

# Grief's Journey



Although grieving is a natural healing process, it's hard work. Often, it is easier to talk about finding hope for the future and an appetite for life than it is to do it. However, the necessary healing process requires you to face the flood of disruptive emotions that follow the death of your loved one.

While you grieve, it is important to remember that you are engaged in a healing process. Grief's Journey is designed to help you move through this difficult transition, offering information about the grieving process, suggesting practical tips for coping with your grief.

This issue of Grief's Journey emphasizes the importance of finding your own path through grief. Your path is unique to you; it is your personal pilgrimage through your pain to new hope for the future. Like any pilgrimage, yours has a social aspect as well as a personal aspect. Many griever find support and comfort in connecting with others who have lost loved ones.

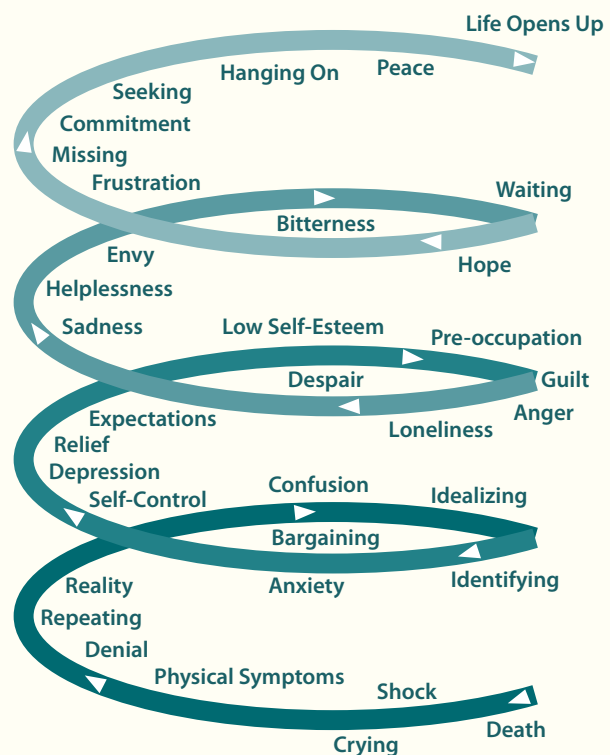
We believe that support can ease your burden by making grief a little less lonely, confusing and frightening. Although you must find your way through your grief, you need not do it alone. We hope you will find support through Grief's Journey. To learn more about the grief services we provide, please visit our website at [HopeWestCO.org](http://HopeWestCO.org) or call anytime at (866) 310-8900.

## A Path Through Grief

Our paths through grief are as individual as snowflakes and can vary greatly from one loss to the next. Having understanding and words for your experience can help you to cope. This path offers a picture of many of the common experiences of grief.

However, because your grief is unique to you, it may not provide an accurate map of your personal path through these experiences.

What feelings will be most difficult for you? How will they affect you? Despite the variances, knowing that others have endured their grief and recovered an interest in life can give you courage as you discover your own path.



# The Seasons of Grief



## Fall

Your **disbelief** prevents you from accepting what is true; you expect to wake up any minute from this nightmare. It simply can't be true and you can't cry because you don't believe it.

**Shock** helps temporarily. It softens the blow, leaving you dazed and numb. You go through the motions like a robot and your emotions are frozen.

**Crying**, sometimes spontaneous sobbing and other times quiet tears, gives you release. It gives deep emotions an outlet. Give yourself time for this physical release.

You may not expect your **physical symptoms**. You're not surprised to feel emotions but you may be unprepared for the myriad of physical responses so prevalent in those who grieve. You may sleep or eat too little or too much. You may have physical aches or pains and numbness or weakness. Your heart may hurt; you may experience extreme fatigue and memory problems. Usually the symptoms fade but check with a doctor to rule out other causes.

With your **denial**, you tend to separate facts from feelings. You "know" the person has died, yet in your heart you cannot yet accept the death. You forget: you imagine your loved one away for an extended trip, you expect that he will call, or he/she will come in the door; you search for him/her when you are out shopping.

You **question**, why did he/she have to die? You repeatedly ask, yet you don't expect an answer. Your question is a cry of pain.

You **repeat** your story over and over again. Repeating helps you absorb the painful reality.

You may need **self-control** to fulfill your responsibilities, do your job, or rest from the pain. You need to moderate your self-

control, because although it can give shape and rhythm to your grieving, constant, rigid self-control can block healing.

## Winter

When the **reality** of the death sets in, you may feel that you are worsening because you acknowledge that the death really did happen while other supports may diminish as family and friends expect you to improve.

**Confusion** tampers with your sanity. You can't think and you forget your thoughts mid-sentence. You are disorganized and impatient with yourself.

You tend to **idealize** and remember only good traits, as if your loved one was perfect. You find it hard to accept your living loved ones who are not-so-perfect.

You **identify** with your loved one to stay close to him. You may copy his/her style of dress, hobbies, interests or habits. You may carry or wear a special object or piece of clothing.

Your **anxiety** increases and you are frightened of losing control or going "crazy." You **panic** about the future, money or other people who could die.

Sometimes you feel **relief** – you've had a good day! You're so much better. You can laugh and have fun without feeling guilt. Enjoy these moments when they come; you deserve a rest from your pain.

Your **depression** may return periodically, sometimes when least expected and surprise you because you thought you were better. You may hurt so much you don't care about anything. Everything is an effort.

Your **expectations** are important: you may feel you aren't grieving "correctly." Your friend was better in a few months – why aren't you? It is better not to compare. Expectations – your own or others – may add to your burden.

Like most bereaved people, your **self-esteem** and **self-confidence** may temporarily fall far below normal levels.

Often no matter what you are doing, you are **preoccupied** with your loss, thinking of nothing but your loved one. You continue to feel intensely **angry** at yourself, others, medical personnel, your loved one or God. You may feel irritated by everyone and everything. Then you feel **guilty** because you were angry. You are tortured by your regrets. You keep going

over real or imagined mistakes in your relationship with your loved one and you feel that no one else can understand.

You are **isolated** and **lonely**. You are empty and you want to withdraw from family and friends – or they are too busy with their own lives.

Sometimes you **despair**. The agony is unbearable and you feel that you won't be able to survive. You feel hopeless and don't want to go on living. You want to be with your loved one. Sometimes others mistake these feelings, thinking you are suicidal.

Your **sadness** seems inconsolable. Unhappiness pervades your life and you miss your loved one's presence desperately.

You feel **helpless** and unable to help yourself cope with grief. You feel powerless because you cannot control your feelings. You see other couples together or children with their parents and you envy their togetherness. It makes you feel keenly what you have lost.

Your **frustration** builds as your fulfillments are gone and you haven't found new ones yet. Nothing interests you.

Temporary feelings of **bitterness** and **resentment**, especially toward those who are, in some way, responsible for your loss are natural. Habitual bitterness, however, can drain energy and block healing.



## Spring

Life may seem like constant **waiting**. Your struggle is over but your zest has not returned. You are in limbo, exhausted, uncertain and life seems flat. But somewhere inside, you struggle to believe you will get better – you keep hope alive. The good days begin to out-balance the bad.

You never stop **missing** your loved one. Particular days, places and activities can bring back the pain as intensely as ever.

But you are able to make a **commitment** to life. You recognize that healing is a choice and you decide to actively begin building a new life for yourself.

This means taking the initiative to **seek** involvement in spite of feeling you can't possibly do things on your own. Some days you **hang on** to your grief; it is familiar and it keeps you close to your loved one. Letting go seems like forgetting so you are reluctant to do so. But you begin to let go gradually.

## Summer

Finally **peace** comes and you can reminisce about your loved one without reactivating the pain. You feel able to integrate these changes into the new you and face your own future.

Life **opens up** and has value and meaning again, you can enjoy, appreciate and anticipate events. You are willing to let the rest of your life be all it can be.

## Parent's Corner

### *A Child's Path Through Grief*

Even though each path through grief is unique and individual, there are some typical differences in how children and adults grieve. Children are far more likely to express grief through changes in behavior. It is more common for them to experience long and intense periods of grief years after the loss. And, they are more vulnerable to believing that they caused the death by something they said or did.

### *Guilt and Fantasies*

Children live in secret worlds of their own, with fantasies and facts intermingled. Gradually, as they grow, they learn to discriminate fact from fantasy. When a loved one dies children often fantasize about the cause of death or illness; they may link something they said, thought, or did with the death itself.

Adults need to be cautious about saying anything that might contribute to guilt. This includes using a dead parent as a source of pressure: "Your father would want you to make good grades." Listening to your children, watching them play and paying attention to their fantasies help. It also is important to respond to their questions with simple, honest facts in language they understand.



## *Behavior Changes*

A child may not recognize grief (consider how often adults don't) and may not be able to choose how to express it. He may just feel "weird" and act weird as a result. Restlessness, hyperactivity, tardiness, truancy, academic problems, stealing, fighting and drug use all may be expressions of a child's grief, whether they happen soon after the loss or years later.

How can a parent help? Recognize your limits – you are also struggling with loss. Consider offering your child special support from another adult, a friend, family member, clergyman or counselor – who can help him work through his grief in a healthy way. Recognize that your child is not "bad" but expressing his grief the only way he knows how. Behavior problems, like other expressions of grief, will probably diminish with time.

## *Delayed Grief*

In adults, delayed grief usually results from a failure to feel and express emotions at the time of the loss. When grief is faced and worked through, despite its many ups and downs, it tends to grow less frequent and less intense. However, a child may express and talk about his grief during the period immediately following the death. Yet as he grows up and gains cognitive abilities and social experiences that allow him to grasp more fully the reality of his loss, he may be faced with another period of grieving. A transition in his life may stir up memories of his loss and precipitate new grief.

It is important for adults to be sensitive that a child who has experienced an early loss of a family member may have difficulty with transitions and may need special help, beyond what parents can give, to come to terms with his grief. Seeking professional help is not a sign of weakness for either the parent or the child; it is a sign of determination to help the child live up to his full potential.

## *Healing Demands Work*

Grief is a painful process that we naturally resist. The healing process is called "work," it demands that we work through our feelings to release the pain and work through any relationship issues that may not have been reconciled.

The more fully we grieve in the early months, the more relief we feel as time goes on. Unfortunately, we cannot reduce our pain by postponing it. Although grieving people often ask if there is some other way to recover. It simply isn't possible to avoid our grief without jeopardizing our healing and recovery.

Our denied, unresolved feelings can stay with us for many years. They can surface in others ways, including physical symptoms or chronic, low level depression. Instead of resisting what we feel, we need encouragement to learn how to be with our feelings, to release them with trusted friends, family or peer groups.

## *Challenging Grief Mythology*

In American culture, most people have been taught a set of myths that influence how we deal with death and grief. Some of the myths we learned prevent us from reaching out to others for help when we need them most. In our society, we rarely learn that it is good to share and talk about our feelings; that our losses change us forever; and that we will need a long time to integrate our loss and pain into our personal identity.

## *Commons Myths About Grief*

- All losses are the same.
- All bereaved people grieve in the same way.
- It takes two weeks to three months to get over your grief.
- When grief is resolved it never comes up again.
- It is better to put painful thoughts out of your mind.
- Anger should not be a part of your grief.
- Children need to be protected from grief and death.
- You will have no relationship with your loved one after death.
- The intensity and length of your grief are testimony to your love for the deceased.
- Only sick people have physical symptoms in their grief.
- Funerals and rituals are unimportant in helping us heal.
- It is best to stay in control and keep a "stiff upper lip."
- It is best to put the memories of your loved one in the past and go on with your life.
- It is best to get involved and stay busy so there is no space to feel pain
- Crying doesn't solve anything.

It is not easy to change traditions and long-held beliefs or expectations. But when we believe it is important for us and that is in our best interest, we can re-learn and make changes. One difficulty is that we are impacted by the beliefs and feelings of those around us. While we may wish to change, others around us may not. It may take preparation and discussion to make changes, yet the results often benefit the whole family.



### *Finding the Courage to Reach Out*

How often have friends or family members offered, “If you ever need anything, just call.” Your friends and family want to help but they don’t know how. Unfortunately, when you feel most unable to reach out, others need you to tell them how to help you. You need to be pro-active in finding the support and help you need during this time of transition.

#### ***There are many ways to build a diversified support system***

1. Recognize that no one person, no matter how caring or concerned, can meet all of your needs. As you begin to identify the family members and friends who want to help, think about how each person can best help you, based on the nature of your relationship and how he or she has supported you in the past. Sort out the good listeners from the “movers and shakers,” and those who are comfortable with practical tasks (fixing the plumbing, running errands, etc.). All of these people may be players in your network of support. The key is to know what tasks are most appropriate for each person.
2. Tell people what you need. Most people struggle with this task because you must be willing to be vulnerable at the risk of appearing weak. Challenge traditional definitions of “strength” and “weakness.” Experience shows that the strongest people are those who recognize their need for

assistance and seek out the help they need. Muster your courage, swallow your pride and let others know specifically how they can help.

3. Educate others about grief as a natural healing process and tell them about your grieving experience. Explain how you need support, companionship or practical assistance during the healing process. Remember, the general public knows very little about grief and has no idea how to help someone who is grieving. People really do want to help but they simply don’t know how. Sharing your Grief’s Journey bulletins with your family and friends can be a successful tool to educate your loved ones to help them understand you and your grief better.
4. Consider participating in a bereavement support group. Groups bring grieving individuals together in a safe, confidential forum where common concerns and feelings can be expressed more freely. Find a group that is facilitated by professionally trained bereavement counselors and is specifically designed to meet the needs of grieving people.

Contact your local hospice for loss support groups in your area. Hospice & Palliative Care of Western Colorado regularly offers grief support groups. Call 866-310-8900 for more information.

***“Nothing about death,  
is quite as scary as the exhilarating  
terror of trying to accept life.”***

*Barbara Davidson*

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*Profoundly changing the way our community experiences aging,  
serious illness and grief – one family at a time.*