

Grief and loss

We will all experience grief at some point in our lives. Grief is a natural response following the death of a loved one or the loss of someone close to us. The experience of grief will vary for individuals however there are common experiences shared by most people when grieving.

What is grief?

Grief is the term used to describe what we feel and how we respond to the loss of someone close to us. Our experience of grief will be determined by a variety of factors including the relationship we had to the person, our personality style, our coping mechanisms, our support network, our previous experience of loss and our cultural and spiritual beliefs. Grief is an important process that allows us to come to accept loss in our lives. It is important that we allow ourselves time to grieve following loss so that we can move forward. Identifying how we feel and acknowledging our emotional responses, while painful, is extremely important in being able to come to terms with our loss. It is important to adopt healthy strategies to cope and seek support when struggling to manage the range of emotions experienced when grieving.

Normal reactions to loss

The following are some of the emotions you may experience whilst grieving. You will not necessarily experience all of these emotions and you may find that you experience waves of emotion that come and go at various times. The first few days following the death of a loved one will be particularly intense.

Common emotional responses:

- emptiness or feeling numb and devoid of emotion
- disbelief that the person has died
- confusion
- intense sorrow and sadness
- yearning or longing for the deceased
- anger at ourselves or others including the person who died
- relief
- guilt or shame
- exhaustion
- loneliness and isolation
- feeling that life is meaningless without the deceased
- overwhelmed at having to cope
- anxiety about the future
- moments of happiness.

Common experiences when grieving:

- not feeling yourself
- changes in sleeping and eating patterns
- physical pain
- difficulty concentrating and remembering things
- preoccupation with the deceased or the circumstances of their death
- lack of enjoyment in normal activities
- withdrawal from others
- conflict in personal relationships
- thoughts of suicide or self-harm
- reliance on negative coping strategies including alcohol and drugs.

Call
Lifeline on
13 11 14
if you need
to talk

The experience of grief should not be confused with depression although there are some common symptoms between the two. If your grief persists for an extended period and prevents you from returning to normal activities, it is important to seek professional advice. While grieving is a normal process, depression is a mental illness which can be effectively managed with the right care. The sudden loss of a loved one can be a potential trigger for suicidal thoughts and feelings. It is important to be aware of this and to seek help if this happens.

How to cope when grieving

We have natural coping mechanisms that allow us to manage grief. It is important that we prioritise our self-care and adopt healthy coping strategies at this time. Below are some strategies you may find helpful:

- **Allow yourself to grieve** — create time and space to experience the range of emotions that come following the loss of a loved one. It is important to be able to identify and acknowledge the emotions you are experiencing. You may find it helpful to write down what you are thinking and feeling. There is no right or wrong, simply your own experience. You may find it helpful to talk with a close friend or family member about your experience. Someone you can trust and rely on to listen to you.
- **Take care of yourself** — it is especially important at this time to try to eat well, exercise and get plenty of sleep. Try to maintain normal routines wherever possible. Initially you may consider taking time out from work and study commitments to lessen the stress on you at this time. Do not place unrealistic expectations on yourself and avoid making big decisions.
- **Accept help from others** — let family and friends know what they can do to help, offers of help with food and taking care of children can be of great benefit. Consider talking to a health professional if you are concerned about how you are coping. You may benefit from joining a support group to share your experience and from listening to the experience of others in a similar situation.
- **Avoid negative coping strategies and avoidance techniques** — you may find in the short-term that it is easier to abuse substances such as alcohol and drugs as the experience of intense pain and sadness is reduced. However, these avoidance strategies only delay the grieving process and have a negative impact on our emotional and physical well-being. Identify other healthy coping strategies such as exercise or meditation to bring some relief.
- **Prepare for stressful events** — birthdays and other special occasions or certain places may elicit a strong emotional response. Be aware of this and identify what you can do to cope. Plan an activity or engage in a ritual at this time to remember and acknowledge the loss. Allow yourself to celebrate the happy memories you have of the deceased.

Where to go for support

Seeking help is a positive sign at this time. There are numerous support options available to you if you need to speak to someone about your experience of grief and loss.

Below are some of the places to go for information and support:

- **Contact Lifeline:** 13 11 14 (available 24/7) or Online Crisis Support Chat (available nightly at www.lifeline.org.au)
- **Mensline Australia:** 1300 78 99 78 (24hrs)
- **Kids Helpline:** 1800 55 1800
- **Beyondblue:** 1300 22 46 36
- **Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement** 1800 642 066 or visit www.grief.org.au
- **National Association for Grief and Loss (NALAG)** www.nalag.org.au
- **Australian Psychological Society (APS)** Find a Psychologist: www.findapsychologist.org.au
- **Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA)** Find a Therapist: www.pacfa.org.au
- **Australian Counselling Association (ACA)** Find a Counsellor: www.theaca.net.au

You may consider visiting your GP to discuss your current symptoms if they are problematic. Your GP can refer you to local health professionals based on your needs or visit the Lifeline Service Seeker Directory at lifeline.serviceseeker.com.au to search for local services and centres in your area.

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Phone 13 11 14 | www.lifeline.org.au

Call Lifeline on 13 11 14 (available 24/7) if you are feeling suicidal or in crisis or visit www.lifeline.org.au to connect online with our Crisis Support Chat (available nightly), find a range of other useful factsheets and to find local services in your area.

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