

Helping Families

Cope With

Grief and Loss

Grief and Loss

Grieving is a healthy and natural healing process. It is not a sign of weakness. For most people, grieving follows a pattern, which proceeds through a series of stages, whether the loss results from death, divorce, job loss, or even moving away from friends and family. Since each of us is different, not everyone will experience every stage, or proceed at the same pace, or with the same intensity of feelings. The best way to confront loss is to recognize it, understand the feelings and reactions you experience, and get support during the grieving process. The following are the basic stages of the grieving process.

Denial

A period of numbness and shock usually follows a major loss or death. This stage allows a person time to absorb what has happened and begin to slowly adjust to the reality.

Anger and Guilt

As shock wears off, grief gives rise to a variety of feelings, including anger. You may feel angry at the person you lost for disappointing you or leaving you, angry at a company for laying you off, or even at God for letting a bad thing happen. You may feel unreasonably responsible for your loss or guilty about what you imagine you could have done to prevent it. You may even feel guilty about some of your other feelings.

Sadness and Despair

Losses can bring varying degrees of sadness, loneliness and yearning. Your feelings may be so overwhelming that you try to avoid them. But tears, sadness, thinking about your loss, or other expressions of your grief are not “breaking down,” they are essential for healing. Reaching out to others is a key way to lessen loneliness and overcome depression.

Acceptance and Hope

Gradually accepting your loss and adjusting to the changes it brings can give you hope for the future again. These changes take time, and may be painful, but they're also a chance for personal growth. During

the most painful moments, it's hard to believe that your life will be better. But you will come out on the other side, perhaps stronger, perhaps wiser.

Aftermath

Just when you think you “should” be “over” your loss, reminders can plunge you into another wave of grief. Although this may continue for months or years, the waves usually become smaller, less frequent, and easier to deal with over time.

The Symptoms of Grief

- Feel physically drained
- Out of emotional control: feel good one minute; in the pits the next
- Can't eat—food makes you sick. People tend to lose a lot of weight
- Susceptible to illness
- “Zombie Effect”: feeling shut down due to your body's natural coping mechanism
- Brain is scrambled; can't think clearly or remember things
- Cry continuously
- Can't cry—bottle it up (it will come out years later)
- Stay extremely busy so as not to have time to think
- Drink too much
- Take too many drugs
- Can't sleep at night
- Take naps frequently and are constantly tired
- Sigh a lot
- Lose interest in work; house; physical appearance
- Neglect personal hygiene
- Fantasize about the past
- Suffer from extreme loneliness
- Have lots of guilt about things you did or didn't do
- Lack of interest in sex
- Engage in self-criticism
- Have a huge hole in your heart and soul
- Think you will never recover from your loss

- Suffer from severe depression
- See no reason to exist

How do you know if you are grieving???

If you have suffered a loss through the death of a loved one or through divorce, you are probably grieving.

You must allow yourself to feel these feelings, and accept the fact that you are normal if you are engaging in any of these behaviors and signs of grief. You need to allow yourself time to grieve because it is an important aspect in your healing. If you feel the feelings and work through them, your grief will lessen, and in time, fade.

Tasks of Grief

These are the tasks you must accomplish in order to work through your grief. It isn't always easy, and each person must accomplish these tasks in his or her own time. But each task must be accomplished in order for you to heal and move on with your life.

Task One: You must accept the reality of your loss. You must talk about the loss until you accept it. The more you talk about it, the more you will realize that the loss is real—that the person is really gone and will not come back.

Task Two: You must allow yourself to experience the pain of grief. In any loss, you must accept the painful reality and finality of the loss. If you don't, your grief will keep resurfacing throughout your life and interfere with a healthy emotional state of being. You have to feel the pain. You can't avoid the pain. It will hurt. You will feel awful. But this pain must be felt in order for you to work through the pain and heal. If you push the pain away and refuse to feel it, it will fester for years and affect your entire future.

Task Three: You must learn to adjust to a life without having your loved one (or whatever thing it is that you have lost) be a part of it. You have to return to your home and the places that may remind you of your loss. You have to encounter each aspect of your life without

your loved one being a part of it. It will be hard, but you must keep going. You can't withdraw from the world.

Task Four: Finally, after you have grieved all you need to grieve, you have to begin to withdraw emotional energy that you are investing in your grieving and the focus you have on your loss, and invest it in new or existing relationships and activities. If, after a reasonable amount of time, you constantly re-live your loss and all the aspects of the relationship prior to the loss, including "what you did wrong" and "what you could have done differently," and refusing to try to move on with your life, you are investing too much energy in your grieving. The support and encouragement of a loving family and a good support group is necessary in order to move on with your life. New friends and new interests are important. The time will come when you will have to go on with your life.

Coping With a Loss

Ideally, the bereaved person will work through the process of grieving. With time and support, they will acknowledge and make sense of the loss, experience the pain, and adapt to a new life and identity.

- Give yourself permission to feel the pain and loss.
- Be patient with the process and don't pressure yourself with expectations.
- Accept that you need to experience your pain, your emotions, your own way of healing, and in your own time. Don't judge your emotions or compare yourself to others.
- Express your feelings. Let yourself cry. Both are necessary for healing.
- Get support. Talk about your loss, your memories, and your experience of the life and death of your loved one. Do not try to protect your family and friends by not expressing your sadness. Ask others for what you need. Find and talk to others who have lost a loved one.
- Try to maintain your normal lifestyle. Avoid major life changes (for example, moving, changing jobs, altering important

- relationships) within the first year of bereavement/loss. This will allow you to maintain roots and some sense of security.
- Take care of yourself: eat well and exercise. Physical activity is a good way to release tension. Allow yourself small physical pleasures that help you replenish yourself like hot baths, naps, and favorite foods.
 - Avoid excessive alcohol, which can harm your body as well as dulling emotions. It is likely to slow your recovery and may cause new problems.
 - Forgive yourself for all the things you said and did and/or for all the things you didn't say or do. Compassion and forgiveness for yourself and others is important in healing.
 - Give yourself a break from grief. Although it is necessary to work through grief, you do not need to constantly focus on it. It is healthy to find appropriate distractions like going to a movie, dinner, or a ball game, reading a good book, listening to music, getting a massage or manicure.
 - Prepare for holidays and anniversaries. Decide if you want to continue certain traditions or create new ones. Plan in advance how you want to spend your time and with whom. Do something symbolic in memory of your loved one.
 - Join a bereavement support group. Others can give encouragement, information, guidance, comfort, practical suggestions, and can help you feel less alone.

Helpful Guidelines

These guidelines are presented in the hope that they will help grieving individuals in their journey from helplessness to hopefulness.

1. **Accept your emotions.** Any significant loss, such as death of a loved one, hurts. It is difficult to say goodbye—to realize that in your lifetime you will never see or touch your loved one again. Why pretend that you are not experiencing turmoil by “keeping a stiff upper lip?” Your emotion is a natural response to the death of a loved one or to any other form of significant loss.
2. **Express your feelings.** Deal with your conflicting feelings openly. A feeling that is denied expression is not destroyed; it remains with you and often erupts at inappropriate times. It

does hurt to use words like *dead* and *widowed*; but you must confront reality and put your feelings into words. Cry if you need to. It is a natural expression of grief for both men and women. Crying is the emptying out of the emotions so healing can occur.

3. **Don't expect miracles overnight.** Allow sufficient time for the grieving period to run its course. Don't compare yourselves with others in similar positions. Their smiles might not reveal the depth of their sorrow. Be yourself. Don't pretend to grieve beyond the time you need to grieve. Nor do you need to pretend recovery before you are recovered.
4. **If you have children, bring them into the grieving process.** Death is a crisis that should be shared by all members of the family. Children too often are forgotten by grieving adults. Silence and secrecy deprive them of an opportunity to share grief. When in your heartache you overlook your children's feelings, you heighten their sense of isolation.
5. **Don't escape into loneliness.** If you isolate yourself or stay alone too much, your home will become a protective shell that keeps you from facing the challenges of life. At the same time, look at your priorities so you don't overload your circuits. Stick with what is important and necessary now and don't worry too much about what is down the road.
6. **Keep in touch with your friends.** Let the right people know that you need their support and feedback. They cannot bring you comfort unless you talk with them, share your feelings, and allow them to enter your sorrow. Holidays, birthdays and anniversaries are especially difficult times to be alone. Plan ahead to spend these days with caring and understanding friends.
7. **Join a support group.** At some point you may be disappointed in the reactions of your friends or acquaintances or close friends. Perhaps you don't hear from them as often as in the past. They may seem awkward or uneasy in your presence or even avoid your company. That's why self-help groups have been successful in providing necessary emotional intervention through the crisis of loss. People in these groups understand your fears and frustrations; they have been there before themselves.

8. **Counseling may be very beneficial.** Sorrow leaves its imprint on the healthiest of personalities. You may need more than the warmth of a close friend or understanding of a fellow sufferer. A professional counselor who is not emotionally attached to you may be more effective to assist you in dealing with your intense feelings or maintaining a clear perspective.
9. **Be nice to yourself.** By treating yourself well, you could become your own best friend. While in need of caring and supportive people, you will also need moments of solitude to find yourself. A little withdrawal and reflection will allow you to become more relaxed and energized. By taking care of yourself, you will recognize your strengths as well as your weaknesses, and you will become more confident that you can manage the challenging days ahead. After all, if you're not nice to yourself, who will be?
10. **Turn pain into growth.** Death ends a life, not a relationship. Through grief, you can become a more understanding, compassionate, and sympathetic person. Resolve to live as your beloved would want you to live, to love as they would want you to love, and to serve others as they would have wanted you to serve. The Chinese word-picture symbol for crisis is the same as the symbol for opportunity. This is your new challenge.

Psychological Responses to Loss

Whether an individual copes with a significant loss or death in a positive and constructive rather than in a negative or destructive manner depends on the types of coping mechanisms used and the quality of support being given. There are two major psychological responses by individuals when adjusting to loss: (1) the use of *coping mechanisms*; and (2) *emotional reactions*. If we wish to help friends and loved ones in times of sorrow, we need to understand how these are expressed by them.

Coping Mechanisms

Coping mechanisms operate to psychologically protect individuals and are used to reduce the level of anxiety they feel at a given

moment. This allows them to better adjust to the loss and begin the grieving and healing process.

1. **Disbelief or denial:** This response reduces anxiety by allowing individuals to limit their awareness about the reality of what has happened until the pain can be let in more slowly. Everything inside shouts “NO!” and the mind struggles to escape. Unable to tolerate the pain that would emerge if reality were faced, the individual experiences “emotional anesthesia.” *Numbness* and *confusion* are often predominant responses. Sighing and crying can be readily observed. Others cannot cry and may withdraw. This stage is relinquished more easily if people will listen to the bereaved person and help them express their whole range of feelings. Listening to feelings without giving advice is the best helping strategy.
2. **Disorganization and dependence:** Characterized by a period of confusion in which the grieving person may feel out of touch with the ordinary proceedings of life. They may exhibit very dependent behavior and a time-orientation that focuses solely on the present. They may become quite demanding, asking others to do things they normally can do themselves. Some of their talk and actions may seem foolish and out of character to others. It is wise not to make major decisions, such as selling one’s house or moving, during this period.
3. **Intellectualization:** A coping mechanism in which the grieving person attempts to master the loss by gathering a great deal of knowledge and information and analyzing in great detail the situations leading to the loss. They may find out the most intricate medical data of a fatal disease, for example. Or they may plan in detail what will happen after the loss occurs. Surviving individuals may rationalize the loss by saying, “He’s better off in the long run,” or, “She suffered so much.” This allows the individual to remain emotionally detached and to become an “observer” of the situation. If it remains within reasonable bounds, intellectualization can give the individual and family members a greater sense of control.

Emotional Reactions

Emotional reactions coexist with coping mechanisms, but they do not necessarily protect the person from the trauma of loss. They are means for the individual to express emotions and feelings associated with the loss.

1. **Anger and resentment** are common emotions of bereaved individuals. It is often expressed as a protest against what seems to be a cruel, unfair and incomprehensible fate. It is a reaction to frustration—the source of which cannot be removed, so the person feels trapped and helpless. When this happens, the individual may project this anger onto more accessible targets (e.g. spouse, family members, hospital, physician, the government, etc.) or others involved in the loss chain. Overt expressions of anger, such as verbal outbursts, sarcasm, and unreasonable or persistent demands, should be recognized as an understandable response to a traumatic situation and not necessarily a personal attack. For most of us, talking openly about our feelings helps reduce the anger.

Friends can help by listening empathically and resisting the temptation to return anger with anger, or becoming defensive if they make accusations. Unexpressed anger may be turned inward and may be replaced by silent bitterness, indifference, apathy, aggression, and ultimately, depression.

2. **Guilt** feelings are frequently a part of the grief process. These feelings become focused as the individual searches for the cause of the loss thinking thoughts like these:
 - “What did I do wrong?”
 - “Could _____ have done anything differently?”
 - “If only I hadn’t _____.”
 - “If only I would have _____.”

When you live with someone for any length of time, you will say things that you regret. When that person dies, you suddenly realize all the things you wanted to say and didn’t. You remember words you wish you had not said or actions you wish you had not taken. It is human to feel guilty and want another chance to erase neglect and failure. If the individual openly expresses guilt, it is better to encourage talking about it rather

than clamming up. Saying, “No, you’re not to blame,” doesn’t really help either. A caring person will encourage the full expression of feelings rather than blocking them, which would make the person feel even guiltier.

3. **Fear and anxiety** is another emotional component of bereavement. The grieving person may exhibit feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, hurt, and anxiety. Sudden loss means rapid change and demands great adjustment. Starting over, with a new job, with a new career, and new relationships, can be a frightening experience. Since the loss is usually not of one’s own choice, there may be great anxiety about an unknown future. The greater the loss, the greater the potential change, the greater the anxiety and fear. Joining a support group where people can freely express their worries in a supportive environment can help reduce needless anxiety.
4. **Shame** occurs when a person is in a situation that is incompatible with the image that one wishes others to have. Shame, guilt, anger and regret often intertwine and are overlapping. A farmer who involuntarily leaves the farm may believe that this reveals an intrinsic weakness and unworthiness in him. When friends and family try to be encouraging and reduce guilt, it may undermine one’s sense of dignity and self-esteem. Accepting the individual as an “OK” person and being there when needed is true friendship.
5. **Loneliness and depression** are considered the most painful processes. When a loved one is removed from their lives, people often are overcome by feelings of utter depression and isolation. Gradually the finality of the loss sinks in—an empty chair near the TV, an unused pillow, a family photo, a missing phone call. Sadness and depression follow and self-pity is frequent.

Problems which are manageable when shared with a partner become magnified when faced alone. Sometimes an individual may search for a quick replacement. However, the healing and recovery are more likely achieved if the bereaved person completes the grieving process before seeking a new partner or

making any new lasting commitments. Delaying major decisions allows people to see new perspectives; to make decisions more easily lived with during the years ahead.

6. **Relief and recovery:** Feelings of relief and recovery are difficult to admit and acknowledge openly. Relief is so intermingled with our sense of loss that we cannot see it isolated enough to take it for what it is—a normal, human response. A feeling of relief does not imply any criticism for the lost relationship. There is an overlap between relief and recovery—in fact, feelings of relief may signal recovery. As the individual brings closure to bereavement, and as hope softens the intense feelings of loss, a new life begins.

The person reaches out and makes constructive efforts to rebuild by responding more readily to phone calls, attending meetings, and seeing social gatherings as opportunities.

Helping People with Bereavement & Loss

Grief has been called the “sorrow of the soul.” Grief over death or separation is a fundamental human experience, yet the pain experienced in bereavement and loss excludes no one.

Some Tips for Dealing with Grief

- Take care of yourself: eat well, exercise, and get enough sleep.
- Talk regularly with friends. Tell them what helps you and what doesn't help.
- Structure your time alone.
- Record your feelings by writing or drawing in a journal.
- Talk about your feelings with someone you trust.
- Do something that requires you to use your hands in repetitive motions.
- Spend time alone in nature, meditation, or prayer.
- Invite someone to be your telephone buddy. Talk daily.
- Do something to help someone else. Volunteer for something.
- Give yourself rewards.
- Change something in your home.

- Allow yourself to laugh.
- Allow yourself to cry.

Helping Children with Bereavement

Children seldom have support and love from sources outside the family. Therefore, a breakup in the family unit, a loss of a loved one, or a pet, may be more traumatic than for an adult. They experience an initial period of protest, and then become quiet, withdrawn and less sociable. They may also revert to behavior of earlier years and “act like a baby” again. When breaking bad or sad news to children, consider these steps:

- Tell the truth. Children can handle it better than adults realize.
- Offer love and reassurance that you will be there with them and to help them.
- The sooner you explain things, the better.
- Reassure children that they are not the cause of the loss, nor responsible for taking care of anybody but themselves. When adults will not level with the children, they are forced to draw their own conclusions—which are always much worse than the facts. Children are flexible and resilient and can deal with reality.

Understanding Grief

What is grief and how does it differ from depression?

The concept of grief describes *the emotions and sensations accompanying the loss of someone or something dear*. The word itself was originally derived from the Old French *grève*, meaning a heavy burden. In English, “grief” connotes an experience of deep sorrow, one that touches every aspect of our existence. Grief can literally “weigh down” the person who must face the reality of a gut wrenching loss, taking both a psychological and physical toll on the bereaved person. Complex physiological and psychological responses may be extremely painful but can be overcome if faced and experienced.

You may experience any of the following when you grieve:

- Numbness, the sense that none of this is real—you're just imagining it
- Expecting your deceased loved one to come back and be able to resume life as usual
- Experiencing your loved one communicating with you after death
- Difficulty paying attention or remembering things as well as you did before your loss
- A sense of anger, injustice, vexation or helplessness about your situation
- Feelings of incredible emptiness, loneliness, self-accusation or despair
- Guilt—if only you had done more, been nicer, not left home, etc.

The following are typical physical symptoms of grief:

- Difficulty going to sleep, or waking in the middle of the night
- Weight loss or gain; over- or under-eating
- Low energy or fatigue
- Headaches, chest pain or racing heart
- Upset stomach or digestive problems
- Hair loss

When you understand that grieving people have similar thoughts, feelings and physical sensations, you can be assured that what you are going through is completely normal. For example, mood swings (you feel fine one minute and then all of a sudden you burst out crying) need not take you by surprise. What's more, it is entirely possible to have a decrease in symptoms for quite a while and then suddenly experience a 'relapse' when something reminds you of your loved one—or for no explainable reason at all.

What makes depression different from grief is the absence of positive feelings—a moment of awe at glimpsing a baby or a particularly beautiful sunrise or sunset, or hearing an inspiring piece of music. About 2 in 10 people develop a depressive disorder in the year following the death of a loved one, with symptoms beginning roughly in the third month. This is different from the deep sorrow which naturally results from losing someone you love. Some refer to that sadness as 'depression' when technically it's not.

The major warning sign for clinical depression is when you don't experience even rare moments of pleasure, for extended periods of time.

Symptoms such as these may interfere with your life:

- Life seems meaningless and you can find nothing pleasing or positive
- You are drowning in despair with no relief: no laughter, no smiles...no sense of future
- You have trouble sleeping, or you sleep most of the day
- You have a drastic weight loss or gain
- You are unable to function in everyday life
- You have persistent thoughts of ending your life

If you find yourself in this situation, it is essential to seek the assistance of a mental health professional, who can help you regain hope for living.

Are there stages of grief?

According to David Kessler, co-author with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross of the last book written before her death: "The five stages, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance are a part of the framework that makes up our learning to live with the one we lost. They are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. But they are not stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them or in a prescribed order. The stages have evolved since their introduction and they have been very misunderstood over the past three decades. They were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is not a typical response to loss as there is no typical loss. Our grief is as individual as our lives."

Other experts use terms like "phases" or "cycles" to describe the process most commonly experienced by people when facing their own diagnosis of a terminal illness. Friends and family members go through a similar process, cycling back and forth between the different intense emotions. These phases are often experienced in the sequence described below, but individuals can cycle through these feelings in a different order, and can return to previous phases

as grief is processed. It is also entirely possible to feel more than one emotion simultaneously, perhaps to a greater or lesser degree.

Denial

Upon hearing bad news, the most common reaction is a feeling of numbness or shock. We may experience disbelief: "That is not possible...there must be some mistake...you must have the wrong person, the wrong medical records...that can't be true or happen to me!" The mind-body has incredible defense mechanisms. If we pretend that something isn't true, then somehow the blow is softened. At any moment, our loved one could reappear, or so we imagine. Time seems to briefly suspend itself, at least until the cruel reality of the truth sets in.

Anger

We may get angry at the messenger who delivers the news, the doctor, the person who caused us this pain (even if that person is now deceased), at anyone we can hold responsible for our grief, even at God. This reaction is perfectly understandable. There is a need to know why this happened and whether the loss could have been prevented. "Who is at fault?" we question. Somehow pointing the finger allows us to divert the pain from the core of our being where it rises up and threatens to overwhelm us. Others may turn their anger inwards and blame themselves for what has happened.

Bargaining

We may try to negotiate the situation, either with another person involved, or with God: "Please give me one more chance and I promise things will be better...I will change...If you will reverse this, then I will _____ in return." This is a kind of magical thinking where we believe our actions will be met with the desired outcome. Some people attempt to strike a deal with their Higher Power: to stop smoking, to find more time to spend with family, to offer an apology that's long overdue. At some point, though, we face our limitations in holding up our end of the deal. No matter what we say or do, the bitter truth is that things will not go back to the way they were before. And that's when the next phase hits.

Depression

When we realize the loss is real and unchanging, we may sink into a deep sorrow. Though Dr. Kübler-Ross dubbed this phase 'depression,' it is more accurate to describe it as more of a combination of loss and loneliness and perhaps hopelessness. We may feel remorse or regret, rehearsing over and over what we could have done differently. Or perhaps we feel guilty that we are still able to enjoy life while our loved one no longer can. This intense experience of sadness leaves us with sparse energy for housework or outside activities. It is common to find ourselves sobbing over the smallest little thing or crying for days on end. Whether or not we have a terminal illness, we may feel our life is over. Some may consider or attempt ending their lives.

Acceptance

Time, in and of itself, will not heal our wounds. We may miss being able to share our life with that person, no matter how long it's been since they passed away. We don't have to forget how much our loved one means to us in order to move on. If we can come to terms with the reality of the situation, recognize it as a fact of our lives, and gradually let go of the struggle against the tide of emotions that we experience, we can move beyond our suffering. Even with our new circumstances, we can find peace within ourselves.

Is it normal to feel so much pain?

Yes. Grief is a normal process. Intense emotional pain is not uncommon and actually supports rather than restricts healing. This pain might be felt as physical distress—burning, searing, can't-catch-your-breath pain. You may also experience a sense of longing that can:

- re-surface from time to time for years
- sneak up and surprise you out of the blue
- be expected and anticipated, such as the anniversary date of loss, or a visit to a particular location that carries reminders of the lost person

It's impossible to predict the course of your grieving. And yet, life goes on and appreciation for it can grow. Along the way, the burden becomes lighter—perhaps because you grow stronger. Eventually, you regain meaning and purpose in life even as you feel the loss:

- You are able to play again

- You can laugh with a friend
- You begin to look forward to other experiences in your life
- You feel joy

It is not unusual to experience feelings of relief if the relationship with the deceased was exhausting or destructive for the family. It does not, in any way, disrespect the loss—it is healthy and life-affirming to get on with the business of living.

The ‘work’ of grief includes:

- Resolving any past grief
- Fully acknowledging and accepting the intensity of present grief
- Hurting, even though it’s not pleasant

If you don’t allow yourself to have that experience, you are blocking your healing. Instead of trying to deny or medicate the pain, realize that the hurt is necessary in order for you to heal. Our experience of mental suffering offers us the chance to grow stronger in the process.

What are some strategies to cope with grief after the loss of a loved one?

Death is a part of life; hanging on will not prolong your loved one’s life or bring them back. Letting go and surrendering to the grieving experience, with the help of others, will bring comfort and solace.

Here are some other areas in which you can ‘grieve well’:

- Self-expression
- Physical self-care
- Emotional self-care
- Good social support

One of the key elements of healthy grieving is allowing your emotions to surface in order to work through them. In the long run, trying to stuff down your feelings—in the belief that they will simply fade with time—is counter-productive. When ignored, grief causes pain that is sometimes so excruciating that people want to numb and escape it through alcohol or medications. But in blocking the grieving process you block the natural return to interest and meaning in life that follows the grieving process and is its real end point.

Take care of yourself through self-expression

- **Talk.** You deserve to express yourself at this difficult time, even though others may discourage or even reprimand you for having a strong emotional reaction. Talk about your loved one to others or to God (and encourage them to do so, too). If they are uncomfortable, gently let them know that part of your healing process is getting it off your chest.
- **Write.** Start or continue writing in a journal or diary. You may want to compose a letter to the deceased person to describe how you feel and 'say' things you never got to say. Some questions to ponder and write about: *How would you spend the rest of your life if you only had a short time to live? Would you say or do things differently?* Be as honest as possible about how you feel.
- **Create.** You may want to create a special collage or other artistically-inspired memento about your loved one, like a scrapbook. For those who are beginning artists, you can use memorabilia items or something symbolic like seashells. In the process, your thoughts and feelings may become clearer as you provide a creative outlet for expression. This exercise also may bring up other feelings that you need to face.
- **Remember.** Let this be an opportunity to reflect on the good times. Looking back, what do you appreciate about the contributions of your loved one? What are the moments together that you cherish the most? Do things to honor and remember your loved one: If they loved flowers, plant a garden in their honor or help others plant gardens; support the causes and organizations that were important to your loved one.

Take good physical care of yourself

- **Get enough sleep.** A regular sleep routine will be of benefit. If you are tired during the day, give yourself a chance to sit or lie down. Resting your body will help your emotional recovery.
- **Avoid chemicals.** Though you may crave a chemical to help you get through this time, try your best to steer clear of substances like alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine, because their side effects can be unhelpful in the long-term. For instance, instead of coffee, opt for green tea, which is less jolting to your energy.

- **Exercise regularly.** If you are physically able, take a brisk walk in the morning or at lunchtime. Choose something that will motivate you to get out of bed. Whether you feel like it or not, get some sort of physical exercise every day.
- **Eat well.** Even if it's the furthest thing from your mind, pay attention to the quality of what you eat. Take the time to eat nutritious meals while sitting down, avoiding processed or 'fast' food (even though you may be pressed for time and not feel like cooking).

Take care of yourself emotionally

- **Have fun.** Is there a book that you have wanted to read or a movie you haven't had time to see? This is the time to do it. Whether it's listening to uplifting music or getting a massage, do what makes you happy. Even though you may feel guilty about being pampered at this time, you deserve to treat yourself well.
- **Forgive.** The death of someone you love brings an end to opportunity to communicate. You may be reminded of the need to forgive that person for a past hurt—and forgive yourself if need be—then move on. Maybe you said something you regret. Perhaps you wish you had done more at the time. In your grief, you may have felt embarrassed, guilty or angry (which is completely understandable). Let yourself off the hook and apply that energy into something positive.
- **Plan ahead.** Anniversaries and holidays bring their own particular challenges. You may feel especially emotional a year after your loved one dies, on their birthday or another significant marker. Attending an event such as graduation, wedding or funeral can be highly charged, as well. This is a completely normal reaction. In order to prepare, talk to other members of your family to find out what their expectations are. Decide together how you would like to change your traditions while honoring the memory of your loved one.
- **Get the support you need.** There are people who want to help you get through this time—friends, loved ones, pastoral counselors, bereavement counselors, trained laypersons and professionals. Often people want to help, but don't know what to do. Accept help that feels good:
 - It's alright to tell people who want to help how they can best help you.

- o One of the most helpful things might be to prepare healthy meals for you.
- o Some people can take time to just listen and hold you as you cry.
- o A good friend might even laugh with you, in the midst of your pain.

It is important to have an outlet for sharing grief, even for people who aren't usually comfortable talking about their feelings. Humans are social creatures and knowing that others know and understand will make you feel better, less alone with your pain. Many support groups exist for the general public as well as for specific populations, such as grieving parents and suicide survivors. Whatever the nature of your loss, connecting with others will help you heal. You will know how far you've come when you can share another's pain and know the possibility of recovery.