

UNDERSTANDING GRIEF



The grieving process is emotional, complex and deeply personal. There is no wrong or right way to grieve. But there are steps you can take to better cope and resolve your feelings.

Grief is a natural reaction to loss — and not just the loss of a loved one. Grief can be triggered by a life-changing event, such as divorce, job loss, bankruptcy or foreclosure.

Your Grief is Unique

The grief you experience will be different from that of your co-workers, friends, children or your spouse. Sadness, anger, guilt, regret and panic are all valid feelings that can surface during the grieving process.

For some, grief may last years, while others may appear to move on and resolve their feelings more quickly.

Ways You Can Cope

The National Mental Health Association (NMHA) offers suggestions and coping skills to help us through this process:

1. **Give yourself permission to take as much time as you need to help you move forward through processing your loss.** Sometimes others will try to nudge into believing “you should be over it by now.” Resist responding to these suggestions; remember these folks mean well and simply want you to feel better.
2. **Surround yourself with caring, supportive people.** Grieving takes enormous amounts of emotional energy and you do not have any extra to waste.
3. **Find safe ways and places to express your feelings without hurting yourself or others.** Screaming and crying in the shower allows you a safe private outlet. Pounding pillows with your fists or pounding the pavement with your feet (jogging), lets you vent your anger without victimizing someone else. Exercise allows a healthy outlet.
4. **Try to maintain a healthy lifestyle.** Eat nourishing, healthy foods; wrap yourself in warm blankets or flannel pajamas; drink plenty of healthy fluids while avoiding alcohol and caffeine; and try to get plenty of rest. Your sleep may be disrupted. This is normal. Take naps as needed.
5. **Maintain as much of your routine and schedule as possible.** Making too many changes such as a new house, job or relationship can leave you overwhelmed and vulnerable to intense emotions. Big decisions made under the influence of strong emotions can lead to regret later.

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6. **Have patience with yourself and other grieving family and friends.** Healing takes time. Your thinking may not feel clear. Your confidence might feel shaken, and you may find yourself struggling to make decisions. This is normal and will gradually lift with time. Remember, you have experienced a life-changing event. It takes time and may take years to accept and adjust to your life without your loved one. Eventually, you will find moments of joy in your new reality.

Being a Friend

If you are a friend to someone who has experienced a loss, you may find yourself struggling to support your friend as they grieve. The NMHA offers the following suggestions as a guide:

1. **Be a supportive, caring listener.** Encourage your friend to talk and remember. You may find them repeating stories; let them — this is part of their healing process.
2. **Be a “safe friend” — accept your friend’s feelings, even those that feel more negative.** Being angry is also part of their healing. Sharing your memories of their loved one lets them know that their loved one is not forgotten and helps them feel like their loved one was valued by others. Acknowledge holidays, birthdays and anniversaries with a card, a text or email, a phone call or a visit.
3. **Continue to reach out a month or more after the funeral.** For many, the second month and that first year on are very difficult. Family and friends have returned to their homes and work, the thank-you notes are written and estates are settled or in process. The impact of the loss is felt by your friend or loved one. Remember their holidays are now reminders that someone is missing. Reaching out to them lets them know that you care.
4. **Help your loved one slow down their decision-making process when making life changes.** Encourage them to take their time and keep schedules and routines consistent.

5. **Regarding work: Let your friend know it’s okay to return to work when they feel ready.** Sometimes the structure and routines that work provides can be comforting. Other times, it can be a reminder that your friend’s performance is influenced by their lack of concentration and riddled with errors. If you are a manager to someone returning to work after a major life loss, please remember that folks are not at 100% when it comes to their focus, concentration and job performance. Please be patient and kind. Please understand that in the years to come birthdays, anniversaries and major life events might trigger emotions and struggles for your employee. Be kind and offer them space to process these emotions. They’ll be appreciative and loyal to you for this respect.
6. **Be patient, practical and compassionate.** While there is no time limit on how long a person grieves, there is usually a gradual return to participation in activities and routines. If this does not happen after a few months, you may want to encourage your friend to see a physician or grief counselor. Offer to go with them to a grief support group.

Can You “Deal With” Grief?

People, especially Americans, grieve and mourn while they maintain a veneer of normalcy. They try to go through their daily activities without acknowledging their pain and suffering. Fortunately, most of us have a social support system, friends, family and co-workers we can rely on for help. Out of their love for us, these folks often reach out to us when they see us struggling. Just having someone to talk to can greatly alleviate the pain associated with grief and speed up the recovery process. Some people try to avoid their feelings. They may think that experiencing these emotions is something they simply don’t have to do. There are many people who believe they can deal with grief, and simply move on.

Can You Just Avoid Grieving?

It’s hard to control emotions. Like happiness, grief is a natural emotion that happens to all of us at some point in life. Your feelings may be many or few; either way, it is difficult to “deal with” these emotions. Simply put, there is no way around it — you must have them. You do have a choice. You can experience your grief naturally, and let the feelings come to you as they will. Or you can try to put them off, but you cannot put them off forever. At some point these emotions will surface and demand to be processed. Avoiding, burying your emotions, or putting them off will likely make them more difficult to process later.

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Children and Grief

Be aware that you may witness some regression in your child. Bed-wetting, thumb-sucking or even an overall clinginess can be expected. Change evokes uncertainty for kids, and that can be scary. Gently provide your support, and do not punish for regressive behaviors. It might help to acknowledge your child's action and help tie this to loss or change. Make sure to look for the positive side of the situation. Try to reinforce that a new school provides opportunities to meet new people and to try different activities.

For death, recall fond memories of the loved one and rely on your belief system to help assuage your child's fears. Finally, remember to always be honest with your responses, as you are teaching your little ones how to handle important life events. Use this opportunity to reiterate that while you cannot prevent future losses from happening, your love and support can always be counted on.

Learning Through Loss

You know that sinking feeling you get when you experience disappointment? As adults, we understand that this is the feeling of loss, and it can result from several situations, including death, divorce, a move, or even something as simple as a change in routine. Of course, your reaction depends on the circumstances, but rational adults know that loss, both great and small, is simply a part of life. For kids it's a different story. If you're a parent, you have likely witnessed the earth-shattering temper tantrum that can occur as a result of simply telling a child that they can't have something they want. So, what happens when the loss is more significant? How do you help your child through the pain?

Helping Your Child Adjust to a Life Transition

The first step, whenever possible, is to do everything you can to prepare your child for the life transition. Gradual transition can ease the stress caused by change and help avoid more intense repercussions. Know that your child will sense the strain of a life-changing event, even if they are very young, and that avoiding the subject altogether is more detrimental than talking openly about it.

Discuss grandma's failing health, or the upcoming move to another city. Make yourself available for questions and be prepared to discuss the logistics repeatedly. Your child is grappling to get a handle on the situation, and it is the parent's job to be there as a support and resource for information to help them successfully navigate this transition. Reassure your child that with time the change will get a little easier to manage and accept.



If your child continues to struggle in managing their emotions, please discuss this with their pediatrician or school counselor for guidance or call an Employee Assistance Program professional at **1-800-316-2796**.

We are here for you

For additional resources and assistance, visit
mutualofomaha.com/eap.