Learning to Live With Loss

“What we have once enjoyed and deeply loved we can never lose, for all that we love deeply becomes a part of us.”

– Helen Keller

The James

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
WEXNER MEDICAL CENTER
Dear Family Member or Friend,

We offer our sincere and heartfelt condolences for the recent loss of your loved one. Over the next few days, weeks and even months, you may have a range of emotions that can change. Although there are common ways people grieve and mourn, loss is a very personal experience and everyone’s grief is different.

This guide was developed to be a resource for you during the first year after your loss. It has general information about grief and some practical coping tips to help you understand your feelings and learn to cope with your loss.

Grieving the loss of a loved one is significant and, at times, may be overwhelming. It is important to be patient and kind to yourself during this time.

The James Bereavement Services
I. WHAT IS GRIEF?

When someone you love dies, you will have many feelings and thoughts. Everyone grieves in their own way, and grief is a very personal experience.

Grief is a normal response to any change or loss in your life. Mourning is the outward expression of your grief, including your spiritual rituals and cultural traditions about death. Bereavement is the period of time you mourn and grieve after a loss.

**Typical Grief Reactions**

Some common reactions to a loss are listed below.

**Physical and behavior reactions:**
- Sleeping and eating changes
- Fatigue or feeling tired
- Nausea
- Crying

**Mental reactions:**
- Confusion
- Difficulty making decisions
- Forgetfulness
- Disbelief
- Replaying memories
- Feeling like you are in a fog or dreamlike state
- Difficulty focusing
Spiritual reactions:
Questioning your sense of purpose, your values, your beliefs and what you feel is important to you now.

Emotional reactions:
- Sadness
- Guilt
- Relief
- Fear
- Numbness
- Emptiness
- Anxiety
- Regret
- Longing
- Shock
- Loneliness
- Anger

Emotional reactions can happen in waves or feel like a rollercoaster of emotions. One minute you may feel fine and the next you feel fear, anxiety and sadness.

It is normal for things or events to trigger or cause grief. This may include hearing a favorite song, seeing someone that looks like your loved one or someone asking you about your loved one. These experiences are normal, and it is common to have an up-and-down journey with feelings of sadness and of hope.
Styles of Grieving

Everyone has a different way to cope with grief. There is no “right” way to grieve. Many people handle grief in ways that include both feeling and thinking styles of coping.

Feeling-focused people:

- Share emotions more readily
- Have more intense waves of emotions or feelings
- Openly share their feelings
- Talk about the illness and death of their loved one
- Share memories about their loved one with family and friends

Thinking-focused people:

- Plan, organize or work on projects
- Focus on problem-solving
- Want information and facts
- Focus on practical things or fixing things
- Want more time alone and may want to grieve in private
II. THE FIRST YEAR OF GRIEF

What to Expect

The first year of grief is often called the “year of firsts.” You will face holidays, anniversaries, birthdays and other important events for the first time without your loved one. You may also grieve other losses related to the life you had with your loved one. These losses can include:

- Future dreams and plans
- Family structure
- Traditions
- Companionship and intimacy
- Financial security
- Social connections
- Help with daily activities, such as parenting and household chores

Grief is a very unique and personal process. Try not to compare yourself to others. Grief can be impacted by many factors, such as your relationship with your loved one, your normal ways of coping and your experience with your loved one’s illness and death.

There is no “normal” timetable for grieving. It is important to be patient with yourself and let the grieving process happen. Over time, the intensity and frequency of your feelings of loss will lessen.
Coping With Holidays and Other Special Occasions

It is normal to become more emotional before holidays or special occasions. The thought of being without your loved one may be worse than the actual day.

What you decide to do one year may be different than what you decide to do the next year.

Think ahead and make a plan of how you want to handle these special days.

- Keep your plan simple.
- Be realistic with your expectations.
- Focus on what you can control.
- Think about who you want to spend time with and how you want to spend the day.
- Tell your family and friends how they can help.
- Give tasks to others or ask for help.
- Talk about the family traditions you want to keep the same and be open to new ways of doing some things.

The Anniversary of Your Loved One’s Death

It is normal for you to grieve more as the anniversary date of your loved one’s death gets closer. You may also feel more anxious, irritable and sad, or become more tearful. Learning to cope after the death of a loved one is a personal process. As you move forward in your life, you will not forget your loved one and the life you shared.
Your family and friends may be unsure about how to talk with you about this anniversary, or they may not remember the date. You may find they are waiting for you to say something or to tell them how they can support you.

Handling Your Loved One’s Belongings

It can be hard to sort through your loved one’s belongings. You may come across some items that can bring up difficult emotions and memories.

Here are some suggestions to help you:

• Find your loved one’s will to see if decisions have already been made. If there is no will, think about what your loved one would have wanted.
• You may want to do this alone or with support from people you trust.
• Take your time. Set time limits and take breaks when you need to.
• You may want to organize things into categories such as:
  • “Things to give away” or “donate” — items that are not of value or meaning to you
  • “Things to keep” — items that are connected with your loved one and have special meaning for you or others
  • Things you are “unsure” about at this time — items that you need to think about for a while longer.
Returning to Work

Going back to work after a loss can be hard, but structure and routine may also be helpful. Here are some tips to help you cope when you return to work.

- Give yourself time to adjust.
- Think about what you want to share with co-workers.
- Have a plan in case you start to feel overwhelmed or emotional. It may be helpful to call a friend or find a private space, if you need to step away.
- Try new ways to help you stay focused and remember things. Make a to-do list, send yourself emails or voicemail reminders, set phone alarms or break tasks down into simple steps.
- Many of your co-workers may have lost a loved one and can be a support to you.
- Find out about support services offered by your employer such as an employee assistance program.
III. WAYS TO COPE WITH LOSS

Honor and Remember Your Loved One

There are social and personal ways to honor and remember your loved one. Some common examples include funerals, memorial services and celebration of life ceremonies. These religious rituals and cultural traditions honor the life of your loved one and can provide support, comfort, peace and order at a time when you may feel overwhelmed.

Personal remembrance activities:

• Keep some items that remind you of your loved one and give you a connection. Examples may include jewelry, watches, clothing, pictures, videos, letters/cards, family recipes and other personal belongings.
• Think about how your loved one would want to be remembered.
• Share your favorite memories of your loved one.
• Write down your family history or create a scrapbook of family pictures and keepsakes.
• Complete a project to honor your loved one.
• Donate to a charity in memory of your loved one.
• Listen to their favorite music or cook their favorite foods.
• Write about things that connect you to your loved one.
Practical Ways to Manage Your Grief

• Take part in activities and relationships that are important to you.
• Be aware of your grief and allow yourself time to mourn.
• Take one day, one hour or just one moment at a time.
• Eat healthy, get enough rest and exercise regularly.
• Stay away from hurtful or harmful choices, such as the use of alcohol or drugs.
• Balance your time alone and time with others.
• Find a place of peace and comfort.
• Read or write daily healing thoughts.
• Keep your daily routines and structure to give you a sense of stability.
• Limit your time with distressing news or tragedies, especially if it makes you feel more anxious or upset.
• Take your time making important life decisions for the first year after your loss.
• Try new ways of coping if your old ways of coping do not help.
• Balance your grief with positive thoughts. Remember the relationship you had with your loved one and the good in your life.
• Think about what is meaningful in your life. This can be an important part of healing and create purpose in your life after your loss.
Grief is stressful. Ask for help when you need it. Sources of support may include family, friends, clergy, your healthcare team, local hospice services, support groups, mental health counselors, school counselors or funeral home staff.

**Grieving After a Difficult Relationship**

Grieving when a relationship was hurtful due to conflict, abandonment, abuse or neglect may be very hard. Here are some ways to help you cope when your relationship with your loved one was hurtful:

- Ask for help from family, friends and mental health professionals who can support your feelings and help with your healing.
- Make plans in advance to help you deal with important dates or events.
- Connect with others who share your experiences.
- Do activities that help with your healing. Release rituals, such as balloon, butterfly and flower releases, or letter writing can help you let go of your past hurtful feelings and memories.
- Focus on your strengths.
IV. FAMILY GRIEF AND HEALING

Your family may need time to heal and adjust to this loss. The following tips may help your family:

- Talk about your individual grief experiences and needs.
- Listen to each other without judgment.
- Adjust your expectations of other family members. Some may not be able to do things or provide support like before. It is important to respect everyone’s needs.
- Be patient and support each other during this time.
- Talk about the family roles, traditions and spiritual rituals you want to keep or change.
- Make plans for holidays and special occasions.
- Find ways to care for each other and stay connected.
- Focus on the strengths of your family.
- If family conflict is unable to be resolved, you may want to seek help from a clergy member, mental health counselor, attorney or financial adviser.

Help Your Children Cope With Grief

Listen to, connect with and support your children. Their grief may come up again during different times in their lives, such as holidays, special events or other important life changes. The following suggestions may be helpful during these times:

- Be patient and understanding.
- Tell them the truth and share information based on their age and maturity level. It may help to repeat information or talk about it several times.
• Give your children time to think about the information you shared with them.
• Do not use words or phrases that could cause confusion. For example, saying “gone to sleep” may cause your child to be afraid to go to sleep.
• Talk about grief and how they may feel. Let your children know you are there to talk and answer any of their questions or concerns. Check in often to see how they are doing and what you can do to support them.
• Remind your children that they did not do anything to cause their loved one’s death.
• If a parent has died, it is important to remind children that they will be cared for so they feel secure.
• Invite children to join in family activities such as sharing memories and telling stories.
• Keep regular routines, rules and boundaries to provide a sense of stability.
• Find things to help comfort your children, such as cuddling, reading a book, listening to music or using a night light in their bedroom.
• Encourage them to do things they enjoy, such as physical activities, artwork, journaling and playing games with friends and family members.
• It is normal for children to display immature behaviors when they are stressed. These behaviors may include bed wetting, clinging to a person, not wanting to sleep alone or not doing activities that they have been able to do.
• Limit things that can increase your child’s stress, such as violent or tragic news, TV shows or movies.
• If you have concerns about your child’s response to grief, talk with a professional, such as a school counselor or member of your healthcare team, or seek help from your local mental health agency.
V. WHEN TO SEEK MORE SUPPORT

If your grief does not decrease over time or if it becomes more difficult, you may need professional support. It is important to call your doctor or a mental health counselor or to go to the nearest emergency room if you:

- Are unable to function at home, work or school
- Feel depressed, hopeless or helpless
- Have intense and frequent anxiety or panic attacks
- Have little to no enjoyment in activities
- Abuse alcohol or drugs
- Withdraw from family and friends
- Have thoughts of self-harm or suicide

If you are thinking about suicide, or if you think you may act on suicidal feelings, call 9-1-1 or your local emergency services number right away.

You can also call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK (8255) to talk with a trained counselor.
VI. SIGNS THAT YOU ARE HEALING

The healing process takes time. You may often feel like you take one step forward and two steps back. Some signs that show you are healing include:

- Being more comfortable spending time alone, crying less and feeling like your grief is less intense
- Improvement in your eating, sleeping and energy level
- Things people say do not upset you as much as they did at first
- Increased ability to concentrate and focus
- Creating new routines, learning new skills and feeling more confident
- Understanding more about your grief and what helps you cope
- Forming a new identity and having plans for your future
- Doing activities that give you a sense of purpose and meaning
- Connecting more thoughtfully with family and friends
VII. RESOURCES

Websites can be used to find information about grief. It is important to use caution when looking up information on the Internet. Make sure information is from a trusted source.

The James Bereavement Services
http://cancer.osu.edu/griefsupport

OTHER RESOURCES

American Cancer Society (ACS)
cancer.org
800-277-2345
The ACS website has information about cancer and end-of-life care, including coping with the loss of a loved one.

CancerCare
cancercare.org
800-813-4673
CancerCare offers grief support and resources for people who have experienced the loss of a loved one.

Hospice Foundation of American
hospicefoundation.org
800-854-3402
Information about grief and resources are available on this website.

National Cancer Institute (NCI)
cancer.gov
800-4-CANCER (800-422-6237)
The NCI website is the U.S. government’s comprehensive online cancer resource. Information about grief and coping tips can be found in the Advanced Cancer and Caregivers section.
National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization

nhpco.org
703-837-1500
This website has information about grief and coping tips in the Caring Connections section.

National Alliance for Grieving Children (NAGC)

nationalallianceforgrievingchildren.org
866-432-1542
The NAGC has information about the needs of children and teens who are grieving a death and provides education and resources for anyone who supports them.

The Dougy Center: The National Center for Grieving Children and Families

dougy.org
503-775-5683
The Dougy Center offers grief information and resources for families.

The Center for Loss

centerforloss.com
970-226-6050
This center offers information and resources about grief and loss.
“We do not get over grief. But over time, we do learn to live with loss. We learn to live a different life ... with our loss.”

– Kenneth J. Doka, PhD