

Grief Basics



What Is Grief?

Grief is the whole-person response – emotional, physical, behavioral, and spiritual – to the loss of someone or something important.

It is unavoidable, powerful and sometimes overwhelming, but it is the cost of living in a connected and loving way.

The ultimate goal of grieving is to integrate the loss into your ongoing life story, recognizing the reality of the loss while claiming the gifts it left with you.



New Ways to Look at Grief

1. There is no one way to grieve, but many possible ways that vary by your history, personality, beliefs, inclinations and other factors. Any of those ways can be successful as long as they fit your needs.

2. Grieving is both individual and relational. Without connection and caring in the first place, there would be no grief. During grieving there must also be connection and caring from supportive people to get you through. Trying to go it alone to keep your privacy or to avoid burdening others is dispiriting and unnecessary.

3. Grief has three faces: Mind, Body and Spirit. Successful grieving must attend to all three. Old grieving ideas focus on grief as emotional suffering. New grieving ideas also address healing the bodily effects, tackling spiritual struggles, as well as creating new ways of thinking about loss.

4. Grief occupies two landscapes: 1) Consciousness where you contend with ideas that can either constrain you or free you to explore grief on your terms, and 2) Action where you select the steps and choices that will allow you to carry out your grief in concrete and positive ways. Solutions need to take place in both landscapes.

5. There is no timetable for grieving. Each grief has its own needs and requirements. Often, well-meaning support people try to rush and short-circuit your grief. It won't work. Unfinished grief lurks and waits for expression even if it has to wait for years. Your own pace is the only one that counts. And don't be surprised if grief kicks up again even after you thought it was resolved. That does not mean a failure on your part, but is the very essence of grief – it never fully goes away, though its impact can diminish greatly over time.

6. Although it sounds odd to say, many gifts can emerge throughout the process of your grieving, if only you can recognize them. They start with the outpouring of support that often comes right after a loss, and continue through growing wisdom and perspective; renewed relationships, new practices and beliefs; even a new direction and mission in life can result. Embracing these unwanted gifts can be transformative, and can provide healing moments anywhere in the process, not just at the end. Each of the Ten Secrets of Successful Grieving introduced here provides its own gift.

7. There are experts with ideas worth listening to, but you will be by far the greatest expert on your own grief. Many researchers and thinkers have learned a great deal about grief, but few of their conclusions have made it into the public consciousness. Sharing their insights is one of the goals of this site. Your job will be to capture the ideas that ring true for you.

8. Loss cannot be measured or compared. Loss through death usually leads any list, but losses of all kinds need to be grieved. Loss of a job, a relationship, a dream, a role, a physical capability, health, youth, a pet, any of the losses on the accompanying list, and more . . . we could add to the list all day.

9. Your loss will not be greater than losses that other people have withstood, nor should it be diminished by the depth of others' suffering.

10. A new loss can reactivate old losses and make the whole process more confusing and overwhelming than it seems that it should be. Especially ungrieved old losses can become powerful parts of a new grief experience. Spotting them is the first step to taming them.

11. Grief is often seen as occurring at the end of a loss or tragedy, but can be lengthy and ongoing in situations of a slow-motion decline. Ask anyone who has a loved one with Alzheimer's disease or other chronic disease where the loss continues, and new grief for each lost capability is always presenting itself. In fact, this chronic unremitting grief demands an enormous amount of energy and perspective, and is rarely acknowledged.

12. You might as well form a relationship with your grief, since it will likely be with you for a while. Greet it in the morning, negotiate with it to leave you alone some of the day, befriend it if you can, or at least don't let it become your enemy. Above all, don't hide from it. It will likely become less fearsome and less powerful as you get acquainted with it. If you are the imaginative type, you can give it a color, a shape, characteristics, a name, and a place you can imagine it retreating to when it decides to give you a break.

Types of Losses



Grief inevitably follows numerous and varied kinds of losses. Any significant loss brings additional secondary losses along with it. For instance, a divorce means giving up a marriage, and also companionship, hopes and plans for the future, often financial security, trust and emotional security. Both the primary and secondary losses need to be grieved, which explains in part why grief cannot be wrapped up as quickly as we hope. The list that follows includes examples of both.

Losses may be inevitable, as when children go away to college, or a parent dies in old age. Though anticipated, preparation cannot prevent the grief that follows.

A loss may be unexpected, as an accident or a crime or sudden illness, coming with no warning and no opportunity to prepare.

Or a loss may be preventable, as a regrettable lapse of attention that results in an accident, or a decision to drive though impaired, or continued smoking that leads to cancer.

Each brings its own challenges and demands.

Relationship

- Death of a relative or friend
- Withdrawal of affection and intimacy, as in the breakup of a relationship or cutoff by a friend or family member
- Divorce or separation
Custody or visitation changes
- Absence due to geographic distance
- Broken trust
- Death of a longtime pet

Practical

- Loss of job, money, savings, business, success
- Retirement
- House, home
- Valued object

Physical

- Body image, as in loss of youth, beauty, effects of aging
- Body function, including loss of sexual desire or function, mobility
- Health, via terminal illness, chronic illness, injury
- Mental capability, memory
- Independence, self-sufficiency due to addiction or other difficulty

Personal

- Identity
- Innocence
- Role
- Beliefs
- Sense of order, mastery
- Safety, if crime victim or trauma survivor, including domestic violence

Transitional

- Leaving home
- Leaving school
- Moving away
- Other losses of familiarity or security

Anticipatory

Expected or feared loss of health, relationship, role, financial security, safety

Imagined Future

- Long term goals
- Plans, dreams, hopes

And many, many others