

Loss and Aging: A Guide to Grief

Living well often means we will be privileged to live longer and healthier lives. While living longer gives you more time to spend with those you love and do the things you enjoy, it also means there is a greater likelihood you will lose friends and family members to death.

Those who live the longest are burdened with outliving many of their family and friends. They often become well acquainted with the concept of grief. Older adults who are more exposed to the experiences of loss does not mean these losses become easier to accept. [Studies](#) have shown that the grief process does not change with age. Grief is grief, no matter your age.

August 30th is National Grief Awareness. People often shy away from talking about their grief with their friends and family. By openly discussing the mourning you are experiencing, you begin to normalize the grief experience, finding support and healing along the way.

What is Grief?

When a person experiences a significant loss, such as that of a loved one, relationship, friendship, or health, the painful emotions and feelings you experience are your body's natural response to the loss. These feelings of grief can include shock, confusion, anger, disbelief, guilt, and extreme sadness. In addition to the emotional symptoms, a person often experiences physical symptoms, such as trouble sleeping or eating, as well as cognitive, behavioral, social, and spiritual issues.



When a loss occurs, you may be overwhelmed by the pain and feelings you experience. While the feelings are deeply unpleasant, the good news is they are completely normal and there are ways for you to navigate the experience in a healthy way. Just as grief is a deeply personal feeling, so is the grieving process, which can range from months to years, depending on the person.

The Grieving Process

You may have heard of the famous Five Stages of Grief, developed by psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in 1969: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. In the years since the initial stages were created, the sixth stage of "meaning" has been explored.

Rather than find "closure," by looking for

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meaning beyond the original five stages, a person can turn their grief into an experience that is more positive and hopeful. As we age and potentially deal with multiple losses, working to find this meaning can make all the difference.

Working through these steps can help you move through the process and on to something new. The steps are:

- **Step 1:** Recognize the pain you are feeling is real. You are not bound by anyone else's expectations.
- **Step 2:** Accept that as you experience grief, you may feel several different, unexpected emotions. Whether you experience uncontrollable laughter or unyielding sadness, these are normal, and you should not judge yourself for any of the emotions that arise.
- **Step 3:** Know that what you are experiencing is personal and unique to you. You do not need to grieve the way anyone else expects or experienced. Grief is a personal experience.
- **Step 4:** Connect with people who care about you and try to meet with them face to face. Their support can help you make your way through the grieving process.
- **Step 5:** By taking care of yourself physically, you are also supporting your emotional health. Try to remember to go to your doctor's appointment, eat healthfully, continue taking walks or do another form of exercise.
- **Step 6:** Understand that grief and depression are not the same things. While many of the symptoms are the same, clinical depression is a serious illness that can be harmful if left untreated.

Is it Grief or Depression?

According to the American Psychiatric Association, there are important differences between grief and depression.

- **Grief:** Painful feelings come in waves and are mixed with positive memories of the person who has died.
- **Depression:** A person's mood and feelings are nearly always negative.
- **Grief:** The person grieving has the same feelings of self-esteem they've always had.
- **Depression:** The person feels worthless and may feel like they hate themselves.

Major depression is different than the depression described in the Five Stages of Grief. It may feel like you are stuck or cannot move past it. If that becomes the case, or if you're unsure if what you're experiencing is normal, it's time to talk with a mental health expert.

Getting Help Through Your Grief

You don't have to grieve alone. Although it may feel like no one can understand your enormous loss, there are people in your life who can. [The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) recommends the following steps:

- **Connect with family and friends.** Accept offers of connection or invite people to call you or visit. You can ask your loved ones to share stories and photos of the person you've lost, and also plan a date and time when you can all honor your loved one. Continue to celebrate and cherish the life that was lost.

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- **Create new rituals or a space for your memories.** There are many ways you can express your love for the person you have lost, including starting a blog or webpage in their memory, creating a video or slideshow, starting a memory book, or creating a community charity event in their honor. Ask friends and family to help and contribute. You also can do something special like planting a tree in your loved one's honor or cooking their favorite meal.
- **Look for local resources.** Local grief and bereavement counselors are important resources who are skilled at helping people navigate grief process. Healthcare providers like [Intrepid USA's Care Team](#) can help to connect you with these and other resources. You also may want to look at the offerings of churches, synagogues, and mosques in your area, or even your personal faith leader. Many faith-supported support groups do not ask that you be a member of their faith.
- **Ask for help.** Reaching out can be difficult, but it's also very rewarding. If you are struggling in your grief, start by reaching out to friends and family or your doctor. For mental health support, contact your doctor or call SAMHSA's 24-hour helpline at 800-662-4357 (HELP). If you are in crisis, call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255 (TALK).
- **MYTH #1:** You aren't sorry about the loss if you don't cry. While crying is a normal response to grief, there are many ways you may experience and express your pain.
- **MYTH #2:** If you move on, you start to forget about your loved one. Moving on simply means that you have accepted the loss, but it does not mean you are forgetting anything. Instead, you will keep these important memories alive – and these memories may become even clearer and more precious than before.
- **MYTH #3:** Grief lasts a certain amount of time. The timeline for grieving varies and is different for everyone. Some people may also say “the first year is the hardest,” and while that year is very painful, it also often is accompanied by extra support from friends and family that goes away with time. That loss of support can make grieving even more difficult long after the first year.
- **MYTH #4:** Only women are hit hard by grief. While traditional societal norms may cause some men to feel like they can't express emotion, they are just as affected by loss as women and need just as much support.
- **MYTH #5:** Crying or talking about it just makes it worse. Keeping your grief in, whether that's your tears, words, or another expression, can make you feel trapped in your pain. By letting your grief out and embracing the mourning that you are feeling, you can take positive steps toward healing.

5 Myths About Grief

Even if you think you know it all about grief, common myths still exist concerning the grieving process. A few of the more common myths are:

If you or a loved one need care at home, email Intrepid USA today at help@intrepidusa.com.