

About Grieving

Grief is the process of adjusting to loss. Most of us will experience grief related to a loved one's death at some point in our lives. While grief can be painful and confusing, it's important to know that grief is a normal response to loss, and it changes over time.

What to Expect in the First Few Weeks

Soon after the loss of a loved one, many people experience some physical and emotional reactions. How long these feelings last, or how intense they are, is not the same for everyone. Think of grief as a wave with ups and downs—good days and bad days, peaceful moments and tougher moments. In general, the waves get less strong and less frequent over time. But sometimes there will be large waves that seem to come out of nowhere. You may visit a place or hear a song that reminds you of your loved one. Or, you may not know what caused the wave of emotion. It's important to remember that this is a normal part of grief.

Common Physical Reactions

- crying or sobbing
- changes in sleep patterns
- nausea or upset stomach
- changes in appetite
- restlessness or agitation
- numbness
- headache
- muscle tension
- heart palpitations
- anxiety or panic

Common Emotional Reactions

- confusion
- shock or disbelief
- emptiness
- intense sadness
- guilt or regret
- a feeling of going through the motions
- anger or irritability
- fear or worry
- relief

What to Expect in the First Few Months

The weeks after memorial events are often hard. The feeling of being on “auto-pilot”—busy planning a funeral or handling your loved one's affairs—starts to fade, and family and friends may visit or call less often. This is also when the reality that your life has changed begins to set in, and you may feel like you are getting “worse.” You may be more tearful or find yourself thinking a lot about the events leading up to your loved one's death. These often difficult thoughts and feelings are normal and healthy as you begin adjusting to your loss.

Throughout the first few months, be patient with yourself. The death of your loved one will bring many changes, large and small, which may mean doing new things or thinking about things in a new way. Getting used to these changes can be stressful for you and for family members. Please remember that children, like adults, can benefit from learning that grief is a normal reaction to loss. How we support children through grief depends on their age. If you have questions about talking with your child about loss, contact a pediatric health care provider, school guidance counselor, or local librarian for resources.

Strategies

Even though no one can take away your pain, there are things you can do to feel a little more in control of your grief. Here are some tips:

- Create a simple routine.
- Get out of bed and go to bed at the same time each day.
- Eat and drink regularly throughout the day, even if you don't feel hungry or thirsty.
- Avoid excessive alcohol use or other substances.
- Plan to do something each day.
- Spend time with family and friends.
- If you are working, be sure to tell your supervisor and/or the human resources department what has happened; ask about options for taking time off.
- Check in with your doctor.
- Learn more about grief (bidmc.org/palliativecare).
- Make an appointment to see a counselor or spiritual leader.

Having realistic expectations can also help a lot. Remember...

- Grief cannot be hurried.
- Grief is different for each person.
- Grief is a normal response to loss – it is not a sign of weakness.
- Grief follows a wave-like, up-and-down pattern.
- Grief is not an illness with a prescribed cure.
- It is normal to have deep feelings when someone you love dies.
- It is normal to yearn or long to see them again.
- Grief can feel different with different losses in your life.

Making Time for Grief

In the months—even years—after the death of a loved one, it's important to know that you may still experience grief, though it may change over time. Some people feel more in control if they set aside time for grieving. One idea is to start with 10-20 minutes every day or every other day. This is a time when you can stop what you are doing and just think about your loved one.

The following activities may help you, but if you find them too hard, that's okay. Try to find an activity that's right for you.

- Sit quietly and think about your loved one.
- Talk to them as though they were sitting next to you.
- Visit the cemetery or another place where you feel close to them.
- Look through photos of them.
- Write about the things you miss about them, the things you didn't have a chance to say to them, or the events surrounding their death.
- Do something creative in their memory (like make a memory book or play music).
- Do something they liked to do or thought was valuable in the world.

Professional Help

Sometimes, grief begins to interfere seriously with your emotional or physical health. It's important to get professional help if you feel that any of the following symptoms are getting worse over time. A doctor, grief counselor, social worker, or psychologist can help.

- Feeling more and more depressed
- Feeling hopeless about your future
- Thinking about suicide
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Losing or gaining weight
- Having sleeping problems that disrupt your daily life
- Feeling panicky, anxious, or agitated
- Having great difficulty carrying out everyday tasks
- Experiencing little or no enjoyment in activities
- Feeling as though you have been “stuck”

Talk with your doctor or call your local hospice or hospital for information about counseling or support groups. For more resources, including helpful websites and books, visit bidmc.org/palliativecare or call the BIDMC Palliative Care Service at **617-667-1320**.

Remember: Moving on with life doesn't mean forgetting your loved one.

Love never dies.