

Further suggested reading is available from our Thérèse Brady Library, [library@hospicefoundation.ie](mailto:library@hospicefoundation.ie)

### Bereavement & Loss Hub

[www.bereaved.ie](http://www.bereaved.ie)

### Bereavement Support Line

Freephone 1800 80 70 77. Available Monday to Friday, 10am-1pm. In partnership with the HSE.

Produced by Irish Hospice Foundation's Bereavement Education & Resource Centre

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