Understanding grief

A guide for those grieving the death of a loved one

KAISER PERMANENTE®

Contents

Understanding the journey of grief

Grief is a healing journey we travel through the death of a loved one and back to wholeness. Understanding this process and the intense emotions that can accompany it may help you move toward a healthy recovery. While the journey through grief may be slow and difficult, it can also be a strengthening and growth-filled experience.

We can't control everything that happens to us or our loved ones during this lifetime. But we do have control over how we respond to those experiences. We can choose to live in sorrow and anger, or we can choose to work through those painful parts of grief and heal. By moving through the process, we become stronger and more compassionate people.

In this booklet you'll find information we hope will be useful and comforting. If you have questions, please call the Bereavement Program Coordinator, Kaiser Permanente Home Health and Hospice, for your area.

- King County (north of I-90): 206-326-4549
- King County (south of I-90), Pierce County, Kitsap Peninsula: 253-274-4627
- Snohomish and East King counties: 206-326-4549

5 common myths about grief

Myth #1: Grief and mourning are the same experience.

Grief describes the thoughts and feelings we experience when someone we love dies. Mourning describes our outward expression of grief, like crying, talking about the person, or celebrating anniversary dates. Different cultures have different customs for mourning.

Myth #2: There is a predictable, orderly way that everyone experiences grief.

Certain experiences are common among people who are grieving. But you may skip some completely, or repeat some a few times. There's no right way to grieve, and no one can tell you how you should do it. If you can, let the people in your life know what you are experiencing, and how they can support you. They may or may not be able to give you what you need, but letting them know might help.

Myth #3: It's best to avoid your feelings of grief instead of moving toward them.

It's important to give yourself permission and time to mourn. Some people may tell you that you need to avoid or move away from anything that hurts. Just the opposite is true. Trying to cover up or move away from grief before you've worked through it can create feelings of anxiety and confusion. No one can tell you how long grieving should take.

Myth #4: After someone you love dies, the goal is to "get over it."

Everyone is changed by the death of someone they love and by the experience of grief. To assume that you'll "get over it" quickly and that life will be exactly as it was before the death is unrealistic. Taking the time you need to grieve and come to terms with your loss should be the goal.

Myth #5: Tears of grief are a sign of weakness.

Crying is perfectly normal, healthy, and healing. It's a natural way to release emotion and tension. It also can help you communicate your need to be comforted. Crying can make friends, family, or others in your life feel helpless or awkward. They may make comments like "Tears won't bring him back," or "She wouldn't want you to cry." It's important to give yourself permission to cry.

What to expect from grief

Grief is a natural and necessary reaction to the death of a loved one. It's a healthy human response. While grieving you might experience — in no certain order, and possibly repeatedly:

Feelings: Shock, numbness, a sense of unreality, anger, irritability, guilt, sadness, depression, anxiety, fear, hysteria, helplessness, relief, vulnerability, loneliness, mood swings, feelings of being crazy, self-blame.

Physical sensations: Tightness in the chest and throat, dry mouth, oversensitivity to noise, dizziness, headaches, shortness of breath, weakness, lack of energy, upset stomach, pounding heart, heavy or empty feeling in body and limbs, hot or cold flashes.

Behaviors: Appetite and sleep changes, absentmindedness, social withdrawal, avoiding reminders of loss, dreams of loss, calling out to the person who died, restlessness, sighing, crying, increased sensitivity in social situations, experiencing symptoms of your loved one's illness.

Social changes: Desire for support from friends, increased dependency on friends, pulling away from friends, no energy for others, marital problems, taking on some of the jobs in your family that your loved one used to do, and increased sensitivity to topics of loss, like accidents and natural disasters.

Spiritual needs: Searching for meaning, reflecting on personal life philosophy,

questioning priorities and values, understanding the presence of sorrow in life, and making connections with friends, family, and community.

Thought patterns: Disbelief, sense of unreality, preoccupation with the death or person who died, confusion, inability to concentrate, problems with decision making, thoughts of suicide, and seeing, hearing, or feeling the presence of the person who died.

Grief can be compared to climbing a spiral staircase where things can look and feel like you are going in circles, yet you are actually making progress.

– Grief /Loss, Bureau of Study Counsel, Harvard University

Anticipatory grief

Imagine yourself about to step through a doorway. Just as you start through it, you see the door slowly swinging shut. You have no control over the door closing. But you do have time to slow your pace, think of other possible directions to take, and step back far enough so the closing door won't hit you. You have time to prepare.

Anticipatory grief works the same way. It's a concept used to describe the separation anxiety experienced by families as they watch their loved one dying. It can also apply to families who have a loved one in a war zone, a high-risk occupation, or with a history of suicide attempts.

Four aspects of anticipatory grief:

- Depression
- Heightened concern for the dying person
- Rehearsal of the death in your mind
- Attempts to change the results of the death

Anticipatory grief lets you:

- Gradually accept the reality of the loss over time
- Complete unfinished business with the dying person, such as expressing feelings, resolving past conflicts, and saying goodbye
- Apologize for past mistakes in the relationship
- Slowly withdraw some of the emotional energy you have given to the dying person

- Gradually take over responsibility for the dying person and their duties, including household chores, paying bills, and refilling medications

Anticipatory grief can be complicated by:

- The high level of physical strain involved in caring for a terminally ill loved one over a long period of time
- Your own loss of energy and vitality
- Isolation caused by being so involved in caregiving that you become too exhausted to reach out to others
- Becoming so engrossed in caregiving that you neglect your other roles and identities. It may be hard to refocus on yourself after ignoring your own needs for so long
- Increased family and financial stress
- Rising and falling hopes about the dying person's situation
- Increased use of unhealthy coping behaviors such as alcohol, gambling, and legal and illegal drugs
- Mixed feelings about your loved one's impending death. These may include guilt, anger, or relief
- Fear of the actual death, or of not being able to handle what's happening

Grief attacks or memory embraces

"I was just sailing along feeling pretty good, when out of nowhere came this overwhelming feeling of grief." This comment reflects an experience commonly called a "grief attack" or "memory embrace." A grief attack or memory embrace is a period of time when you have intense anxiety and sharp emotional pain.

You may think that long periods of deep depression are the most common part of grief. But shorter, more frequent grief pangs are also common. They're called grief attacks because they may feel like they attack you out of nowhere.

You may feel an overwhelming sense of missing the person who has died and find yourself crying. As one woman shared about her husband, "I'll be busy for a while, and sometimes even forget he died. Then I'll see his picture or think of his favorite food, and I'll feel like I can't even move."

Grief attacks are normal. If one strikes you, try to be gentle with yourself. Allow yourself to experience it – and even embrace it.

Adapted from: *Understanding Grief – Helping Yourself Heal* by Alan D. Wofelt PhD, Accelerated Development Publishers, 1992

The work of grieving

Grief improves with time, but time alone won't heal. Grief is work. It requires energy and attention. These are the major tasks you may experience as you move through your healing journey.

Face the reality of the death

Grieving often begins with feelings of shock and denial. You may need to spend time remembering and reliving the details of your loved one's death. It's helpful to talk about your experience with trusted friends and family to help you accept that the death is real.

Allow yourself to express your emotions

Give yourself a safe time and place to cry if you need to. Find ways that help you let go of anger. Some people hit pillows, some exercise intensely. Share your fears and anxieties with others – a good friend, counselor, or support group. Forgive yourself. Let go of guilt. It's important to remember that you did the very best you could at an extremely difficult time in your life. Believe in yourself. Believe in your own strength.

Refocus on life

When you're able, allow yourself to be social again. Re-establish relationships with old friends and begin making new friends. Discover your strengths and challenge yourself to grow in new ways. Give yourself permission to live a happy, fulfilling life.

It's the nature of life to change. You experience birth, growth, health, illness, aging, and eventually your own death. Learning how to adjust to these changes as best you can is your job in life. Your attitude toward the death, and your ability to ask for support, will help you move through the grieving process.

Self-care while you grieve

Treating yourself with care and affection is important during your journey through grief. Here are some suggestions that may be helpful.

Be gentle with yourself. Don't rush. Remember that healing takes time. Try not to have unrealistic expectations of yourself.

Accept your feelings. Allow yourself to feel the emotions that come up. It's okay to be angry, and to cry or feel depressed. It's also okay to feel a sense of relief about the death. These feelings are a natural part of grief.

Identify your support system. Finding people who are supportive and asking for their help can be a comfort.

Share your feelings. Talk to people who understand and can support you.

Pay attention to your physical needs. Make sure you are nurturing your body by eating well-balanced meals, getting enough sleep, and doing some kind of movement every day.

Give yourself credit for your progress. Just making it through each day is an accomplishment.

Avoid alcohol and drugs. They won't cure your grief. They can prolong, delay, and complicate your grief.

Consider changing your routine. Although major life changes should be avoided for a while, giving yourself permission to change small things that are painful reminders of your lost relationship can sometimes help you through the grieving process. Things like rearranging the furniture in your house, changing the times you eat meals or go to bed, eating or shopping in different places can all be small steps toward building a new life.

Identify your trouble spots. Birthdays, anniversaries, special holidays, and even certain times during ordinary days may be difficult for you to get through. Knowing the days, times, and places that make you uncomfortable can help you plan ahead. Come up with ways to take care of yourself during these times. Give yourself permission to feel your feelings instead of trying to pretend they aren't there.

Write in a journal. Writing about your feelings and experiences can be a healthy way to release your emotions. Going back and rereading what you've written in the weeks and months ahead can help you understand your healing process, and see your progress.

Look to the future. When you feel able, you may want to begin taking small steps toward building a fulfilling future. Renew old friendships and strengthen family bonds. Take a class. Join a group. Rediscover old interests and activities, and find new interests. Plan things you can look forward to like lunch with friends, a hike, or a trip.

Common questions about grief support groups

You may have heard of grief support groups, and wondered if you should join one. To help you decide, here are answers to the top 5 questions grieving people ask about these groups.

What is a grief support group?

It's a meeting of up to 12 people who have all experienced the death of a loved one. Grief support group members often describe their group as a "safe place." It's a place where members can share their stories as often as they need to. It's a place where they are respected and what they share is strictly confidential.

A grief support group is not a therapy group. For that reason, most grieving people with a history of emotional issues are encouraged to seek individual counseling. Also, a grief support group is not meant to be a social network. Often friendships form as people get to know each other, but that's not the purpose of the group.

What happens in a grief support group?

Usually, the person leading the group starts by explaining the rules of the group. For example, they remind the group that what is said is confidential. Each person introduces themselves and tells as much or as little about what they're experiencing as they wish. There's usually an open discussion period, and some groups include educational information shared by the group leader.

Who runs a grief support group?

Grief support groups can be led by people with many different backgrounds. Some support groups, called self-help support groups, are led by people without professional training but with a lot of personal experience with grief. Other groups are led by mental health professionals – people with training in social work, psychology, or counseling.

Whatever their backgrounds, the job of the group leader is to make sure the grief support group is a safe place. While a professional group leader may provide some information on the grieving process, the most valuable input usually comes from the group members themselves as they share their stories and experiences.

Why might a support group be helpful?

These groups give you a chance to connect with people who have had similar experiences and understand what you're going through. You can talk about your experience in detail, as often as necessary, with people who want to listen.

How do I choose a support group?

The most important consideration is finding a group that feels comfortable to you. Many people say they specifically look for a group that meets two requirements:

- A group leader who seems to be knowledgeable about grief and running a support group
- Group members they can relate to, such as other young widows, or others who have lost a loved one to cancer

For information about grief support programs at Kaiser Permanente and in your community, contact the Bereavement Program Coordinator, Kaiser Permanente Home Health and Hospice for your area.

Ways to be good to yourself

Sometimes it's the simple things in life that are overlooked when we're tired, overworked, stressed, and sad. Here's a list of things you can do to help lift your spirits. Try the ones that appeal to you and forget the rest. After reading the list, you may think of some of your own.

Start writing in a journal

Play an instrument you enjoy, or learn to play an instrument

Take a yoga class

Begin a daily set of stretching exercises

Dance around your living room

Look out the window

Take the stairs rather than the elevator

Pick some berries

Find something that makes you laugh

Make a list of your good qualities

Relax without guilt

Go window shopping

Get up early and watch a sunrise

Take a bath for as long as you want

Cook something you've never cooked before

Write a thank you note

Tell someone you love them

Read a good book

Call a friend

Buy a present

Listen to a symphony

Fly a kite

Finish a project

Go to the zoo

Eat fresh berries

Recycle your newspapers/cans

Run on the beach

Daydream

Pick some flowers

Pop popcorn

Give your old clothes to charity

Make ice cream

Sit by the fire

Say "no" to things you don't want to do

Go to a museum

Write a poem

Listen to a story

Relax and watch the rain

Eat by candlelight

Clean out a closet

Throw a Frisbee

Plan a garden

Pull weeds in your garden

Plant a tree

Put on comfy clothes

Participate in a neighborhood pea patch

Bake bread

Take a brisk walk

Drink a cup of hot cocoa

See a funny movie

Have breakfast in bed

Go to the ocean

Ride a bike

Get a massage

When does grief become depression?

Feelings of sadness and depression are normal as you move through the cycles of grief. However, if you experience symptoms of depression almost every day for more than two weeks, and symptoms are interfering with your normal activities, it's time to get help. Depression is a very treatable condition.

Please take a few moments to review the following list of the warning signs of major depression. Check all that you are concerned about:

- ☐ Excessive feelings of worthlessness, emptiness, hopelessness, guilt, anger, or despair
- ☐ Losing interest in pleasurable activities
- ☐ Having trouble with normal activities like eating, sleeping, socializing, paying bills, and going to work
- ☐ Withdrawing from family and friends
- ☐ Losing weight (15 pounds or more)
- ☐ Having trouble going to sleep, staying asleep, or sleeping too much
- ☐ Hallucinating (not including brief episodes of hearing the voice of your deceased loved one or briefly seeing their image, which is a normal part of grief)
- ☐ Thinking about death a lot (suicide, homicide, or past deaths/losses)

If you checked one or more of the boxes, we encourage you to call your personal physician or Kaiser Permanente Behavioral Health Services.

Suicidal thoughts call for quick action

Some people who experience grief question whether they can go on living without their loved one. These are normal and natural thoughts. However, to plan and then take action on these thoughts is not normal. If you are having suicidal thoughts, please get help immediately. An experienced counselor, physician, or clergyperson can help you deal with your depression or anxiety.

> Call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or 911 immediately if you're having thoughts of harming yourself.

Where to get help

Grief support services
Kaiser Permanente Home Health
and Hospice Bereavement
Program Coordinator

- King County (north of I-90):
  206-326-4549
- King County (south of I-90),
  Pierce County, Kitsap Peninsula:
  253-274-4627
- Snohomish and East King counties:
  206-326-4549

Individual counseling and other resources
Kaiser Permanente Behavioral
Health Services

- First-time appointments:
  1-888-287-2680 or 206-901-6300
- Follow-up care:
  Contact your provider's office or call
  1-888-287-2680 or 206-901-6300

Suicide prevention
Call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 immediately if you're having thoughts of harming yourself or others.

Online resources

grieving.com	webhealing.com
aarp.org	dougy.org
griefwatch.com	griefworks.com
lifewords.com	widownet.org

thecompassionatefriends.org

Information on health topics
kp.org/wa

kp.org/wa

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