Grief is a journey of the mind and the heart. It is a process, not an event. While grief is commonly associated with the death of a loved one, it also is present with other types of losses—such as job loss, divorce or loss of a significant relationship, pet loss, relocation, children leaving home, aging—or due to unfulfilled hopes, dreams, and expectations in life. Grief is a normal human experience that is frequently overlooked and undervalued by Western culture. It is often labeled as depression. While depression describes one portion of the grief process, there are, in fact, many physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions to grief. This article will focus on the death of a loved one, although the descriptions and processes also generally apply to the wider array of losses.

Simply stated, grief is the emotional reaction that occurs when someone important to you dies, and mourning is the process of learning to live without that person being physically present in your life. From early infancy, we begin to form strong emotional bonds (attachments) with the significant people in our lives. This fundamental need to attach to others continues throughout life, leading people to seek love, friendship, comfort, and companionship. When someone we love dies, that physical and emotional attachment is abruptly cut off—the love and caring that would have been extended to and received from that person are gone forever.

**Common Grief Reactions**

While grief reactions are diverse and unique to each individual, the following are some of the most common responses:

**Understanding the Grief Process**

### Shock and disorientation.

The loss of a significant person in one’s life can create shock, disorientation, and disbelief that the person is actually gone. Attachment-seeking behaviors—such as waiting by the phone for the person to call, watching for him or her to drive up the driveway, calling out to him or her, or seeing someone who looks similar on the street and thinking it is the deceased—continue for a period. The desire for the loved one’s return can be strong, and full acceptance of the loss usually does not happen immediately.

### Deep sadness.

This is the most common feature of grief. It may or may not be expressed with tears depending on gender, personality, cultural influences, and the nature of the loss.

### Anger.

There may be anger at oneself for not doing enough to keep the person alive or for not seeing him or her more often, or anger at the deceased for dying. The anger also may be directed toward God, doctors, family members, or friends. Anger can be confusing to those trying to comfort the bereaved, so know that it is a common, normal grief response.

### Guilt.

The person grieving may feel guilt over things said or unsaid or missed opportunities to enhance the relationship when the person was alive.

### Anxiety.

Anxiety can be mild or result in panic attacks. There may be concern about another loved one dying in a similar way. With sudden, unexpected death, assumptions about the predictability of life are shattered, creating apprehension about the future.
Helping Others in Their Grief

The following are some suggestions for reaching out to someone who is grieving:

**Contact.** Take the time to call, e-mail, or write a note and let the grieving person know you are thinking about him or her.

**Be practical.** If you can do something practical to help, just do it. The bereaved may not have the mental focus or energy to know what he or she needs at that moment.

**Be a good listener.** Listen to stories about the loved one as many times as they may need to be told.

**Exercise patience, acceptance, and caring.** Talk to the grieving person about the loved one who has died. People frequently do not want to mention the deceased for fear of causing more distress. However, the person grieving often wants to know that others remember the beloved.

**Encourage self-care.** When the person is ready, invite him or her to join you on outings or other activities. If the person declines, respect his or her wishes without trying to convince the person otherwise. The offer is meaningful, and there will likely come a time when the invitation will be accepted.

**Avoid clichés.** Comments such as “He is better off now,” “She is happy in heaven,” “You need to get on with your life,” or “You should feel relieved that her suffering is over” are generally not helpful and are better left unsaid. Those grieving want their loved one alive and with them; their grieving is a process for them of trying to make sense of their life without their loved one.

One Person’s Story

About six years ago, a young woman came to my office and began her grief process. She had experienced the traumatic, tragic loss of a close friend. The following sessions were painful, sad, and filled with tears and despair. Mementos from her friend had been tucked away in a box that she opened each month on the anniversary of his death. It would have been far too painful for her at that time to have any daily reminders of him in her home.

As time passed, the healing process progressed. She felt herself adjusting as she became able to visit
his grave and again as she found she began to cry less during our sessions. Eventually, she placed a framed picture of her friend on a table in her home and was able to embrace the positive things he brought to her life. Eventually, she could remember him without deep sadness. In time, she found a place for him in her emotional being. Eventually, she left my office feeling positive about where she was in life.

Recently, she once again found herself sitting across from me, facing another significant loss. She did not want to be in this grieving place again. I asked her how I could support her, and she responded without hesitation, “I want you to tell me it will be okay.” And deep down she knows she will be okay. She knows she will mourn her loss, she knows the grief will pass, and she knows she will find her bearings once again.

**Conclusion**

Grief is a normal and natural healing process that allows people to relocate a deceased loved one to a new place in their own emotional lives. It is a process of coming to terms with life as it is, of acceptance of mortality, and of once again experiencing the fullness of life. Grief generally does not happen without significant pain and sadness, but it is a restorative process and a necessary journey.

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**Grief and Loss – Additional Resources**

- The Dougy Center – [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org) – grief support for children, teens, and young adults
- The Compassionate Friends – [www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org) – grief support following the loss of a child
- A Journey Through Grief: Gentle, Specific Help to Get You Through the Most Difficult Stages of Grieving, Alla Renee Bozarth (Hazelden, 1994)
- The Journey Through Grief and Loss: Helping Yourself and Your Child When Grief Is Shared, Robert Zucker (St. Martin’s Griffin, 2009)
- Tear Soup, Pat Schweibert and Chuck DeKlyen (Grief Watch, 2005)
- A Decembered Grief: Living with Loss While Others Are Celebrating, Harold Ivan Smith (Beacon Hill Press, 2011)