



Grief and loss

“There is not a typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss. Our grief is as individual as our lives”

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross

Grief is the natural process of adapting to the loss of someone – or something – important to you. Unfortunately, most of us aren’t taught how to prepare for, or deal with, the wide range of feelings that can be experienced after a loss. At such a difficult time, it can be helpful to understand the different ways that we grieve, and how best to look after yourself when grieving.

Much of the following refers to the symptoms that people may experience following bereavement. However, it’s important to remember that we can experience grief in response to many types of loss. In fact, grief can occur after the loss of anything that you value, or you have seen as central to your life. That could include:

Loss of job role

When someone loses their job, they lose a lot more than an income; there are also changes in their ability to provide for the family, to be productive, and feel valued in the community. When the work that you do is an important part of how you see yourself (e.g. “I’m a police officer”), it can be difficult to adapt to life without that role. This can occur at any stage of life, including retirement.

Loss of a relationship

Loss of a loved one doesn’t just happen in the case of a bereavement; separation from a close friend or family member can reduce our sense of connection and value.

Loss of belief

Our beliefs and expectations are crucial to the way that we see ourselves and the world around us and are often what keep us going when times are tough. To lose faith, or belief in something important – for example, a sense of safety and trust in others, or the expectation of justice - can be devastating.

Experiences of Grief

We often talk about the ‘stages’ of grief: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Sadness, and Acceptance. However, this isn’t a linear process and not everyone experiences each of these stages. More often, people feel a range of emotions, and while some find that their mood and reactions fluctuate rapidly, others can feel ‘stuck’ in a particular mood, or way of thinking, for long periods of time. The most important thing to remember is that **grief happens in its own time and fashion.**

Some of the emotions that may be experienced when grieving:

Shock and disbelief

Shock and disbelief may be felt immediately after a loss. It can be difficult to make sense or comprehend what has happened. You may feel physically or emotionally numb.

Anger

Anger at God, the doctors, yourself, or another person, especially if you feel abandoned. You may feel the need to blame someone, feel angry at family members and their behaviour or at the many responsibilities that now need your attention.

Sadness

Sadness is perhaps the most common symptom identified with grief. You may feel you can't stop crying or can't cry. You may have feelings of emptiness or despair.

Relief

Relief especially if you have been faced with a period of uncertainty, or after the loss of someone who has been in pain and/or suffering from a chronic illness.

Guilt

Guilt for feeling relieved, or about something that you did – or didn't – say or do.

Preoccupation

Preoccupation with what you've lost. In the case of losing a loved one, you might find yourself thinking a lot about the way they died or focusing on material objects/possessions that remind you of them.

Fear

Fear of how you'll cope, about your own mortality, of life without that person.

Grief is not just an emotional process. People who are grieving may also experience the following physical symptoms:

- Weight loss or gain
- Changes in sleep pattern
- Fatigue
- Lack of energy
- Aches and pains
- Stomach upsets
- Headaches / migraines
- Feeling hollow or empty in the stomach
- Sensitivity to light and noise

and behavioural symptoms:

- Social withdrawal or isolation
- Being over-protective of others
- Changes in diet
- Change in exercise routine
- Reduced self-care
- Increase in alcohol intake
- Drug / prescription misuse
- Risk taking

Looking after yourself after a loss

Grieving can be physically and emotionally exhausting, to the point of interfering with your capacity to cope with daily life and manage your health and wellbeing. Looking after yourself is vital, even though some days you might really struggle with the energy and motivation to do so.

As much as possible, try to stick to regular routines around diet, exercise, sleep, and social contact:

Eat

Grief causes stress on the body so eating nutritious meals to replenish your body is important.

Sleep

Try and keep to normal sleep routines: for example, a pre-sleep wind-down routine and regular bedtime and wake times. Have strategies at hand for when sleep is interrupted.

Exercise

Assists the body to process stress and can offer you some time out mentally (remember, time out from grieving does not equate to lack of love, regard, or care for what you have lost).

Social contact

You may have no interest in social engagements and/or feel threatened by having to be sociable, but social contact will provide opportunities for support and distraction from the pain, both of which may reduce the isolation frequently experienced in grief.

Actively reduce stress

Stress and anxiety (about the future, about how you will manage) will likely increase when we grieve. Even if you find it difficult to relax, or that your thoughts are racing, set aside time each day for activities that help you focus on the present, rather than the future, or reduce the tension in your body.

Relaxing and enjoyable activities

Again, a 'rest' or distraction away from the pain of grieving is healthy for the body and mind.

Treat yourself gently:

- There is no right or wrong way to grieve. It's different for everyone.
- There is no set timeframe for grief. Grief is a deeply personal experience that may continue at different intensity levels and at different times. Many symptoms of grief may diminish over a period of months. You may need to consider additional support if you feel you are not coping with day to day living.
- There are many situations that may trigger powerful reminders and emotions. For example, birthdays, anniversaries, family gatherings, photos, favourite foods, places or music. These situations can be difficult to manage. Plan to have appropriate support (e.g. the company of loved ones) to help you manage these occasions.
- Grief can be so profound and unpredictable that many people think that they are losing control and going mad. It can feel like it at times. Know that this is normal; know that with adjustments to your daily, weekly, monthly schedule, you will cope. If you feel you aren't, or you don't have family and friends to lean on, there are options for additional advice and support.
- Don't expect to be your normal capable and competent self; reduce your expectations about what you can achieve in a day, a month, a year. Remember that grieving takes both time and energy and adjust accordingly.
- Avoid making important life decisions, especially those decisions that can't be reversed such as changing jobs, moving house, selling/disposing of belongings.

- Avoid reliance on caffeine, drugs and alcohol. They may provide short-term relief, but may have adverse consequences for sleep quality, daily functioning, relationships and physical health.
- Share your feelings and experiences with people you trust. Talking can help.
- Allow yourself time and space for thinking and feeling about the loss.

When to seek help

You can arrange to speak with a counsellor at any stage about your grief. Some of the experiences which might prompt you to seek counselling are:

- You are concerned or distressed by your grief, or your reactions feel unmanageable
- There is no-one that you feel comfortable talking to
- Your reactions are significantly impacting on your daily life and functioning
- You are unable to carry out your normal roles e.g. as a parent or at work
- You are feeling hopeless, despairing or that you can't go on*
- You are thinking or have thought about self-harm, suicide or harming others*

*If you are experiencing these symptoms you should seek help immediately

Where to seek help

If you feel you could benefit from additional support, contact:

- Employee Assistance Program (EAP):
Acacia Connection – 1300 364 273
SMG Health – 1800 273 865
- Victoria Police Wellbeing Services:
Mon-Fri 9am to 4pm for support, information and referral to counselling
1300 090 995
- 24/7 phone support for urgent issues
- Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement: www.grief.org.au
- Griefline: (03) 9935 7400
- Lifeline: 13 11 14



**Alcohol and Drug
Information Services VIC**
1800 888 236



Turning Point
www.turningpoint.org.au



Police Wellbeing Services
1300 090 995