

# Ways to cope with grief



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He Kotahitanga  
He mea paihere  
na te Rangimarie

In unity and peace  
we support



## Grief is a normal process

Somebody close to you has died – perhaps after being very unwell for some time, or perhaps very unexpectedly. However it happened, life has changed for you.

Grieving is the process of adjusting to your loss, and learning to live without that person in your life. The grief of bereavement is often accompanied by very strong and sometimes painful feelings such as anger, sadness, loneliness, regret and guilt – among many others.

This booklet aims to help you understand some of these feelings.

Not all of it will apply to you. As everyone responds differently, it is important to remember that there is no right or wrong way to grieve.

Grief is a normal, natural process of healing. We suggest you keep this booklet and read it again in a month or so, when some more time has passed.



"Grief never ends, but it changes. It's a passage, not a place to stay. Grief is not a sign of weakness, nor a lack of faith, it is the price of love." Anon

## Grieving is 'up and down'

Grieving is not something you begin one day, move through step by step, and emerge from unchanged at the other end.

People sometimes speak of 'stages' of grief. In reality, it is an 'up and down' process, and everyone experiences it differently.

Most people find that they move through a process of grieving gradually. Don't despair if you repeatedly find yourself back at the beginning – that's not unusual.



# The healing process of grief

Sometimes it is helpful to compare the healing process of grieving with the process of healing that happens with a physical injury.

As with a physical wound, at first most people feel shock and numbness. It all seems impossible and unreal.

Even if you have been expecting the death for some time, somehow it's still a shock when it happens.

## Shock and numbness

Shock helps us through the first days and weeks after a death.

Don't feel that you have to push yourself past this. The sense of numbness will start to fade in a few days or weeks, although it may return from time to time.

As time passes, the reality of your loss will become clearer. When it does, you might feel that you can still hear or see the person who has died, and there is a fresh shock and disbelief when you realise the truth of the loss again.

Or perhaps you find yourself completely unable to see your loved one's face, and you feel as if you have lost even your memory of them forever.



## Taking care of yourself

With a physical wound, pain has a purpose – it stops us from doing more damage. We find there are things we can't do, and we take care of ourselves and ask others to help us.

It is the same with grief. This is the time to be gentle on yourself. If it helps, let your emotional wound be cleansed by crying and talking about your feelings, and let others help and comfort you. Give yourself time to heal too, and don't expect too much of yourself.

Too many people make things harder by telling themselves "I should be able to cope better than this". If you resist mourning, you may just take longer to feel better.

## Waiting for healing

When we injure ourselves, it is a long time before the tissue is strong and well again – even after the acute pain has passed.

Sometimes the waiting can seem very long and tedious, and it is often the same when someone dies.

Bereaved people long for a return to 'normality'. It seems to take forever to be interested in life again. You may feel very lonely and depressed. Often people wonder what the purpose or meaning of their life is, and who they are now.



*If it helps, let your emotional wound be cleansed by crying and talking about your feelings*

## Healing with time

Eventually an injury, whether physical or emotional, will heal itself and you are able to function again.

With grief, this is the time when you start to feel more comfortable with your loss, and begin to take up the threads of your life again.

While things will never be the same, many people feel they have become stronger, more caring and more mature through their experience of grief.

They frequently comment that they are more aware of other people's suffering, and they know more about how to help them.

However, it is hard to imagine this when you are deep in grief.



## How does grief feel?

Many factors affect the way we experience grief.

The amount of support we have, our personality, the kind of relationship we had with the person who has died, our experience of loss in the past, and the degree to which our life changes as a result of their death, all make a difference.

Sometimes people find that a death brings back memories of other losses from the past, and they feel they are mourning those again.

## Sadness and anger

People can feel grief very differently.

Some people are overwhelmed by the intensity of their feelings and wonder if they are going crazy.

If this happens to you, try not to worry too much – you're not going mad.

You may feel very sad and despairing, or empty one moment, and angry and tense the next.

It is common to feel angry with God, with the person who has died, with the fact of death, with yourself, or with those who were involved in care of the person at the time of illness or death.

Sometimes, even though there is no reasonable cause for this anger, the feeling will still be there, and it is real and normal.



People often find they are confused and forgetful, and even simple tasks seem like a big hurdle

## Guilt and regret

You may feel guilty about the things you did, or wish you had done differently.

There may be regrets about the way things happened in the past.

When someone dies, we lose the opportunity to change things with them, and living with guilty feelings is hard. Talking it over with someone often helps.

## Confusion and forgetfulness

People often find they are confused and forgetful, and even simple tasks seem like a big hurdle.

It's as if your mind is filled with thoughts of the person who has died, and the circumstances of their illness and death. You want to talk about them constantly.

Sometimes, others in your family will grieve differently, and it may be hard to be understanding of each other.



## Physical reactions

It is common to have physical reactions such as difficulty concentrating, tiredness, trouble sleeping, no appetite, unexplained aches and pains and a tight feeling in the chest.

It is also not uncommon to have symptoms that mirror those of the person who has died.

Lack of sleep during this time is normal but it can make anybody's day feel grim. If lack of sleep becomes a real problem, talk to your doctor about it. You may be prescribed some medication to help you get some sleep.

## Coping at work

Concentrating and meeting deadlines can be especially hard for those who are working.

If possible, talk it over with your boss or supervisor. Grieving people are often surprised by the people who are able to offer the best support – usually it's someone who has experienced a major loss themselves in the past.



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## Relief

It's also normal to feel happy that the person's suffering is over, or relief that a person you had a difficult relationship with is no longer around and you can begin a new life.

Many people find that there were aspects of the person which they found particularly difficult to deal with, and that life is easier now that they have passed.

It is hard not to feel guilty about this sense of relief after someone has died. Just remember they were human, with good points and bad ones – just like you!

Although you may be surprised by your feelings, they are a normal, healthy response to your situation.



# The death

The quality of the time immediately before and at the time of death can make a big difference to how we grieve.

If the death was a peaceful one, people often find they draw comfort from that peace. There is a sense of acceptance about the loss, along with the sadness.

If it was sudden or unexpected, it can take a long time to get over the shock of a death, and there can be a sense of things being left unfinished or unsaid.

Sometimes people have problems with what others expect of them. One person will tell you to pull yourself together, stop crying and get on with your life, and another will say you should have a good cry - and then seem to disapprove if you smile!

Try to remember that everyone has their own way of handling difficulties, and just do whatever is best for you. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.



## How long does it take?

Some people will expect to be back to normal after just a few weeks or months.

Friends and family may support this by saying things like “Well, life has to go on, you know” or “It’s time to pick yourself up and get on with living”. These messages feel like a criticism, and you may feel you are being told not to grieve anymore.

For many people it takes at least a year before a loss is no longer the big issue in their life, and it can be several years before they feel healed, especially if the relationship was an important or long-standing one.

Try to be patient, and give yourself time to mourn. This is the best way to heal.



## How you can help yourself

There is always something you can do to help yourself through the dark patches. Here are some suggestions:

- Remember you are not alone. Loss is part of life, part of being human. Find someone you can talk to, someone who will really listen. Seek out a counsellor if you feel you are burdening your friends.
- Get plenty of rest. Grieving uses a lot of emotional energy and you will probably feel very drained.
- Balance rest with some productive activity. Being busy helps rest your emotions, and being productive will help you to feel better. Set yourself small, achievable goals, and give yourself a pat on the back when you reach them.
- Keep decision-making to a minimum. Try not to make any major decisions or changes for a while. Some people may hurry you to get the deceased's clothes and possessions sorted out, or to make a decision about where you will live long-term. Don't rush into these things – you are already making a huge adjustment to a life without the other person. There is no need to add to it if you can avoid it.
- Ask others for help. Try to be specific about the ways that others can help you. Do you need someone to mow your lawns, or do you just need a shoulder to cry on?
- It's normal to feel angry. Find ways to be angry safely – play vigorous sport, scream in your car with the windows up, hit a pillow. You may feel silly, but it often helps.
- Eat well. Eat small, nourishing, easily digested snacks often, even if you have lost your appetite.

*Try to remember that everyone has their own way of handling difficulties, and just do whatever is best for you. There is no right or wrong way to grieve*

- Pamper yourself with hot baths, massages, comforting food, a favourite drink, a special magazine, listening to music – whatever helps.
- Learn ways to distract yourself on the days when you feel you just can't face life. Read a gripping book, play cards with a friend, watch a film – anything that takes you away from yourself and your troubles for a little while.
- Keep a journal. Write whenever you feel like it. Looking back over past entries will help to remind you that you are getting somewhere, and putting your thoughts on paper is a good way of getting them straight.
- Get some exercise. A good walk can turn your mood around. Try swimming, vigorous digging in the garden or playing sport. Even giving the house a good vacuum or mowing the lawn can help if you're feeling tense.
- Draw on your spiritual resources in whatever way is best for you. For some people, this will mean going to church or talking to a priest or minister. For others, it will be a walk on a beach or in the bush, or listening to inspirational music. Do whatever gives you a different perspective on life or a larger way of seeing your situation.
- Remember other difficult times you have had and how you managed then. Try to develop a sense of your personal coping style – what helps you best? While you don't have any control over your loss, you can take control of how you deal with it.

# Where to find us



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