

Wellness Wednesday



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5 Signs You're Dealing With Unresolved Grief

Feeling stuck in the grieving process? Therapists explain what to look out for and give advice on how to move forward.

Grief is a normal, natural reaction to loss — such as the death of a loved one — and the grieving process looks different for each person going through it.

In general, though, the most intense period of grieving typically happens in the first six months after a loss and recurs throughout the first two years, said psychotherapist Andrea Dorn, noting that this timeline “can vary widely from person to person.”



And while it's common to experience occasional, unexpected waves of grief for years or even decades after a loss, most people will notice “a gradual decline in frequency and duration of grief symptoms over time” as they work through these feelings, said Dorn, the author of “When Someone Dies: A Children’s Mindful How-To Guide on Grief and Loss.”

But sometimes, the intense period of suffering doesn't subside. You may get stuck in your grief and feel like you can't move forward. This is known as “unresolved grief.” In clinical terms, it may be referred to as “complicated grief” or “prolonged grief.” (A condition called “prolonged grief disorder” became an official mental health diagnosis in 2021; American Psychiatric Association.)

Unresolved grief is “a type of grief where a person continues to experience significant emotional distress, pain and sadness associated with a loss, long after the normal grieving period has passed,” said Dorn, who is also the founder of Bloom Therapy and Wellness in Columbia, South Carolina. “This can happen when someone has not had the opportunity to fully process or come to terms with their loss.”

Dorn offered an analogy that highlights the difference between “typical” grief and unresolved grief. Imagine a ship caught in a storm. Waves may crash onto the deck, leaving the passengers disoriented, overwhelmed and drained.

“However, in ‘normal’ grief, the storm eventually subsides, allowing the ship to sail on to calmer waters,” Dorn said. “Conversely, unresolved grief feels like being trapped in the eye of the storm, where the chaos around you may diminish slightly, but the sense of being stuck remains. This state of grief can create a sense of loneliness and confusion, making it difficult to see your life clearly.”

Wading through the rough waters to reach calmer ones may feel too daunting. So the person ends up staying put, “which can not only be exhausting,” Dorn said. “It can also prevent a person from being able to process and resolve their grief. The only way to reach calmer waters is through the storm, and the only way through grief is to experience it.”

Certain factors are more likely to lead to unresolved grief, Dorn said: a sudden or traumatic death, your closeness to the person who died, a lack of social support and preexisting mental health conditions or emotional struggles.

Below, grief therapists share what unresolved grief looks like so you can identify it and seek the support you need to move forward.

1. You feel persistent and intense painful emotions about the death.

You often feel overwhelmed by feelings such as sadness, anger, yearning or despair related to the loss that make it difficult to function.

“You may feel as though you are stuck in a cycle of grief you cannot escape, and may struggle to find joy or pleasure in other aspects of your life,” Dorn said.

Fanisha Calvert, a therapist in Oak Brook, Illinois, who specializes in grief, said depending on how the person died, you may also experience feelings of shame, stigma, isolation or trauma.

“For example, those whose loved one died by suicide must wade through the emotional devastation and the stigma that accompanies a suicide death,” she said.

For some, the unprocessed grief may show up as increased anxiety or agitation, causing “strong reactions to seemingly small events” in your life, Dorn noted.

2. You avoid — or cling to — reminders of the person who died.

You may notice you’re actively avoiding places, hobbies or other people that remind you of the loved one you lost because it’s too painful.

“For example, you may avoid going to the cemetery, looking at photos of your loved one or participating in activities that you once enjoyed doing together,” Dorn said. “This can make it difficult to maintain social connections and engage in activities that can promote healing.”

On the other end of the spectrum, you might find yourself constantly seeking out reminders of this person — by always touching their belongings, for instance.

3. You’re consumed by inaccurate or unhelpful thoughts about their death.

Inaccurate thoughts are those that don’t reflect the facts surrounding the death. That might include blaming yourself for things that were beyond your control.

“For example, someone taking complete responsibility for a bad choice that someone else made that may have contributed to their loved one’s death,” Calvert said.

Unhelpful thoughts may have some truth to them, but they fill you with negative emotions like guilt, helplessness and hopelessness, she said.



“For example, having thoughts like, ‘I don’t care about what happens to me in the future if my loved one isn’t going to be a part of it. She’ll never see me graduate, so what’s the point?’” Calvert said.

4. You’re having trouble accepting the reality that this person is gone.

You may struggle to come to terms with the loss, experiencing denial or disbelief about this person’s death.

“You may find yourself constantly searching for signs or signals that your loved one is still alive,” Dorn said. “This can interfere with the process of mourning and prevent you from fully processing your emotions related to the loss.”

5. You’re engaging in numbing behaviors.

You may turn to drugs, alcohol or food to dull the emotional pain.

That can lead to “engagement in substance abuse, self-defeating behaviors like overeating or numbing with screens or sleep and sometimes suicidal ideation,” Dorn said.

If these sound familiar, here’s some advice on how to move forward.

Unresolved grief can make you feel isolated from the people and things you care about. Building a strong support system is crucial: family, friends, a grief group or your spiritual or religious community can help.

“Talking to others who have experienced a similar loss can be particularly helpful in feeling understood and less alone,” Dorn said.

Allowing yourself to grieve — rather than suppressing or avoiding difficult emotions — is also an important part of healing.

"It's OK to experience a range of emotions when grieving, including sadness, anger, guilt or regret," Dorn said. "Allow yourself to feel these emotions and acknowledge that they are a normal part of the grieving process."

Finding ways to honor or stay connected to the person you lost can also be beneficial.

"This can include creating a memorial, writing a letter to the person, or participating in activities that they enjoyed," Dorn said. "Finding ways to keep the memory of your loved one alive can help with the grieving process and provide comfort."

If you had a difficult or toxic relationship with the deceased, you can still do the letter-writing exercise, or you might choose to express your feelings some other way, like through journaling or a ritual you create.

Taking care of yourself, physically and emotionally, will also help you move forward. Prioritize sleep, movement and nourishing foods, as well as getting back into activities that bring you joy and relax you, Dorn said, while acknowledging that, at times, this may feel impossible.

Finding a good therapist who specializes in grief (or, more specifically, in complicated grief) can also be a valuable resource.

"A therapist can help you explore your emotions related to the loss, identify patterns of thinking that may be contributing to your difficulties and provide tools and strategies to cope with grief," Dorn said.

And keep in mind that grieving can be a lifelong process. It's not linear, nor is it a one-and-done situation. So try not to get hung up on time frames, Calvert said.

"It's important to expect setbacks and occasional painful reminders. Some days are better than others," she said. "Understanding this framework allows a person to be better prepared through the grieving process."

The goal of processing grief isn't to "move on," said Dorn, "but to find a way to integrate the loss into your life in a way that allows you to move forward — sometimes slowly — with a sense of peace and acceptance. Unresolved grief prevents much, if not all, of that forward movement."



INSANELY GOOD BLUEBERRY OATMEAL MUFFINS

127 Calories | PREP TIME: 40 mins | COOK TIME: 20 mins | TOTAL TIME: 1 hr 2 Mins
YIELD: 12 servings | Course: Breakfast, Snack | Cuisine: American



INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 cups quick oats
1 cup unsweetened almond milk, or milk of choice
1/2 cup brown sugar, unpacked
2 tbsp honey
1/2 cup unsweetened applesauce
2 egg whites
1 tbsp oil, such as coconut or canola
1 tsp vanilla extract
1/2 cup white whole wheat flour
1 tsp baking powder
1/2 tsp baking soda
1/2 tsp salt
1 cup fresh blueberries
baking spray

These Blueberry Oatmeal Muffins are insanely good! Hard to believe they are light. Think baked oatmeal, but in the form of a muffin!

Blueberry Oat Muffin Tips and Variations:

- To store muffins, allow them to cool completely and place in an airtight container or Ziploc bag at room temperature.
- Refrigerate for up to 5 days or wrap tight and freeze for up to 1 month.
- To get that fresh-out-of-the-oven taste, warm muffins in the microwave.
- Variations: try replacing the blueberries with strawberries, raisins, apples or even chocolate chips!

Nutrition Information

Serving: 1 muffin, Calories: 127 kcal, Carbohydrates: 28.5 g, Protein: 3 g, Fat: 2.5 g, Sodium: 222.5 mg, Fiber: 2.5 g, Sugar: 17.5 g



INSTRUCTIONS



1. Preheat oven to 400F. Line a muffin tin with liners and lightly spray with oil so they don't stick.
2. Place oats in a food processor or chopper and pulse a few times. Soak oats in milk for about 30 minutes.
3. Wet Ingredients: In a medium bowl combine brown sugar, honey, apple sauce, vanilla, egg whites, oil and mix well.
4. Dry Ingredients: In a third bowl combine whole wheat flour, salt, baking powder, baking soda and whisk to combine.
5. Combine oats and milk with sugar, applesauce mixture and mix well.
6. Slowly add in the dry ingredients and mix until just incorporated. Fold in blueberries.
7. Spoon into the muffin tin and bake for 22-24 minutes. Enjoy!!

FEATURED EXERCISE

<https://greatist.com/move/quick-upper-body-hiit-workout#circuit-1>

Featured Exercise ► **Overhead press** ✓

» **Do it:**

Reps: 12

Hold a set of dumbbells and bend your elbows to 90 degrees, with upper arms parallel to the floor and dumbbells at about head height.

As you exhale, press the dumbbells overhead without clanking them together. Return to starting position and keep resistance by preventing elbows from drooping below shoulder height.

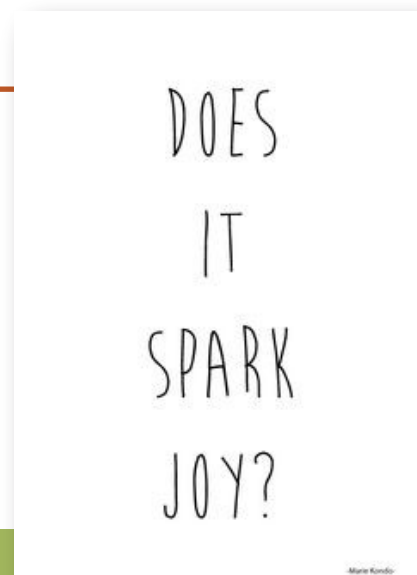


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Regular exercise can help you control your weight, reduce your risk of heart disease, and strengthen your bones and muscles. But if it's been awhile since you've exercised and you have health issues or concerns, it's a good idea to talk to your doctor before starting a new exercise routine.



Meet Ulliance Senior
Wellness Account Manager



Maria Konko