

SUPPORT FOR GRIEF



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Good Grief

Grief is a natural response to death and non-death loss. Despite its normalcy, grief evokes discomfort among most of us, shying away from the topic until we are in the thick of it. One of the most common things I hear as a Grief Counsellor is “I knew it would be hard, I just never thought it would be this hard.”

As we age, we face more frequent encounters with grief, whether from the death of a spouse, friend, or pet, or changes such as retirement or declining health. While grief is overwhelming, understanding its different forms and learning how to cope can help us move forward with compassion for ourselves and others.

The Many Faces of Grief

Grief isn't one-size-fits-all. It takes many forms and is experienced differently depending on factors such as the type of loss (expected, unexpected or traumatic), the relationship to the loss, and personal differences in mental health. Understanding the types of grief can help you recognize and validate your own emotions.

- **Anticipatory Grief:** This occurs before a loss, such as when a loved one is diagnosed with a terminal illness. It involves mourning the loss(es) even before it happens and may come with feelings of anxiety.
- **Ambiguous Grief:** This type of grief is experienced when a person's physical or emotional presence becomes absent, leading to a lack of closure or definitive ending. Commonly experienced in dementia or addiction.
- **Disenfranchised Grief:** This type of grief isn't always acknowledged by society. For example, the loss of a pet or the grief felt by a caregiver due to identity fragmentation.
- **Cumulative Grief:** Multiple losses within a short period, such as losing several friends while simultaneously stepping into retirement. This can make it difficult to grieve each loss before encountering another.

Coping Tools

A common myth surrounding grief is that it occurs in

distinct and linear stages. Grief is not linear, nor does it ever disappear. It lessens its impact over time while reminding us of the importance of what or who is no longer present. Living with grief means finding ways to live with loss while honoring your memories and maintaining your well-being.

1. **Talk About It:** Sharing with trusted friends or family can ease emotional pain. Joining a grief support group—Hospice Muskoka offers numerous—can connect you with others with shared lived experience.
2. **Stay Active:** Gentle exercise, like walking or yoga, can help improve your overall mood while releasing stress stored in the body.
3. **Rituals:** Recognizing specific dates or milestones, lighting a candle, planting a tree, or writing letters to your loved one can provide comfort and a sense of ongoing connection.
4. **Self-Compassion:** Grief can bring up difficult emotions, including guilt or regret. Remind yourself that it's okay to feel a wide range of emotions and that emotions give us important information about how we're managing.
5. **Routine:** Maintaining a somewhat regular schedule can provide structure and a sense of regularity when everything else feels uncertain.
6. **Creative Outlets:** Art, music, journaling, or other creative activities can provide a mechanism for managing difficult emotions.

Living a meaningful life is still possible. In my work with individuals and groups, I always introduce the term “dialectic” which refers to two seemingly opposite things existing simultaneously. Grief could be the biggest dialectic we ever face as we experience immense sadness, anger, guilt, and worry, while also experiencing love, relief, and joy.

A dialectic does not justify or draw a silver lining around loss and death. It simply encourages us to recognize that grief only exists where love lived first.