

Guidelines for a Grieving Person

Many well-intentioned people may have advice for you, telling how you “should” be grieving. However, often these kinds of instruction are not helpful and foster unrealistic expectations. Instead of feeling comforted, you may feel confused and isolated. The following guidelines address some normal grief reactions while understanding that each person is unique in his/her grieving process.

TRY TO . . .	TRY TO AVOID . . .
<p>Give yourself permission to grieve in your own way. Remind yourself: <i>There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Everyone does this in his/her own way.</i> Family members grieving the same person may feel different emotions or express them differently. There is no way to measure how much a person loved another by the manner in which he/she grieves.</p>	<p>Giving yourself a list of “shoulds.” There is no right or wrong way to deal with the deceased’s possessions or when/how to visit the cemetery, or how to celebrate holidays. To say, “I should be [getting rid of these things, not crying so much, going out with friends every time they ask]” puts undue pressure on you to grieve in a prescribed way.</p>
<p>Make only the decisions that are absolutely necessary. How you feel about some decisions (such as moving, making extravagant purchases, or disposing of belongings quickly) may change over time as you grieve. Things that bring only pain in the beginning may become a source of comfort later.</p>	<p>Major decisions when possible. For example, some people may have difficulty being in their home for a while, but, after some adjustment, find comfort in familiar surroundings. If financial or legal matters are not necessitating a move, try to wait a bit.</p>
<p>Tell your story as often as you feel the need. It’s important to go over the details again and again as you try to absorb all that has happened. Talk to trusted family and friends. Professional grief counselors and/or grief support groups are willing to listen.</p>	<p>Deliberately not thinking about the death. Reviewing the final days, death, and funeral and sharing memories are part of the process of grieving. This review is normal, but you may have to do it at your own pace. If the memories are too disturbing, try to balance them with a memory from a healthier or happier time.</p>
<p>Be comfortable in the presence (or absence) of crying, anger, or other emotions. Give yourself permission to cry or not to cry. Not crying can be as normal as crying. Give yourself permission to be angry or to feel however you are feeling at the time. Bereaved persons may be angry with God, with the person who died, or with any number of other targets. You may feel confused, sad, relieved, or a host of other emotions. You may have some guilt feelings. You might try saying: <i>That may be a really hard issue for me, but the truth is that I did the best at the time (with what I knew, with the resources I had . . .)</i></p>	<p>Telling yourself not to cry, be angry, be depressed, feel guilty. You may think of yourself as normally being “in control” and/or as someone who takes care of others. However, when we grieve we cannot control whether or not we cry. Finding yourself feeling vulnerable and emotional may be difficult, but waves of intense emotion are normal in grief. For anyone—including ourselves—to tell us, “Don’t feel that way” is not helpful. We have to feel what we are feeling. As we move through the pain of the grief, the intensity will soften, but grief upsurges are common, even when we feel we are doing well and “getting better.” As we go through the grief journey, the upsurges tend to occur somewhat less frequently and last less time.</p>
<p>Remember that there are questions with no answers. You may ask “WHY?” As we grieve, we may have to learn to accept that some things just don’t seem to have answers. It is difficult to make sense of the senseless, and it may take you a long time to work out explanations that suit your beliefs and values.</p>	<p>Clichés and pat lines. Standard answers (“He’s in a better place.” “It’s God’s will.” “Time heals all wounds.”) may not ring true for you right now. Often, people say these types of things because they feel helpless and want to fix you. It’s okay to let people know that what they said is not helpful. You might ask them to just listen and allow you to tell them how you feel.</p>

<p>Remember that there is no timeline for grieving. Grieving takes as long as it takes and each person grieves at his/her own pace.</p>	<p>Setting up a schedule for grief and the processes that follow a loss. Even if close friends or family members are saying, “It’s been [three, six, twelve] months . . .,” understand that grieving is a process that is based on your personal experiences and personality. Try saying, “I’m grieving as fast as I can.”</p>
<p>Remember that some socializing is important. Although it is normal to want to isolate and shut out the world, reaching out to people who care about us and can be supportive is essential. Also, it can be difficult to know what we need at different times. Sometimes, we need to take care of ourselves by declining an invitation that we are just not up to accepting. Other times, we have to force ourselves to maintain contact with people and activities that can provide us some degree of comfort or relief from the grief.</p>	<p>People who are not supportive. Unfortunately, not all people understand how exhausting and complex grief can be. Some people around you may have unrealistic expectations of what your grief should look like. They may want the “old you” to be back. Others may be uncomfortable with your expressions of grief because of their own fears regarding death and grief. Sadly, sometimes the people we expect to “be there” for us—even close family members and/or friends—may not be able to assist us in the ways we need at this time. We often find that people emerge as “grief friends” whom we never expected to fill that role.</p>
<p>Take gentle care of yourself. Grief affects us physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. It is exhausting. Although it may be difficult, it is important to eat a healthy diet, to get exercise, to sleep as well as possible, and to relax as best as possible. Think about what soothes you and allow yourself to indulge in that activity. It may be journaling, talking to a trusted friend, a warm bath, deep breathing, etc., but it is necessary to give ourselves small breaks from the grieving.</p>	<p>Self-medicating and demanding too much of yourself Alcohol is a depressant. It will not take the feelings of grief away and will likely cause you to feel worse. Take prescription drugs only as directed by your physician. Changes in eating and sleep patterns are normal in grief. However, it is important to take extra-good care of ourselves in order to deal with the challenges of grieving. For example, if you don’t feel like eating, you may have to work on having small healthy snacks rather than expecting yourself to eat larger meals. If you are eating too much, you may have to focus on healthy choices but allow yourself some “comfort foods.” Be patient with your current energy level even though it is probably significantly lower than it was prior to the death.</p>
<p>Understand that you are creating a “new normal.” The death of a loved one causes many changes in our lives. Often our priorities change. Sometimes, our basic beliefs undergo changes (such as, “I don’t have the amount of control in my life that I thought had”). As we work through the grief, we struggle to put our lives back together and establish some sort of routine, a new normal. Often, as we begin, slowly, to function again and to feel stronger, we may feel guilty for “moving on” without our loved one. We have to remember that our loved one would want us to live and that it’s okay to be happy again. That doesn’t mean that we have forgotten our loved one or that we love them any less.</p>	<p>Expectations of “returning to normal,” “closure” or that you will “get over it.” Family and/or friendship dynamics and roles are changed when a member of the group dies. Loss of a significant person in our lives does change us forever. We are not exactly the same and our world is not the same when we experience such a loss. As you carry out the grief work, the intense pain of grieving becomes “softer,” but you don’t “get over” the loss of a special person. The term ‘closure’ makes it seem that we will put the person out of our thoughts, but that does not happen. We carry the memories and the love with us as continue through life.</p>
<p>Allow your relationship with your loved one to change Your relationship with your loved one is transformed to one of memory, but it does not end. Although the person will not be here in the physical way that you are yearning for right now, a new type of relationship with him/her will emerge as you think about what he/she might say or do in certain situations and as you discover other connections. For example, some people tell stories or pursue a hobby or a cause dear to their loved one as away of feeling connected. “The person dies, not the relationship” (Rabbi Earl Grollman).</p>	<p>Defining yourself only by loss Although there is intense pain associated with grief, you will be able to go on with life, weaving into the tapestry of your days new meaning found in the loss of your loved one. You may fear that you will forget this special person or what you shared. You will not forget, but there is grief work to be done to learn to adjust to life without this person physically in it. However, you will always remember your time together.</p>